

RESTORING NORA

Chapter One

New Country

The fixer-upper comes in many guises. A cabin nestled in the woods, a seaside retreat or maybe a forgotten weekend getaway tucked in the corner of a small, bucolic town. Perhaps you sought it out, scanning the real estate section of the Sunday paper after reading the editorials and yanking out the TV Guide. By chance you went on vacation and walking the streets of a completely unfamiliar place, felt a connection that you didn't want to sever at the end of your "ten day, all inclusive" package.

Or you may be one of the lucky few to have an opportunity drop in your lap.

* * *

"Sorry, Nora, it's cancer."

Cancer.

Me.

Cancer.

Oh my god. My kids' mommy is sick. You said it was fine. Fine. I remember. You took out the lump and afterwards, you said it looked fine. You said it wouldn't be cancer and I said, well, let's just take it out 'cuz I don't want that funky lump in my breast anyway, and you said okay, and you did, and now you tell me it's cancer. I've got two kids. I'm 39 years old and I've got cancer.

"Cancer. What kind of...what? Cancer. Okay. Hold on, Doc...Viv, take Sammy and go downstairs. Watch anything. Doctor, hold on for a second."

My kids. My kids. Me. Cancer. Just fucking go downstairs, please! "Yes, Viv, you can choose. Just put a tape in. Yes, DragonTales. Take Sammy! Go...Okay, sorry. Okay doctor, go ahead."

"It's fine. I'm sorry, Nora, but it's cancer. Ductal carcinoma. Cancer of the duct. The milk duct."

"Wow. Okay...Grant isn't home and he's going to have questions. How do you spell that?"

You fucking bastard. You said it would be "fine." You said, "Oh, it looked fine." You said "I'll call you with the good news." This is not good news. This news sucks. This is what's called bad news.

"Nora, of all the cancers to have, this is a good one. It seems to have been contained to the duct."

This coming from the man who was going to call me with "the good news." Pardon me while I don't jump up and down and run right over to your office and French kiss

your dick for that wonderful piece of information. Gosh, thanks! A good cancer. Super-duper.

“But Nora, the tumor was rather large...”

You said it was the size of a large gumball! That’s pretty big, even to me, you hack. A good, big, malignant, cancerous tumor. What word doesn’t belong in that sentence?

“...so why don’t you and your husband come to my office tomorrow night and we can talk.”

“Fine. Okay. Thanks.”

“Six?”

“Six. Yes. Thanks.”

“You’re taking this really great, Nora. Very clear-headed. I’m impressed.”

“Thank you. Okay. Six. We’ll be there.”

Clear-headed. I feel clear-headed. Everything is like crystal. Sharp. Bright. I have cancer. I have cancer. I have a big tumor in my breast. I have cancer. And I have to get the kids to bed.

* * *

“We’re lost.”

“We’re not lost,” Grant insisted, peering out the windshield as the wipers, set to the highest possible setting, furiously fought the pummeling rain. The headlights cut through the watery darkness ahead of the car, revealing the black of the road and glimpses of towering pines lining both sides of the country road.

Map in hand, Nora peered out the side window. “Honey, we’re maybe a little bit lost. But it’s okay. It’s Wisconsin. Eventually we’ll find something. Or else hit Minnesota. One of the two.” She reached forward towards the windshield and, using the sleeve of her shirt, wiped the inside of the window, thinking, a month ago, who would of thought we would be here? Making our way through the winding roads of the beautiful state of Wisconsin to go look at a cabin in woods.

Incredible, how one phone call can change your life.

“It’s so odd,” said Grant, suddenly smiling, glancing over to Nora.

“What?”

“We should be putting the kids down but we’re here. It’s a mess, I mean wet, and honey, we probably won’t be able to afford it, but it is interesting.”

Nora rubbed his shoulder, enjoying the strength of his back under her palm. “I was just thinking the same thing! I mean, I know, I know, we probably can’t afford it but it is an adventure. It’s a good thing. I needed a good thing. We both do. I mean, after recently.”

“Yup. And you deserve every good thing there is,” Grant murmured, eyes back on the road.

Nora gazed at his clean, easy profile. He grinned, feeling her eyes on him.

And we can afford it, my dear, Nora thought, looking back out the window. He’s as into this idea as I am! But, wait. Let him come to it. You know this sweet man. He makes the word pragmatic seem recklessly wild. Just keep nudging him forward.

The rain started to abate and Grant reached over and returned the windshield wipers to a lower setting. The rattling of the rain on the car roof turned into a gentle throb and both Nora and Grant's bodies eased, enjoying the return to relative quiet.

"You know, maybe we're not lost," said Grant. "We're just not used to driving in the country. Everything just looks different. We judge distances by intersections, blocks and, I don't know...malls and highways. We're getting acclimated. If we did get this place, I think this would become...just the drive to the cabin, you know?"

Nora settled back into the corner of her car seat and watched Grant, thinking, he has the most amazing ability to make me feel safe.

Grant continued. "I talked to John, our financial guy."

"Yeah? I didn't know that you talked to-"

"Well," Grant conceded, "I was a little excited after that call. I mean, I did a little research on the Internet..."

Of course you did, Nora thought.

"And it is an amazing price. And not even being on the market. Pam said her aunt and uncle just want to unload it. Don't want to fix it up. Don't want to have to deal with realtors. Pam said they haven't even been to the place in over a year. Maybe two." Grant stared intently ahead, repeating the same few sentences he had been saying, off and on, the last few weeks. "It could be quite the deal. The deal of a lifetime. My dad never got that place in Florida and he always kicked himself. We could...if we were careful. The budget would be tight..."

Grant trailed off, crunching numbers in his head.

Nora peered into the darkness of the Wisconsin night. “Amazing how one phone call can change your life,” she said again and then cried, “Look! Light!” relieved in spite of herself. “It’s gotta be Wautoma. Wautoma was next on the map.”

They drew closer and the headlights hit a faded blue and white sign. “Wautoma Bait & Tackle Shoppe” loomed out of the darkness.

“Yippee,” Nora cried as Grant added, “Well, done, my steady navigator.”

They peered out the windows as they entered the town.

Grant slowed the car to a crawl and drove down what appeared to be the main drag. Since it was late, the majority of the shops were closed but a few opened bars and dinner clubs dotted the two-mile long strip of town. Nora could make out some side streets, which appeared to have some smaller businesses on them. A few chains, including a Taco Bell, McDonalds and a chicken place revealed the cultural thread that connected all American towns.

“There,” said Grant, pointing. “There’s that hardware store. The Citgo should be up ahead, and we make the turn off just after...there it is!” Grant executed a cautious turn and the car plunged back into darkness.

“Wow. Civilization just stops, doesn’t it?” Nora murmured. She could just make out small homes, with the blue haze of televisions cutting through the darkness, establishing the population of Wautoma sprinkled at regular intervals along the gently sloping highway. “Can you imagine living here all the time?” Nora wondered aloud. “I mean it would be different. With computers and cable, you wouldn’t be cut off but still...”

“The rain’s stopped.” Grant gestured to her. “Pull out Pam’s notes.”

“Got ‘em.”

Restoring Nora/Sergel

“Okay, we’re looking for Oak Cove.”

Chapter Two

House Hunting

Now it is time to start your search. Remember, the most important quality will be location. Too far away and it will create more hassles than it's worth. Too close and the retreat aspect of your retreat will...retreat! It will take some work to find the proper area, but once you have, you will be able to refine your search and zero in on some potential properties. Once this important step is taken, congratulate yourself. You have just taken the first step to unlocking your new life.

Shifting your mind-set from daydreaming about the possible future to taking action today is an act of dramatic proportions. You will begin to look at everything around you differently and that change in perspective alone will bring change to your life.

The most important thing to do at this stage is to keep reality and expectation separate. The desire to charge forth and buy before informing yourself will be strong. Be optimistic but realistic.

* * *

I could just take this kitchen knife and whack it off. Funny. Ten minutes ago, the thought of losing a breast would have made me gag. Now, I'm ready to do it myself with a paring knife and a roll of Bounty. Am I going to be one of those women you hear about? "I knew a woman once, thirty-nine, two little kids, got breast cancer, died three months later. I wonder what happened to her husband and kids. They moved away. It was terrible. So sad"

Go sit down. Call Grant. No, I can make it. He'll know soon enough. Just sit down and feel this.

I can't feel. What do I feel?

The living room looks different. Should I straighten up? Would it be shallow to straighten up? Do I want to? What should I do? Crying would probably be good. Do I feel any tears? No...no tears. I wish I felt that pressure behind my eyes. Such a nice thing to do. Crying. Means a big emotional thing has happened.

"Oh, I just sobbed when I heard. I lost it."

I'm not losing it. What am I doing? Okay, the kids ate. That's good. I don't have to be too attentive. God will forgive me because I just found out I have cancer. I get let off the

Good Mommy hook tonight. Go call them. Get them to bed. Touch them. Touch their hair. Smell them. Feel the smooth skin on their backs.

“Kids!!! Come brush your teeth! Bed!”

Oh god, they’re fighting. Not tonight. Please don’t fight tonight.

“Sammy, Viv, stop it. Please don’t fight tonight. I’ve got...a headache. Yes, sure, okay, Sammy, take a cookie. Take two and give one to your...no! Both aren’t for you! One is for Viv...Viv! Do not hit him! Stop it, both of you!”

My brain is going to explode.

“Just eat the cookies and go to bed. Yes. Yes, Kathleen is coming after school tomorrow but not if you don’t get to bed right after this cookie...oh...um...brush them in the morning. Don’t tell Daddy. And just this one time!”

Just go through the motions. I should be feeling tender, aching affection and overwhelming love and all I want to do is get them into their beds so I can sit and...do whatever you’re supposed to do after you find out that you have cancer.

Cancer. It’s a funny word. A newspaper word. Like “terrorist attack” or “Pulitzer Prize” or “House Appropriations Committee.” A distant, sophisticated word. Complicated. Bestows a differentness on the bearer.

I am a hostage in a terrorist attack.

I have just won the Pulitzer Prize.

I am a member of the House Appropriations Committee.

I have cancer.

Grant is home. Grant is here. There is his car. There is his key in the lock. I have cancer and he is opening the door.

* * *

Grant struggled with the lock, in the worn, pseudo-brass knob as Nora huddled behind him, trying to keep the flashlight trained on his hands. Cold worked its way into the corners of her clothes and she felt what she hoped was a leaf tickle her ankle.

“Hurry up. Just twist it,” she said, wiggling her foot.

“I did!”

“Twist it the other way. I feel a bug.”

“Nora, it’s the woods of Wisconsin in the middle of April. Of course you feel a bug!”

Nora did a little dance, sort of a Sugar Ray Leonard boxing jig, dislodging the hoped for leaf. Her flashlight spilled light around them, revealing a few very tall leaning trees with persistent dried leaves clinging to a few branches and what felt like a lot of black. Dark, black night.

The fragrance of pine, fresh, moldy leaves and earth pressed in on her nostrils, feeding in Nora a combination of excitement and slight, fun fear. It was all so different. Different was good.

Grant gave the lock a firm twist married with a grunt. “Got it! Give me the flashlight, honey.”

Nora ignored him and shone it into the small cabin. Glimpses of furniture, wood paneling and a few stray pieces of pink insulation hanging down from the ceiling seemed to pop towards them. Nora inched in front of Grant and stepped across the threshold.

“Wow,” she muttered, playing the light around the big room. In an instant, the smell of old bug repellent, dust and a strong whiff of gasoline replaced the fresh fragrance of the woods.

Grant guided himself over to the right, reaching for the wall. “They said the fuse box was in this far corner. Nora, shine it...give me some...good, thanks. There it is. I see it. All I’ve gotta do is switch the...OUCH! What is this? A lawn mower? They keep the lawn mower in the living room?”

Nora said, “Here,” stepping over to Grant and handing him the flashlight. She let the deep brown darkness encase her as he made his way to the far corner. As the beam of light wobbled ahead of him she made out the dimensions of the long room. A kitchen was tucked in the far left corner, a staircase rose from the other corner, under which the desired fuse box presumably rested.

Grant located the fuse box and, referring to a crumpled piece of paper cupped in his hand, fiddled and muttered. After a moment, a large gray handle was pulled, a few odd switches flung and he turned to face Nora, eyes dancing. “Go ahead now, honey. Turn on a light. Let’s get a look-see!”

Bending down to a table lamp resting on a small end table, she turned the hard plastic knob. A tentative golden glow suddenly made the harsh blue beam of the flashlight irrelevant. Nora and Grant looked around the room.

The rectangular room was so brown that the white refrigerator resting in the far corner appeared to rise up like the Taj Mahal. Brown wood paneling lined the walls. A large, brown couch, flanked by two brown chairs, one plaid and one tweed, sat in the center of the room, facing a long, large window, presumably opening on to the darkness outside,

punctuating the left wall. Light brown curtains, decorated with blue, white and brown ducks, were drawn across the window. Under the curtains, along the entire length of the window sat a wooden table with a bench pulled up to it. Being made of wood, the table and bench were also brown. A calendar, dated four years back, hung from a support beam and a few pictures of ducks, obviously torn from a magazine, all framed in matching wooden frames, were haphazardly hung around the room.

Nora, stunned by the medley of brown, couldn't pull her eyes away from the scene before her.

It's sort of like a decorating car accident, she thought. The carnage is devastating but you just can't look away. Her eyes traveled to the kitchen. Oh my god, she thought. They managed to find a brown oven. I didn't know they made brown ovens.

"Grant, have you ever seen so much brown in your entire life? What? What!?"

Grant had begun to laugh. Hard.

"What, honey?" Nora demanded.

Speechless with laughter, Grant merely waved to the ceiling. Nora's eyes slowly traveled up.

2 by 4's, with the blue ink printing still on their sides, ran the length of the ceiling at regular intervals. Between the beams, inverted hills of dusty, pale pink insulation, clearly stapled there long ago, hung about three feet above her head. Nora could just make out inexpensive extension cords (brown) winding their way around the beams, linking exposed light fixtures to each other. A small bag, brown, filled with some mysterious substance, hung from an extremely ornate hook wedged into one 2 by 4. Two or three

ancient bug strips, long, yellow and presumably sticky, hung from a few others. Nora chose to not examine them too closely.

Grant, having suppressed his laughter enough to manage speech, gasped, “They said it’s been like this, that the ceiling, how did she put it? ‘The ceiling, well, it needs a little work, finishing, and we never got around to it.’ How long did they own this place?”

“Pam said thirty years,” said Nora.

Grant reached up and easily touched a piece of shredded insulation hanging low over his head. A handful, like a small dusty pink cloud, floated down. “Well, okay. It is a fishing, retreat sort of place. And I guess some people aren’t into, um, projects,” he finally said.

Nora nodded, adding, “And well, it’s not brown. The insulation. I mean, it’s pink. Sort of a nice accent. A visual break from the...brown.” She tapped her foot against the worn carpet. Oh! She noticed the color of the carpet. It wasn’t brown. It was more of a dark, rich tan. Kind of deep, dirty beige.

A piece of insulation clinging to his baseball cap, Grant asked, “Have you looked behind you, behind the door?” as he went over to a small lamp, its base a carved rendering of two ducks beginning to take flight. He turned it on as Nora turned around.

An opened door along the right wall revealed a small bathroom, with exposed cinder block walls and old fashion white porcelain sink, but her mind noted its presence in only a few stray synapses. The rest was occupied with what lay between the outside door they had just entered and the bathroom. It took Nora’s mind a few moments to sort out the profusion of articles that filled the corner.

Lawn furniture. A picnic table. Fishing poles. A large, plastic mesh umbrella. The lawn mower. Rakes. Shovels. Brooms. Metal shelves filled with rusted coffee cans, most likely containing nails, screws and nuts. Large bottles of anti-freeze. Long piping, both brass and white plastic. A black Weber grill. Three inner tubes hanging from hooks in the ceiling. Faded plastic inflatable pool toys. Two pairs of deep green, thick rubber waders, the kind that extend from the armpits to the feet.

And wood. Lots and lots of wood. Piled on an industrial sized shelf almost seven feet long that appeared to be anchored to the wall and the ceiling, planks, 2 by 4's, pieces of trim, segments of paneling, molding and scraps of various shapes and sizes, all lay in a haphazard collection of momentous proportions.

Nora and Grant looked at the wood. And the waders, lawn mower, shovels, rakes and everything else. Finally Grant said, "There should be a car too, you know? 'Cuz it's sort of like a garage."

"A garage in the living room. It's a bold choice," Nora said.

"Unexpected. Not the usual way to go," added Grant.

"Yup," Nora began to giggle. "You've got to admire their aesthetic moxie!"

Grant pointed under the staircase. "It's cinder block construction. No wonder it survived that tornado, when was it? They said the late sixties I think," Grant reached in to slap the wall. He stomped his foot on the floor. "The place is solid as a rock." Grant slapped the wall again. His eyes traveled the room again, a humorous glint being joined by something else. "They mostly used it for fishing and family get-togethers, right?"

Nora nodded. "The kids would love it."

"Does it remind you of your old family place?"

“It smells like it, except for the gas,” Nora said. “But then most cabins probably smell alike, you know?” Nora took a deep breath, filling her lungs with memories. “Yup. Same smell. Woody, cold and bug spray.”

Nora’s mind added in the smell of bacon. Then, laying in a narrow, twin bed. Next, she placed her sisters besides her, Connie snoring lightly, Prilly sprawled on her back, their hair, tangled, draping across the mounds of pillows. Hearing the crackle and splatter of the grease in the frying pan. The summer morning, cold and green. The bright yellow, slightly rough bedspread on top and the smooth, polyester trim of the blanket beneath it rubbing against her cheek. Mom still has that old blanket, Nora noted in her mind, in the corner next to the place where memory happened.

Grant pulled back the curtains and peered out as Nora said, “They said there was 120 feet of shoreline. For the price they’re asking, that’s incredible. Even without a building.”

“It probably got to be too much work for Pam’s uncle and aunt,” Grant muttered. “And, while you’ve got to admit, it’s pretty...raw on the surface, the foundation is...well, it’s cinder block construction! Nothing’s knocking this thing down. It’s got potential.”

“Potential?” Nora said. “Hell, it’s past potential, Grant. Come on, it’s fabulous. You can tell. It’s just sort of scarred by life and way too much crap. And the decorating esthetic of the editor of Ducks ‘R Us Quarterly. Come on, Mr. Stone, let’s venture upstairs,” Nora said. “They said the upstairs is the newer part.”

“You just want a reason to decorate!” Grant shouted as he took the stairs two at a time.

Chapter Three

How-To Guide

With research, understanding your needs, some money, and elbow grease (and a little bit of luck!) you can take the beaten up shack you are looking at and restore it into a healed home that is all yours.

But it is important to understand that buying a cabin is as much an emotional journey as a physical one. Any change, even good change, brings with it a host of issues, including concepts of self, family, love, security, and relationships. As you renovate, you will have to ask yourself to define what you value because you will be making concrete your beliefs about life.

A cabin will give you a sense of your greater place in the world at large. So, as well as being a journey of the mind and body, buying a cabin is also a journey of the heart.

* * *

“So, Nora, how do you feel?”

“Scared. I think I feel scared. I managed to put the kids to bed. I bribed them. Cookies.”

“Good.”

“Grant, I don’t even think for one tiny second it was cancer.”

“Me too.”

“I thought I would know. How can you have a lump of cancer so fucking big you can see it and not know? I mean, I got a mammogram ten, no, eleven months ago. Remember? I did! And they said everything was fine. There wasn’t a lump then...It’s not fair. I did everything you are supposed to do.”

“I know. It’s okay, Nora honey. We’ll get it out. We’ll just get it all out and do whatever we have to do. We will see this guy and then get a second opinion and then just take care of it. We won’t panic.”

We won’t. We aren’t panic people. Especially you. But you’re scared. What if I die? You would remarry. You’re a great catch. Don’t marry Sally. Just not Sally. She would make a play for him. I know she would. Bitch. And I don’t want her raising Viv and Sammy. I’ll tell him, he just can’t marry Sally. He can marry somebody but somebody I don’t know. She’s gotta be cool. And really loving. And not too strict. Artsy would be nice. And pretty but not prettier than me.

And I used to worry about what I would do if Grant dropped dead. What do I do? How would I send the kids to college? What job would I get? Would I stay in the house? But, it's never you. You never think that you are the one that is going to drop dead. It's always the other guy and you are the one bravely carrying on. Ten pounds thinner and bravely carrying on.

Shit, I don't want Grant to be a widower. I want to be here. I want to have teenage battles with Viv. I want to see Sammy graduate from college.

I don't want to be one of those people others remember twenty years from now.

"Remember Nora?"

That is not going to happen to me. I hope that isn't going to happen to me.

"Grant, I don't know how to do this."

"Me neither. But we'll find our way."

* * *

This is like Christmas, Nora realized. Christmas as a grown up is not the Christmas you grow up with. It's not magical. Excitement, anticipation or even just pure, naked, unqualified desire are all gone, or at least diminished by the chores, post office, budget, malls, anxiety, lists and too much to do, she thought as she rested her hand on the rough, wood railing and looked up the stairs.

No invisible hands building and carving the moments out of the material at hand, making the ordinary, rich and sweet and laden with promise. I am the invisible hands now.

But this, this place, feels like Christmas.

She looked back at the main floor. There is promise here, she thought. And it is making me feel...what? An odd little flutter rippled in Nora's sternum. It felt like a whisper about the weight of a fluffy piece of cotton candy-like insulation. My body is whispering to me. What is that, she wondered. It's not quite joy. It feels more like...optimism.

She smiled as she started up the steps, painted deep brown of course.

Grant peered down and said, "This floor they added on in, when did she say? The seventies?" he said. He fumbled for a light switch at the top and Nora got a glimpse of a few shelves and more paneling. Brown paneling.

But she was struck again by that little whisper, which seemed to have worked up from her chest and into her thoughts.

I want this place, she realized. Brown, dusty, cluttered and unchanged for years, probably decades. Scarred and stagnant from being ignored, I want it. I want to resurrect it. And we are going to get it. It is going to work out. I don't know how, but it is. Grant hasn't reached the panic about money stage, but he will. I can get him past it. I'll just call it an investment. I'll say, "Look at all we'll be saving on vacations and trips." Investing in our family. Bring up the rotten stock market. Oh! That's good! Remember that. Land is never a bad investment. But say "property." Sounds better. Property is never a bad investment.

She stood stock still on the staircase, halfway up, and smiled.

"Honey, come on," Grant cried, "Hey, it's not so bad up here!" She continued up, arriving on the second floor a different person from the one that had just left the first.

The stairway opened onto a small common room. It was occupied by two extremely uncomfortable looking chairs facing another wall lined with stacks of discarded boxes half filled with a few books, what looked like some rusted tools, an old black telephone and piles of dusty papers. There was a table covered with a sheet shoved under a window overlooking the back of the property with a couple of chairs clustered around it.

Grant was already in one of the bedrooms, looking at the ceiling. “From what I can see, the upstairs is finished,” he called as Nora picked her way over to the hall bathroom. She flicked on the light and peered in to discover a fairly modern shower, toilet and sink. Then her eyes focused in on the walls.

“Oh my god!” Nora cried. “You won’t believe this! Honey, come quick!”

Grant joined her.

“I can’t believe it,” she stammered, pointing to the wall. “Brown duck wallpaper. In a small bathroom, with wooden paneling halfway up the wall, they finished off the room with brown ducks flying in a light brown sky. And a border too. A duck border. What a bold, unexpected choice. It’s incredible. Why haven’t we seen this place in Architectural Digest?”

Grant grinned, his eyes wrinkling in at the corners. His close-cropped black curly hair was beginning to show some gray and his wide, friendly mouth counteracted the length of his narrow face. Under this baggy sweater and ancient parka was a body of even proportions and tremendous comfort. His hugs were legendary. He had the ability to convey in the briefest embrace a sense of comfort and protection. He was fighting a losing battle with the hazards of gravity on the middle-aged torso but Nora chose to see only the good.

Grant stated, “You love this place, my sarcastic little wench. Mentally, you’re at that monthly dealer, fair place, thingy, already hauling junk-“

“Antiques.”

“Whatever. You’re already decorating, painting, ripping down wallpaper, doing that redoing thing. My checkbook is getting lighter with ever room we see.”

“Grant, look at this place. The color scheme. It’s a crime. We could be charged with criminal visual neglect if we just walked away.”

Shaking his head, Grant leaned against the hallway wall as Nora wandered from room to room, her feet padding across the dark muddy colored carpet strips that were laid down in strategic places. Paneling lined the walls of all the rooms but only halfway up the walls. Finished off at chair rail height by a strip of molding, the top half of all the bedrooms were painted a plain, bland light yellow. Grant had turned on the overhead lights in each room and the pale, greenish yellow pigment seemed to glare and bounce off the surfaces from the exposed light. Each bedroom had twin beds except the largest, which had a double bed. Two of the three bedrooms faced what was the shoreline.

Nora went into what appeared to be the master bedroom and peered out of a set of glass sliding doors. Darkness pressed in on the glass but she could make out a narrow balcony running the length of the building.

She stepped back and caught her reflection in the smudged glass. Her pale, heart shaped face contained a small, even mouth but was topped by strong eyebrows and a clearly defined jaw, which had a tendency to jut forward when she was vexed. Two thick braids of hair, the color of dark, bittersweet chocolate mixed with veins of caramel, stuck out of from a frayed red bandana that had been quickly tied around her head. Body

layered in a parka, an oatmeal colored cotton Henley shirt of unknown origin and a winter scarf bedecked in pink fairies riding purple reindeer that she had grabbed from her daughter's pile of rejected accessories, she knew she physically represented her priorities. Comfort over style. Cotton over glitter. Moisturizer over make-up. Decorating spaces over decorating self. Ease over vanity.

Grant was watching her from the doorway. "So, Nora, what do you think?"

She turned away from her image but could still feel its presence behind her, as though there were two of her standing in the structure, whereas before, there had only been one. Nora, doubled. Two of me. This place needs work. It needs some healing. Scarred, even ugly on the surface, it just needs time and attention. But, hell, that makes two of us.

"Better than getting a mastectomy," she commented.

Grant smiled. The easy, deep smile of a man who knew that he had made through a minefield and was on the troop ship going home.

Nora thought, how silly that men think that they prove their manhood, their macho, on the battleground or the playing field. The metal of a man is found in the oncologist's office. The past six months lay between them, joining them with the permanence of the cement blocks beneath them, a foundation of love, endurance and strength that, when tested, had survived the most powerful of tornados.

"That's why I married you, Mrs. Stone. You have such an eloquent gift for understatement."

Chapter Four

Exterior

Since, for most getaways, the climate and outdoors are an integral factor of the experience, a thorough examination of the property's land is essential. Take note of the condition and upkeep of the immediate area, also taking into account the proximity of neighbors, the condition of their property and any adjoining open lands that could possibly be sites for future development.

This is also a good time to step back and look at the property you are considering as a whole package.

Objectively, in the bright light of day, consider the condition of the structure along with the state of the surrounding property. This would be time to take inventory in order to get a firm grasp on whether you are up for the work and expense that lies ahead.

* * *

How could this one little breast cause so much trouble? It already looks different. Kind of...shriveled after that biopsy, lump yanking thing. It's definitely smaller. I wonder what this second opinion doctor is going to say? God, if we go with her, it's going to be a long drive, there and back.

Shit, what am I doing, worrying about the fucking drive? If I lived in rural wherever, I'd have to take whatever I could get. Stop being picky, Nora. Be thankful. No, gratitude. I should start one of those stupid gratitude journals.

Be grateful that I live within driving distance of the University of Chicago.

Be grateful we have insurance.

Be grateful that I can get a second opinion.

Be grateful we...oh, shit, this is boring! A boring, droning list. No wonder I stopped watching Oprah.

I look pretty good, if I ignore the incredible shrinking breast. Why can't a person get cancer of the inner thighs?

Okay, just say goodbye to it. Be ready. Soon, the whole thing might be gone. But it sort of is already gone. It looks different. Lopsided. My breast got snatched away while I wasn't looking. I wish I had taken a picture of them, right after high school. God, I looked good. Why the hell did I always feel fat? I was hot! Now, the chance is gone. Forever.

I've got 1 and 2/3rds breasts. My arms look pretty good. Grant likes the ass. I am strong. That's good. I'll be one of those women who look better after. I'll work out a lot. Only problem with that plan is that it involves working out a lot.

Hey, that's a good gratitude thing. I get to back off on the workouts. Right now, I can just say, "Well, I've got breast cancer so running just feels wrong. Too jarring on the tissue." Sounds really medical and important.

But, I need to be strong. I need a "Keep Nora Strong" plan. Because, I think this all might get a lot worse before it gets better.

God, I'm scared. How do I do this?

Shit, I am already doing this. Just...nobody warns you. They should say, "Hey, next week, you're gonna have to start this really big, life threatening thing, so get ready." Nope, life just throws you out of the back of the Happy Life truck into the woods of cancer and...death. And you just have to find your own way out.

And I just happened to leave 1/3rd of my left breast on the floor of the pick-up.

* * *

"So, Grant, should we go stumble around in the woods? Try and find the lake?" said Nora as she rapidly twirled a braid around her finger. The silky coil of hair, with its rhythmic mounds of soft, hilly weaves, flopped through her fingers in a comforting dance of fingers against rope. Faster and faster she twirled the braid.

Grant looked at Nora, spotting the tilt of her head, the jut of her hip and the hair whirling through her fingers in the easy, familiar dance and he knew unless he developed

the will of a Jedi Master, he was going to be the proud co-owner of an old cabin in the woods of Wisconsin very, very soon.

“Sure, honey,” said Grant. “I’ll grab the flashlight. I think I left it by the fuse box.”

Nora was already pounding down the stairs. “Got it,” she called up to him.

Grant arrived back on the first floor and said, “You know, Nora, we’re going to have to check out other properties to compare this too, right?”

Nora nodded furiously, handing him the flashlight.

“Then, if it is the deal we think it is, get an inspection,” he continued. “They said the septic was ancient. Financing. Title search. Have a survey taken...”

Nora continued to nod and also started to do a little dance on her toes, her snow boots lightly tapping against the carpet as she chimed in, “Property is a great investment, honey. Everybody says. And it’s an amazing price. Hasn’t even been on the market.”

Grant bobbed his head. “I know, but we have to be pragmatic. This would be a huge thing.”

Nora nodded seriously as her boots danced. “Huge,” she agreed.

“It would be putting a lot of financial eggs in one basket.”

“Yup. A big, concrete basket with a big lake and almost an acre of land for the kids to play on and do nature stuff, and play and swim and fish with their daddy...” The boots did a shuffle step and attempted a moonwalk.

“And an even tighter budget for us...” said Grant.

“And another house to keep going. I know,” Nora said. Then the thought really hit her. The dance stopped.

Another house.

Could I do that, she wondered? Another house. A three-hour drive. No dishwasher. No playdates. No washer, dryer. Just me, Grant and the kids. But Mom did it, she thought. Mom did it with three kids, no TV, just a radio at the cottage, and Dad coming up on weekends every summer. April and Connie and me, swinging on that cool swing. Dolls under the pine trees. All day by the water. The smell of Coppertone. Picnics. Coloring books. Exploring. Sunburns. Wild strawberries. Puzzles. That's what I want Viv and Sammy to have. That experience of being a big soul outside in a big, quiet, clean, green place. Being so bored that you end up having a ton of fun out of desperation. Stopping the noise of life to listen to the dialogue inside. Fresh corn on the cob, eaten outside with lots of butter and those little yellow plastic things that hold the ends.

Grant gazed at Nora, her open features wiggling in thought. "Nora, do you know? Would you be up to it, after everything?"

Nora listened another moment to her dialogue, rising up from her gut and reaching her mind. She looked into Grant's easy green eyes. "I think, after everything, that it is better to live a big life than a small one," she said.

And slowly, the boots resumed their dance. With a grin and a grunt, Grant switched on the flashlight and crossed over to the door. Nora wasn't sure, but she could have sworn she detected the slightest bounce to his step.

They stepped outside. The moist, cold air smacked them in the face and they both instinctively turned right, Grant aiming the flashlight in front of him, its beam making out a railing and a few wooden steps set into the sloping ground. A long slab of concrete could just be made out, a deck that faced the lake, currently shrouded in darkness.

Old wet leaves and the sharp points of overgrown bushes slapped against Nora's coat as they made their way down the hill. The steps came to an end and a large open lawn spilled out before them and, beyond it, the lake. Grant pointed the flashlight down the sloping field. Its hazy beam floated over the overgrown grass and landed on a mound of brush covered earth resting along the length of the shoreline.

Nora said, "What the hell is that?" as Grant strode ahead and tentatively push against the long mound with his boot. Solid, the hip high wall dirt and grass didn't budge under his foot, so Grant climbed on top of it and peered over the other side.

"Don't fall in," cautioned Nora, grabbing the back of Grant's sweater.

"Honey, don't grab me," Grant snapped. "I'm fine! Yup, that's the water. This big hill of dirt...I don't know why this is here. The shorelines on either side don't have it. I think." Grant waved his flashlight in either direction. He climbed back off the mound of grass, weeds and dirt and turned off the flashlight.

Slowly Nora's eyes adjusted and she could make out scattered lights of homes far across the lake. She exhaled and a diaphanous puff of breath floated before her. Cold and slightly damp air wiggled into her neck, wrists and ankles. Her nose began to crinkle up inside and she inhaled the familiar chilly sensation of true winter being pulled deep into her body.

"Look up," said Grant.

She looked up. Stars. And stars. And more stars. The longer she gazed, the more stars appeared.

It looks like fudge, she thought. Blue and black fudge, and as you stir it in the pot, the colors start mixing and melting together. And the stars are glitter, sequins dropped in,

carried around and around by the wooden spoon. She suddenly remembered a trick from long ago. “Grant, Grant! Just focus on one star. Really, really hard. Look at only that one and the others will seem to disappear.”

They both tilted their heads even further back and squinted. After a moment, Grant began to laugh. “Cool,” he said.

As Nora gazed at her single star, her chosen one, the others began fading away. Words floated up to her.

Keep your eye on the prize. What is that from, she wondered, searching her memory but keeping her eyes on the star. The civil rights movement. That’s it. But what’s my prize? Maybe just being here. Being here and not...out there. Not out there in space. In the cosmic soup, floating around. Maybe today is my prize.

Grant gestured to the left. “Look, over there must be their old pier on the grass. Pam said it hasn’t been in the water for a few years. And that light must be those neighbors that live here all year long. See the light, the one up the hill? Wow, they really aren’t too far away.”

He fell silent. The rich, heavy stillness bore down on their ears and Nora, inexplicably, began to giggle. Grant’s bouncing chuckle joined her giggle and they stood, laughing, in the cold, dark, wet field.

Grant eventually sputtered, “Do we know why we are laughing?”

Nora helplessly shook her head and finally managed a “feels good, though!”

Chapter Five

Information Gathering:

Identifying Problems and Prioritizing

Now, the next part isn't fun and it will probably make you feel the exact opposite of the way you were hoping this experience would make you feel, i.e., it will be stressful and worrisome instead of relaxing and freeing. But the truth is, this is the only way to get there from here. Stress and worry will be part of the deal for a while. Yeah, it sucks. Sorry. But after the excitement of discovering your fixer-upper cabin comes the very important, perhaps most important and, yes, totally yucky stage of the process. While not glamorous, the need to collect information is crucial to making an informed

decision. Do your research. It is also imperative you hire qualified experts. You just have got to. Suck it up and pay for the good inspector.

As you research your property begin collecting names of local plumbers, carpenters and other crafts people. This will not only aid in immediate projects and any future construction or restoration but also help build ties with the community. Before you buy, consider all the alternatives and possible headaches, both emotional and financial,

* * *

“I’m glad you came to us, Mrs. Stone. As you figured out, it probably wasn’t the best move for that other doctor...um...well, a lot of potential imagery and diagnostic information was lost when he...when you had the lump removed before further MRI and mammograms could be taken, to see the extent of the involved tissue. The margins were clearly dirty, so we will have to take a great deal more tissue.”

“To be safe...”

“Right.”

“So, mastectomy.”

“Probably. I want to get some more imagining done but considering the size of the original tumor, the size of your breasts, the fact that a fair amount of tissue has already been lost...It’s a difficult decision but the priorities are fairly clear in this instance...”

God, Grant looks so pale in this light. I wonder how I look. Do I look calm? She's being concise. Not mincing words. That's good. She's figured out that I can take it. She's direct. And smart. She emanates waves of smart. Not like Dr. Whack-Away. He was certainly amiable. But just didn't even think it could be cancer. Prick. Master Prick of the Universe. Why didn't he tell me to get a needle biopsy before scheduling a lump-yanking session?

"So, Dr. Szczepanski...did I say that right? Good. If I had gotten a needle biopsy at that other hospital, and, you know, known earlier, could we have avoided a...mastectomy? Just gone with a lump thing?

"Lumpectomy? Of course, it's difficult to say, given the information that was lost when the lump and surrounding tissue was removed but...by this report, the lump was over 5 centimeters. But a lumpectomy could be possible. There then would certainly be chemo and most likely radiation. I couldn't guarantee you how much of the original breast would be left. Your breasts are..."

A 36A on a good day. Used to be a 36B. Damn breastfeeding. They used to be pert. Almost perky. Say goodbye to your perky tit days, Nora girl. It's gonna be Hack-In-Sack lingerie for the rest of your life.

"So, even if you had come to us first, I probably, may have, considering what we know, would have recommended a mastectomy. Considering how fast it grew, your youth...you have young children to raise..."

Yes, that thing about prioritizing. Viv and Rex need me more that I need my tiny, whacked up little 36A.

"What about chemo and radiation, doctor? I mean, with the mastectomy."

“Well, Mr. Stone, with ductal carcinoma, if it hasn’t gotten to the lymph nodes, depending on what we find out in the surgery, what we see on further MRIs and mammograms...”

Spit it out, Doctor! Is my hair going to fall out and my toilet going to get a vomit volume test?!

“You may be able to avoid radiation and chemo altogether. With all infected tissue gone, there would be nothing to radiate. And if the cancer remained in the ducts, which ductal carcinoma tends to do, well, chemo may be avoided. That we will only know when we biopsy the lymph nodes. So, you may be able to just have the mastectomy. Tamoxafin may be prescribed when we find out the estrogen receptor status.”

Man, these doctors suck at “yes” or “no.” They have a “may” addiction. You MAY have to do this. You MAY have to take that. Chemo MAY be avoided. Good, Grant is writing down that estrogen thing she just said. What else was I going to ask her?

How did she get to be the boss of one of the top breast centers in the country and still look like...my age? And be a woman even. God, feminism is cool. She is so...confident. Completely confident. Not rattled. She was born to do this. I love meeting people who are doing what they were born to do. I think I even love her a little bit. I love that she is smart and doesn’t bullshit and that two male doctors come in before her, to check me out, awaiting the arrival of their boss doc, the one everyone wants to see. If a woman makes it this far, or a minority, you just know that they are amazing. ‘Cuz, it takes that extra dose of smarts and chutzpah to push past the cultural-high school-life-easy-way-out crap.

Geez, I've gotta get busy. Well, not curing cancer but where are those paints? I know where they are. In the furnace corner, behind the Barbie bike. Okay, maybe starting to work again is not a priority right now.

"So, Mrs. Stone..."

"Please...Nora."

"Nora, schedule the MRI and Mammogram through Hallie. She'll coordinate with plastic surgery so you can minimize your trips down here."

"Dr. Szczepanski..."

"Please, Mr. Stone, the name is a mouthful, although you both pronounce it perfectly. Dr. S. works for most of my patients."

"Call me Grant. So, Dr. S., when do we schedule Nora's actual surgery?"

"Well, we have a few more tests. Ultrasounds, the MRI, one or two appointments with plastic...So, it may be a few weeks."

MAY again! I'm going to start not liking you if you keep up with this "may" shit, Dr. S.

"Sounds great, doctor. Grant, it makes sense. After that other place, I don't want to recklessly charge anywhere."

"So, Nora, Grant, talk to Hallie. And, you both are going right on to Dr. Gray's office, right? Excellent. He's a superb plastic surgeon. You know how to get up to Plastics, correct? Go to the fourth floor and then...oh, good. You have the map to the building. Now, my e-mail is on my card."

The grabbing of the file. Already, I'm recognizing the international sign for "Appointment Over."

* * *

“So, we’re going to need to get it inspected,” said Grant, coat still on, mail in hand, standing by the kitchen counter.

Nora, stirring spaghetti, said, “I know. I called the guy. He knew the lake,” then bellowed, “Dinner in five minutes! Viv, Sammy, come upstairs now. Turn off the TV. Wash hands. Now, please!”

Grant poked his head down the basement stairs. “Hey, Daddy’s home.”

Screams of joy, a “Daddy!” and a “Stop it, Sammy” could be heard floating up the stairs, followed by the pounding of feet.

Sammy burst into the kitchen, followed close behind by Viv. A four-year old bundle of warmth, he plunged his head into Grant’s stomach, wrapping his arms around Grant’s hips. His face popped up and, soft, deep brown eyes dancing, he leaned against Grant and said, “Mommy got me Buzz Lightyear sheets.”

“Buzz Lightyear sheets?” Grant cried. “Why, I wanted Buzz Lightyear sheets! Nora! Did you get me any Buzz Lightyear sheets?”

Viv moaned, “Dad! You don’t want Buzz Lightyear sheets,” as she sauntered into the kitchen, her thick brown hair partially swept up in a complex structure involving several barrettes, a tiara and a multi-colored string of unknown origin. Her wide eyes expressed adoring disdain. “You are so silly,” she finished with a flip of her head.

Grant let out a roar. “I am silly! I AM THE SILLY MONSTER!!” He dropped the mail and started chasing Viv around the house. Sammy joyfully joined in the chase,

screaming, “Chase me too, Daddy! Chase me too!” Grant obliged, allowing Viv and Sammy the joy of loud, feigned panic as they tore through the house, begging for their very lives.

Nora dumped the spaghetti into the colander, watching the steam fog up the kitchen window. It’s getting dark later; she thought, her eyes wandering across their backyard. A stray plastic lawn mower lay abandoned near the garden bed. Her eyes stayed on the black earth as she visualized her list.

Call inspection guy. Call bank. Ask about septic. Taxes? Mortgage rates. Can the inspector check out that pier thingy? Appraisal. Do they do that? And what was that survey thing? I want to make this easy for Pam’s family. Don’t want to queer the deal and have them list it. God, thinking about mortgage rates is boring! Okay, painting the entire place. That’s not boring. White. I see white. Even the awful paneling. A warm, country white with Provencal prints everywhere. A mix of furniture. Shabby chic. Colorful. Comfortable. There was that antique store we drove by. Yes! This is better. Not boring, that’s for sure! Paint the bedrooms different colors? Maybe bunk beds for the...

A small body plunged into her side. Nora gasped as a shaft of pain jumped from her breast to her stomach. “Augh, oh Sammy, ouch, ouch, honey, you’ve gotta be careful of Mommy’s bruise. You can’t do that...”

Oh, shit, Nora thought. Look at his face. Shit, shit, shit. Ouch. Shit.

Grant rushed in. “Sammy? Nora?! Are you okay? Sammy, you can’t jump on Mom that way! You hurt her bruise!”

Sammy threw his hands over his face and burst into tears.

Shit.

Nora knelt down and embraced his shaking body. “Oh, sorry, Sammy. Sorry, sorry, sorry. You just surprised me...” Her rebuilt breast throbbed, tender from the impact but still somehow numb. A corner of her brain wondered how something could be numb but still hurt.

Sammy continued to weep into his hands, sputtering out, “Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. I’m sorry, Mommy! Sorry!”

Grant and Nora exchanged a look as Viv, face blank, leaned against the door jam. Grant mouthed, “Are you okay?”

Nora nodded. “Drama over, everybody. I’m fine. Sammy, Mommy’s fine and we are all fine, right?” Sammy nodded slowly, nose running. Viv wordlessly sat at the table as Nora wiped Sammy’s nose, hustled him to the table and returned to the colander, full of now sticky and cold spaghetti.

We have got to get this cabin. The words appeared in her brain like a flash. She glanced over to the kids to find Grant sitting at the table, tiara on his head, silly grin on his face, waiting. Sammy, face puffy and moist and Viv, eyes underlined by gray, simultaneously notice his attire and burst into giggles.

Grant’s eyes met hers.

We have got to get this cabin.

Chapter Six

Making The Call

After all pertinent information is gathered, comes the time you need to make the decision. Whether to proceed or to retreat can be a tough call. Do you await a better property? Is this what you should do? Can you really take this project on? But, if you've done all your awful, boring homework, you will be making a somewhat informed decision. I say "somewhat" because no decision can be fully informed. You know it's true. There is no way to be prepared for every contingency. That's just the way life, the ultimate fixer-upper, goes!

* * *

“So, Nora, what do you think?”

“She really knows her stuff. And she’s got credentials up the yin-yang. And she’s got good yin and yang. You know, the feminine and masculine thing. Strong but empathetic. Articulate but not pushy.”

“Honey...”

“I know.”

“This is one decision I can’t make for you.”

“Well, Grant, you probably should, ‘cuz, if I croak, you’re the one stuck raising the kids. Oh, let’s just whack the thing off. I can’t...we can’t...I’ve got to be around for them. For you. Hell, for me! It sure would suck, not knowing what happens to Britany Spears career trajectory.”

* * *

“Well, the inspector said the electrical is ancient. And the plumbing, the septic, well, the plumbing is sound but the septic...”

“Then, why are you smiling, my dear husband?” asked Nora.

Grant leaned back in the kitchen chair. A weekend’s growth of stubble, dirty jeans and an army jacket, older than either of them, completed the picture of a serenely happy man.

Why is he happy? Nora thought. I mean, happy is good. Happy is great. My husband, looking at plunking half of our life savings down on a building with creaky wiring and

septic system that should be christened Three Mile Island, is grinning like he just won a jury award big enough to bring a tobacco company to its knees.

“Grant! Come on!”

“I mean, we are going to have to put two thousand into it just to bring the electrical up to code...”

“You are Satan. Why are you happy?” Nora threatened aloud but noting clearly in her mind that he had said, ‘we are going to have to...’”

“Well, you see, the inspector, Tony, really nice guy, he came before the appraiser. And, honey, I was bummed out, I mean...anyway...then Marty showed up. Tony was the inspector, Marty was the appraiser. Both really nice guys. And they know each other...Tony and him, you know, it’s a small community. Marty is on the school board and Tony, he’s also got a wife who owns that bookstore in town that we drove by...”

My husband, Mr. Let’s-Not-Invite-The-Neighbors-Over-I’m-Too-Tired, has become the social butterfly of Waushara County.

“But, anyway, Nora...Marty said...I mean...he knew it wasn’t listed yet. He said the price we were getting it for was...well...”

“What!?!”

“About 2/3rds of what they could probably get for it. And if we put in some work, you know, new septic, finish the inside, the electrical...we could double its value or more. In a year.”

“Interesting. Very interesting.”

“Mrs. Stone, I think we should move on this.”

“Mr. Stone, I couldn’t agree more. Let’s move.”

Chapter Seven

Inspection and Appraisals

Just remember, if the location is good and the property and foundation are solid, any additional construction or upgrades will pay long lasting dividends so don't allow yourself to be discouraged by all the things you must take into consideration. A thorough inspection of the property by a reputable company, along with an appraisal, will be crucial to making the proper offer. Any money that will be put into upgrading electrical, plumbing or other basic components will be wasted if the foundation of the structure is not sound. An inspection by a qualified expert will provide you with all the information you need to proceed.

* * *

“I’ve never seen so many brochures in my life. At least they give you a fancy, designer plastic bag. The American Cancer Society logo and all. Screw Armani. I’m aiming for the Alzheimer’s Association baseball cap next visit...oh, good, there’s the footbridge to the elevators.”

“Yeah. Wow. It’s snowing.”

“Sure is a busy place.”

Are all these people doctors? They are all so fucking young! At least Dr. S. had a little gray hair. I wonder who else here has cancer? Is everybody not in a uniform, sick? I don’t feel sick. God, this bag is heavy. It’s like the tour of the maternity ward you take the first time you’re pregnant. All the brochures and paper. But, then we got a fabric bag to hold all the stuff. Do we still have that bag? Yes, Viv has those Polly Pockets in it.

Why does pregnancy rate a fabric bag and cancer only plastic? Sort of seems like it should be the other way around. And it would be nice to get something. A couple of perfume samples or something. That’s it! A new business. Grown up Happy Meals for cancer patients. After your appointment, you get a burger, fries, small soda and a fifth of vodka. No. Prostate Cancer Happy Meal = beer. Breast Cancer Happy Meal = wine cooler.

Shit. There’s a little girl in a wheelchair. Shit. Oh shit. I’m so shallow. There is a six-year old on a breathing tube and holding a Barbie and I’m bitching about not getting a fabric souvenir bag.

Restoring Nora/Sergel

Deep breathe, Nora, girl. Going up.

Deep breathe. Walk the pretty atrium.

Deep breathe. Plastics.

Sit.

Forms.

More forms.

Insurance card.

Smiles. Nurse. Enter into Plastics. Doors. Gown. Paper covered table. Oh, nice. A nice little cabinet to hang your clothes. And you know you're in a top-notch hospital when they have this month's issues of magazines.

Nurse. Smiles. Blood pressure. Smiles.

Funny. No one ever says "lump" or "cancer."

Wait.

Resident.

Questions.

Wait.

Wait in a blue gown, feet dangling off the table. I feel like I'm five years old. Grant reading People magazine. We have that issue. Why is he reading it?

Gentle knock.

"Come in."

Dr. Gray has no gray hair. Dr. Gray is young. Not too young. But young. But, Dr. Gray has the vibe. The smart-doctor vibe. God, I'm getting good at this. Here we go.

“So, long story short, I’m the good news doctor, Mrs. Stone. See, we take this tissue from right here, your lower abdomen, I build a blood flow through here...and, the right breast, we boost that for symmetry...you’ve got fabulous tissue right here. It’s going to look terrific. A few years after the surgery, you might not even be able to tell which breast it was.”

I’m standing in a room, letting a man I just met grab and manipulate my breasts, as my husband stands watching, not three feet away. Welcome to the Cancer Twilight Zone.

“So, Dr. Gray, I’m walking out of here with a flat stomach and pre-child tits?”

“Like I said, nice to hear good news, right?”

“But, damn, they should give it to you all at once. The first phone call should be, ‘Hey, yeah, sure, you got breast cancer but you’re getting a boob job and tummy tuck, gratis’”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Dr. Gray...he should be Dr. Fiesta Harvest Delight. You are a god among men. There is hope in this tiny little cubicle. Hope and words like, “‘after the surgery’ and ‘great’ and ‘fabulous’ and ‘looking amazing.’” And you laugh at my jokes. You fly other places and lecture other smart doctors. Dr. Fiesta Harvest Delight, you and Dr. S...I’m going to write an ode to you, or paint a series of famous, brilliant portraits. The Good Doctors. Something like that.

* * *

“Okay, Nora, here’s the bank statement and the savings books. We’re going to have to move some money around.”

* * *

“Okay, Mrs. Stone, how’s Monday at 10:45? And the other...hum...Thursday? 2:15? You’ll have to go down to MRI yourself to schedule that one yourself.”

* * *

“Hi Andy. So you talked to Grant at work? Oh, a few times. Hold on a second...Sammy, I’m on the phone...turn it down!...Sorry, Andy...okay, so you think it’s a good investment? Yeah, that’s what I told him too but coming from a financial guy, it probably sounded a lot better. And the interest rates and all that? Yeah, Grant should go into money management. No, I take that back. My nerves couldn’t take it.”

* * *

“Don’t move your arm...um....Mrs. Stern...”

“Stone.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s okay. And you are...?”

“Tamika.”

“You’re the I.V. lady.”

“Yup.”

“You just sit here all day and put in I.V.s?”

“Yup. Make a fist, please. Now, don’t move.”

“Wow. Wow! Oh my god. Tamika, you’re amazing! That was like...butter.”

“Yup.”

“You know your life has taken a strange turn when you become an excellent judge of I.V. insertion.”

“Yup.”

“Thanks, Tamika.”

“Your welcome, Mrs. Stone.”

* * *

“Nora, I called for another credit report, just to be sure, and I scheduled a meeting for us to get together with Andy. Go over the entire financial picture. This is a whole new big thing we’ve got to factor in now. The future has an entirely different look to it, fiscally, and we want to know exactly what we are getting into.”

* * *

“Now, don’t move, Mrs. Stone. Here’s a button. If you get distressed, just push it. Now, I’ll slide you into the MRI in a minute. Are your legs, all right? Good. Now, it is very important you don’t move. You will hear a series of clicks. But don’t move.”

“How long?”

“The entire series...about forty-five minutes. I will talk to you occasionally though this speaker between scans. But don’t move. The last test may feel a little odd. I’ll be pushing some dye into your system to get a better resonance and it may sting a little bit. Are you comfortable?”

“Comfortable? Well, I’m laying face down on a seven-foot long soft and cushy bed with my tit hanging through a hole; I’m covered with blankets, warmed by the way, thank you very much. You’ve supplied me with more pillows than Bed, Bath and Beyond and there’s not a person under ten years old in sight. Comfortable? I think I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

“Good. Now, don’t move. And remember, the last one may sting.”

* * *

Chapter Eight

The Financial Picture

Taking a good look at your current and future fiscal picture will prove very helpful in insuring your cabin adds to your family's well being instead of depleting it. You may find this part of the process uncomfortable, even scary, but try to push through the fear. The big decisions in life require looking at some hard truths but once found, that insight will make the end result more pleasurable for everyone.

There's probably no way it's not going to sting at least a little but once you have a clear vision of your financial picture, and you've got a plan to implement, then it will be time to proceed.

* * *

"Nora, it's going to sting, financially, I mean, moving all this money from savings into getting the cabin."

Grant, don't panic on me now, Nora thought, watching him lean back in his chair, drumming a steady rhythm with a slightly chewed pencil topped off by a large Elmo eraser. Of course, I knew he was going to freak out at least once. It's good to freak out when you're doing a big thing.

"We need to really think about this, Nora! Crunch the numbers. Going back up this weekend is a good idea. See those other properties to compare. See the cabin in actual daylight."

Elmo's head beat a steady beat. TAP-TAP, tap, tap, TAP-TAP.

"Taxes, property taxes, maintenance, the septic, we still need to put money away for retirement, college for both kids. I've already talked to Andy once or twice."

Tap, tap, TAP-TAP, tap, tap, TAP-TAP.

"It's going to be very tight if we do this! Here, hand me that calculator again...see, okay, mortgage rates are good. Let's say we lock in at...okay...what we do... I showed you this, right?"

About seventy-eight times, thought Nora, leaning in over the calculator.

Tap, tap, TAP-TAP.

Nora gazed at Grant, watching him work the calculator with one hand and give Elmo's head multiple concussions with the other. God, I love this man, she thought. I love him because he is steady and true and the real deal. He defines responsible and I'm asking him to jump off a financial cliff, albeit wearing three parachutes, leaving thousands of dollars in the savings account, to land in a canyon filled with marshmallows and down-filled pillows...still, I'm asking him to jump off a cliff.

"Okay, so, Grant, that would be...what?"

"Honey! The monthly payment. And that's not figuring property taxes! We don't want to get stuck, financially. We need to know what we are doing BEFORE we do it."

* * *

"What's this test for?"

"It's a pre-surgical procedure. The insertion of dye into the breast..."

"Oh, for the lymph node test thingy?"

"Yes. It creates a contrast for the surgeon. It sort of illuminates which lymph node is the senital...the primary one. So they know which one to biopsy. All right, Mrs. Stone, now, arm above your head. Don't move. I'm going to begin inserting the needles now. This may be a little uncomfortable."

"You know, it's odd. A couple of weeks ago, somebody sticking needles into a breast would only be something I think would happen on Law And Order: Special Victims Unit. But today, I'm just wondering where you got your earrings. Does that mean I'm jaded?"

“Maybe a little, Mrs. Stone. But in a good way. I’m just happy you aren’t crying.”

“You get a lot of criers?”

“A few. Can’t say I blame them though. How does that feel?”

“Stings a little. Yup, stings a little. But you still haven’t told me.”

“I’m sorry. This is for the lymph node test that...”

“No, no. Earrings.”

“Oh! Goodness, um, Target, I think!”

“Don’t you just love Target?”

Chapter Nine

Personal Relationships

At this time, the myriad of expectations, fears and hopes can crop up between family members. You and your spouse may find that you both have different expectations. One may want to do everything all at once, simultaneously knocking down walls, putting in new floors and then immediately painting and remodeling. The other may want to

move in a slower fashion, taking each project one-by-one. Perhaps one of you grew up with a family cabin and has a fixed idea of what it means and how it is supposed to look. Others may have grown up in a city, the closest thing to a cabin being the fire escape behind their apartment building.

Whatever the personal history, a few heart to heart talks will do wonders in coming to an understanding of what each person wants and expects. It is rare for two people to experience a shared experience in exactly the same way, so be patient with your partner, listen to their concerns, fears and thoughts.

* * *

The car made its way down the steep, narrow road, wheels crunching against the gravel and stone. Grant's window was down and the fragrance of pine and smoky leaves flooded the car. He nosed the car into the parking spot carved out of the sloping hill. They both got out and slammed their car doors shut, the thuds sounding muffled in the thick cold morning air. A heavy mist hung low to the ground, making the early hour seem even more removed from the context of the day.

Nora whispered, "Well, let's go down to the cabin. "

Grant nodded and they crossed the silent road and ventured down the steps. The cabin rose up, a dark and closed structure, clearly asleep. Everything around them was quiet under the blanket of cold mist.

A squirrel leapt across the floor of the wooden lot, causing both Nora and Grant to jump. An erratic, zig-zagging course brought the squirrel to the base of a looming oak tree, which the animal skittered up, nails tapping against the bark.

“We’ll at least somebody else is awake,” Grant observed.

Nora shuddered, the cold mixing with anticipation reaching into her bones. “I feel completely awake,” she said, walking over to the concrete patio overlooking the lake. The cabin rested behind her, still asleep as she gazed across the foggy field reaching down to the lake. “Grant, Grant, come look,” she whispered.

Grant said, “I feel like we should whisper too, even though nobody is around,” as he strode over to her and looked out.

The large lake lay before them. They both knew it was about 60 acres, Grant having also researched the lake’s history, average temperature, pollution levels, boating restrictions, testing and maintenance schedule, animal life and recorded plant life.

All thoughts of money, pollution count, financing and septic left his mind as he eased his eyes over the silent water. A family of ducks (probably mallards, a corner of his brain noted) propelled themselves across the width of the lake, leaving an inverted V-shape in their wake. A beam of sunlight had broken through the morning’s haze and cut across the water, promising more to come. Thick trees wrapped around the circumference of the lake and a flicker to the right hinted at the possibility of an appearance of a deer if all stayed still.

The view was dazzling. Nora and Grant stood on the long concrete deck with the house to their backs and absorbed the spread of trees, earth, water and sky into their bones. The soft green and light brown of the field leading from the edge of the deck and undulating towards the shoreline held the promise of summer picnics and croquet matches held in the bright summer's heat. Tall, old growth oak, pine, weeping willow and white birch trees provided the delineation between the homes and cabins that circled the lake. The water was still, providing easy transport for the ducks making their way from one end to the other. And the sky was big. It seemed to arch away from the earth, almost reaching up to reveal patches of crisp blue visible through the dissipating haze of morning mist.

The ache that had been holding Grant's lungs and heart in a firm grip loosened. He took in more cold air, sweet and smoky, and reached high above his head with his arms. Stretch. Stretch hard. He exhaled and almost gasped with pleasure, muscles swarmed with release.

Nora was watching him. "You ready to do this?" she asked.

Grant nodded.

* * *

Face it, Nora. No way you're going to sleep. But why? I was so busy today. Oh god. It's because I'm terrified. Lying in bed, in my safe little suburban bedroom, I'm absolutely terrified. My god, I'm so scared. That's why I can't go to sleep.

Well, I could sit up, I guess. Maybe have a good cry. That might help.

Nope. No good. I've never been good at having a "good cry." They have to overtake me. I've never been like other women, able to rustle up a good, long weep. I can't summon them, like some puppy, "Come on, good cry. Come here! Come on, that's a good cry. Don't be shy. Come play with Nora."

No. No good. So, okay, I'll just sit here and be scared. Scared of dying. People die every day. Is it like this for everybody that dies? If I were lying on the ground, shot after a bank robbery or something, would this be the feeling? This adrenaline of terror dancing through my veins?

Talk to Grant. Should I go downstairs? I don't want to worry him more. He's watching the news anyway. What would I say? I'm scared? Been there, said that. What am I actually scared of anyway? If I die, I'll be dead.

First, definitely reincarnation. Way too many rotten lives out there. A young girl in Africa. So many get raped, get AIDS. Or being an untouchable in India. Do they still have untouchables? Jeez, if everyone KNEW they would get reincarnated, I bet things would get a whole lot better, real fast. If some rich guy in Washington knew, next life = poor disabled kid living in the ghetto, I have a hunch he would be a little tiny bit more interested in spreading the wealth instead of just skimming the wealth.

So, reincarnation. That's up there. But, good side, at least I'll finally be able to speak a different language. And hell, maybe I'd be some happy as a lark, cool, content tulip grower up in Holland. That would be nice.

Still, remember to send some money to the Heifer Project tomorrow.

Shit, I can't get comfortable. I hate these sheets. The fitted one always pulls off at the bottom! Okay, Heifer Project and Bed, Bath and Beyond tomorrow. Maybe if I just kind

of try to wiggle it down with my toes and then pull my feet up and away and then...shit.
I'll have to get up to do it.

Oh boy, standing up didn't help the pounding fear of death. Shit. Shit. Oh, screw the sheet. Find Grant.

Lights on. Mute on. Grant asleep on the couch.

"Grant."

"What? Oh, wow. I fell asleep."

"I'm really scared."

"Come here."

Soft, strong comfort. His chest is like a wall of solid, brave, simple integrity. I need to figure this fear thing out.

"I'm scared I'm gonna die, Grant."

"You are not gonna die."

"Yeah, but I may. I need to see that I may. That's it, really. I may die. You know, it's as much the surgery as the before and after cancer part. Ten hours of surgery. I could die right then. People die on the table. I could be one of those."

"You aren't going to die on the table. That, like never happens."

"But, it could."

"Yeah. Yes, it could. I won't but it could. You could die on the table."

"I could die. This thing, all of it, this might be it for me."

He looks so vibrant. So...Grant, sitting here. This one person, my guy, my partner-in-absolutely-everything. In a week or a year, he could be...just him. A widower. Grant:
The Widower with Two Young Children.

“Yes, Nora, this might be. This could be it for you.”

“It feels so good to hear someone else say it. Thank you. God, thank you. Shit, no one else even says it so I feel so alone in my head. I may die from this. I can’t die alone from this though.”

“You are never alone with me around.”

“I know. If I die, you cannot marry Sally or that Laurie bitch. Anybody but those two.”

“Okay.”

“And I want to be buried up at my family’s old cabin in Wisconsin. My ashes, though. Definitely torch me. No boxes.”

“Okay.”

“And at the wake thingy...pizza, Indian food and good red wine. No crap-in-a-box wine. Good wine. At least the \$15.00-a-bottle stuff. And a really good desert table. And lots of excellent music. Cajun zydeco music. Some Los Lobos. And, yes, you would have to suffer through some Shania Twain. Don’t serve shrimp. Prilly’s allergic and it always gets limp and lukewarm anyway. You know. The ice melts. Oh, oh! Have people videotape memories of me. At the wake or maybe at a party later. You know, for the kids. ‘Cuz, memories fade. People will forget.”

“No one would ever forget you, Nora.”

“But they will. And it would be good for the kids. Stories and stuff. And I’m going to write my eulogy.”

“Okay.”

“Because, there is no way I can make this okay for Viv and Sammy if this happens. It will just be their reality. I’m going to set up some cosmic sign too. A sign so if I want them to know I’m around and if there is an afterlife, I’ll be able to hover around them, communicating...love. That I’m still there for them, somehow. Like, I don’t know...I’ll blow a warm wind over their face or something.”

“Honey, you probably would be more tornadoesque, but I’m getting the idea.”

“I think I’m going to write out my will. Stuff that I want to go to certain people. And an excellent eulogy. Words from beyond and such. And I get to pick the picture for the newspaper obit! Do not let Mom do it. She’d give ‘em that awful one from college. The one with my hair doing that weird thing. She loves that picture.”

“I like the one on my desk at work.”

“I’m in the green sweater? At Pam and Gary’s party?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. That’s a good one. Grant, don’t forget.”

“I won’t.”

“I’m feeling better.”

“Good. Me too, sort of.”

“Easier to do this together.”

“Definitely.”

“Hey, is the Daily Show on? Jon Stewart?”

“Yup. I think. Yeah, it’s almost ten.”

“Cool. I’m never up this late. Let’s laugh.”

“Okay.”

Chapter Ten

Making An Offer

So, you've arrived! The property has been inspected and appraised, you've done your financial and emotional

homework and made a decision regarding what you truly want and can also afford.

Since you've informed yourself about the market by comparing your desired property with others in the same area and price range, you are now ready to make an offer.

* * *

"You ready, Nora baby?"

"What? For what?"

Grant stood in the kitchen doorway, garage door rattling down behind him. Briefcase hanging from one hand, suit jacket and empty to-go coffee cup dangling from his fingertips in the other, Grant's face was inscrutable, both pale and flushed, happy and worried. Nora's heart wiggled, doing a dance of anticipation accented with a few beats of dread.

"Grant," she cried, "Come on. What is it? I'm rotten at suspense."

"We got it. The place. The brown, crumbling, ancient septic, no-ceiling place. They took the offer." Grant plopped his briefcase and jacket on a chair and, pulling his tie off, continued. "We have now tied our financial future to a building with electrical wiring pre-1950. With a septic system that makes Chernobyl look like Yellowstone. With a..."

Nora kissed him full on the lips and finished for him. "With 120 feet of pristine shoreline. With a concrete structure that could survive a nuclear winter. With woods and fresh air and almost an acre of wooded, gorgeous land. With...just bunches of cool stuff about it."

Grant looked at Nora, wiggling and chattering. This is an alive sort of thing, he thought. This makes me feel alive. This is a future. She is here, I am here. We have no idea what's coming but it is something that will be a big, demanding thing that will be about...different. This is different and if something is different and new, you can't know it before you do it. Words like "excitement", "building", "projects", "money" and "risky" floated around in his head, banging against each other.

* * *

"All right, Nora, you ready? Here we go."

Swinging doors.

Corridor.

People.

Corridor lights above me. Just like on ER or those medical shows.

Rolling forward.

No stopping this.

Chapter Eleven

The Closing

Most people find the next part of the process most challenging. While a good financial adviser or lawyer can go a long way towards easing you through the legal and

fiscal requirements of purchasing a second home, there is most likely no way to avoid a few sleepless nights. Every major life event will have uncomfortable moments and purchasing a second home is no exception.

* * *

“Alright, Mr. Stone, you sign there and there,” Mr. Rasmussen said, grabbing a pen from a leather embossed pen cup and using it to point across the table. “And then, Mrs. Stone, you sign right below,” he added as he reached across and opened the door. “Karen!” he yelled. “Did you get those other papers? The escrow and the...?”

A “got ‘em” floated back from the outer office.

The Law Offices of Jim Rasmussen seemed filled with people. Nora and Grant sat side by side along a conference table, facing an older couple. Small edifices of papers rested in front of both couples and Jim Rasmussen sat at the head, possessor of his own expandable file folder. Functional office furniture and a document filled wall testified to a busy, well-run office. Gray and white wallpaper of indeterminate age covered the walls, designed and chosen to neither offend nor distract.

Pushed into a corner was a Fisher-Price plastic children’s table covered with old coloring books and a plastic cup filled with crayons. Around the table were a few mismatched small chairs, Viv being squeezed into one chair and Sammy half sitting, half sprawling in another. Their bored faces and idle doodling served as an unintentional parody of the scene being played out at the grownup’s table.

“I never get over how many papers it takes,” the older woman, Gert Lundstrom, commented. Short gray hair, blue eyes, round face and rotund body, she fit her name to perfection. Wally, her husband, sat besides her, scratching out his name on each paper in methodical, get-it-done, fashion.

Gert leaned over to Nora and Grant. “Your children are precious. How old?”

“Oh, Viv is seven and Sammy is four, well, going to be five,” said Nora, eyes frantically searching for the next X she was supposed to sign her name by.

Sam piped up. “Five. May sixteenth. I’m having a Buzz Lightyear cake.”

Wally firmly tapped Gert’s paper with his pen. “Gert!” he said impatiently, clearly used to having to keep his wife on task. As she located her pen, he leaned back in his chair and winked at Sammy. “Buzz Lightyear cake. None better, I hear. You’re a lucky boy.”

“Okay, everybody,” Jim said as Karen reached in and handed him two more sets of papers, the sound of a distant ringing telephone following her. She disappeared and, after a moment, a faint “Rasmussen Law Offices” could be heard.

“This is the last of the papers,” Jim said. “Gert, Wally, hand me yours and...Thanks, Mrs. Stone. Excellent, now all we have to do now is...”

Grant’s eyes wandered around the room. Used to being in a courtroom he had long ago perfected the skill of taking in complex legal information, processing, understanding and retaining it all the while observing and noting the human behavior happening around him.

Reaching for the last papers to sign, he noted Wally’s relief, almost palpable as they neared the end. He’s tired of the burden of the place, Grant realized. Gert is

bittersweet but Wally, he was done with the place a long time ago. Seeing the children makes it easier for Gert, she's visualizing them playing there, the grandchild thing. It's good that we brought them along. And Nora, his eyes still on the couple across from him, he felt her presence like a pixilated field of energy. Nora is excited, he thought. And joyful. And nervous. But good nervous. Looking-ahead-to-good nervous. And Viv and Sammy...Sammy is grabbing his penis under the table.

Sammy.

Penis.

NO!

"Nora," said Grant, rising. Too late.

A small circle of dark blue began to spread across the crotch of Sammy's jeans. Sammy looked down and watched it grow with surprise. Although her view of Sammy was blocked, Nora was already up and crossing to him, wiggling behind Grant's chair, saying, "Honey, Sammy, you should have told me..."

Wally, Gert and Jim, all grandparents and, even more to the point, long free of diaper-toilet training-accident duty smiled tolerantly. Jim chuckled, saying to the room, "Sort of symbolic, wouldn't you say? When I bought my cabin, it almost made me pee my pants!"

Gert half-rose. "Do you need any help, dear?" she asked as Nora shook her head.

Under her spring jacket and sweaters, Nora felt muffled, heavy and sweaty and, berating herself, tried to smile. "Anymore papers for me?" she asked Jim, pulling a sheepish Sammy to his feet as Viv giggled.

Nora felt a bead of sweat run down her back. She suddenly had an overwhelming urge to yell at Grant. She fumed as she dashed off her name on the last few forms.

Could Grant just one time think to ask Sammy if he needs to go, she railed in her head, smile Super-Glued to her face.

Sammy began to whimper, “It’s hot in here. I’m hot,” as Viv started to laugh out loud.

Grant cautioned her, “Viv! Don’t start” as he intently went through the papers, scanning for any missed signatures.

Sammy burst into tears.

Jim, now with alacrity, pushed the last form to Nora as the room filled with wails from Sammy, laughter from Viv, orders from Grant, clucks of comfort from Gert and a small sigh of what sounded like resignation but was really relief from Wally.

I need to get out of this small, gray room, Nora thought.

“Mommy!!!!!!”

The next ten minutes were a tense, hot clumsy bustling of children, papers, goodbyes and congratulations. Eventually, after Wally and Gert pulled away in their sedan, smiling and waving, Grant and Nora found themselves in the dusty parking lot, Nora changing Sammy’s wet pants in the minivan and Grant standing by the minivan, cabin keys in his hand with Viv leaning into his body.

“I can’t believe we did it,” Grant said, looking around the small gravel parking lot outside the attorney’s office.

Stroking Viv’s hair, her body leaning limply against his frame, he thought, my children will skip along this street with ice cream cones in their hands. This is my town now. Wautoma. I’ll buy my fishing bait and stuff...what’s the word? Tackle...just around the corner. Here, I will be Grant. Just Grant. And I will never wear a suit here.

Those suits. The artificial, constricting uniform that is supposed to convey, “I’m a success.” Five, sometimes six times a week, climbing into one, right now made it all worth it. Those years of school, paying off all the school loans, working up from misdemeanor, to traffic, to felony to my own practice, led to this moment. Battling judges and prosecutors. Scraping money from the paycheck, watching as other people pull into the parking lot with their new BMWs or take those 3-week family vacations to Disney. Every single dime saved was worth it. I own a cabin. I own this cabin.

Grant’s thoughts suddenly ran smack into his grandparents.

Bubbie and Poppie. Their grandson is a lawyer with a beautiful wife, two beautiful children and he owns two homes, two cars and owes not one cent to a credit card company. Poppie’s voice spoke into his ear, its remembered timbre seeming to bounce off the walls of the small north side apartment, the clatter of Bubbie cooking in the kitchen playing never-ceasing harmony.

“If you can’t buy it, you don’t need it. A house, yes, you need a house. A man can have a mortgage, yes, but who needs a fancy car? That car, my car, you take care, twenty years a car should last! You save your money. Property. That’s an investment. Be smart! Everybody needs a piece of land but fancy cars? Fancy jewelry? You want to be fancy? Take care of your family. That’s fancy.”

The warmth of Poppie’s hand resting on his head, the smells of baked apples and kishke enticing his eleven-year-old self into the warmth of Bubbie’s domain filled his thoughts, allowing him for a fraction of time to be in both places, the dusty, cool parking lot with Viv leaning her body into his, and standing at the arm of Poppie’s chair, the sounds of his five-year-old brother “helping” Bubbie in the kitchen. The two scenes

vibrated, both equally alive. Real. He was the link, the cord holding them together. A faint prickling swelled behind his eyes. He suddenly bellowed, voice rasping with an unexpected hoarseness, “Come on, honey, let’s go!”

Swiftly but awkwardly stripped a dreamy Sammy of his soaking jeans as he stood compliantly in the opened door of the minivan, Nora fumed, I’m dying here and he’s barking out orders.

“Come on, Sammy, help me!” she ordered. “Lift your foot out. Good, now the other one.”

Grant leapt into the driver’s seat as Viv yanking open the other sliding door and settled herself into her booster seat, efficiently snapping her buckle in. Grant opened his mouth to speak, then took one look at Nora’s face. He closed his mouth.

Both he and Viv, wise to the ways of Nora, stared straight ahead, wordlessly.

Finally, Sammy, dry, changed and buckled and Nora installed in the co-captain’s seat, Grant spoke. “Okay, are we ready? Ready Nora? Everything...ready?”

Poppie and Bubbie’s apartment was now gone and the much more recent recollection of a dozens of papers to sign, a very small, crowded office, Sammy wetting his pants and Nora speaking through clenched teeth filled his thoughts.

“Oh, Grant,” Nora said. “I’m not going to blow my stack. It was just a little too much reality for a second. The papers, the urine, the...all of it.” Her rage as quickly as it had appeared.

So funny, she thought. Some emotions come storming in, take up residence for a day or a week; others can just float in, whack you over the head and then leave.

* * *

“Mr. Stone.”

She’s smiling, Grant thought. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Oh my god, she’s smiling. She knows how to tell people. The tasteful decorated and incredibly bland waiting room seemed to disappear as he jumped out of the armchair he had claimed hours ago. He simultaneously scattered magazines and scanned the room for his mother-in-law as strode over to Dr. Szczepanski.

“So, is it good? Let me get my mother-in-law...”

“Grant, I’m right here.” Nora’s mother appeared at Grant’s side, a now forgotten book hanging from her hand. “I’m Nora’s mother. Maggie Loy.”

Dr. Szczepanski wisely cut to the chase. “The lymph nodes were completely clean. No sign of cancer. Dr. Gray is already in, beginning the reconstruction. It all went very well. I was very pleased.” She stood grinning, body rod straight, her surgical scrubs hanging on her, long neck emphasized since her hair was still gathered in a protective fabric cap. She radiated a delicious combination of relaxation and adrenaline.

Clasping her book to her chest, Maggie burst out with a “thank god!” as the tub of lead that had been sitting in Grant’s stomach began to dissolve. In a bizarre exchange of sensation, his head then instantly started to throb with relief and exhaustion.

“So she’s okay?” he managed, shocked at how normal his own voice sounded to his ears.

Dr. Szczepanski smiled again. “Great. She’s still under, of course. You both aren’t even halfway there, I’m afraid. Dr. Gray just went in. The reconstruction and closing.

But, the cancer is gone. So go get a sandwich. And maybe try to take a nap in one of these chairs.”

Chapter Twelve

The Mess: Physical and Emotional

Now that you have done the deed and signed on the dotted line, (probably many, many dotted lines) you will probably be filled with a number of messy, conflicting emotions. Excitement, fear, anticipation, curiosity, joy

Restoring Nora/Sergel

and uncertainty will be battling for equal time in your heart. The idea, the possibility that was brought into your life by either a long held dream for the future, an unexpected opportunity or the chance sighting of a For Sale sign, is now a concrete reality. You are now the proud owner of a creaky, leaky, dusty, messy fixer-upper. Now comes the fun part.

* * *

“Nora.”

Gray. Gray. Pain. Gray pain.

“Honey, you want some water?”

Pain. Everywhere. Tubes. I.V.s. Beep. Beep. Beep. Ache. Is that Mom?

“Nora, honey, you want some water?”

Water. Straw. Doesn’t help. Cough. Oh no. Don’t cough. Ripping. Feels like I’m ripping. My stomach. My lower...abdomen. Tearing, swelling, aching, ripping, straining. Beep. Beep. Beep. What is that beep? Who is that nurse?

“There, Mrs. Stone...um...Nora, straighten your arm. There. The I.V. got twisted. Do you want a pillow?”

Do I want a pillow? I want to die. I want this to end. I want to be dead. I want out of this...body.

“No. No pillow.”

She's talking to Grant. It's dark outside. Mom looks gray. This room. Smell. Smell. Like stale sweat and acrid, dry medicine. And plastic. Muscle clenching. In my throat. Throat. Bile. Cough. I'm going to vomit. Pain. Ripping. Cough. Mommy. Grant. Cough.

"Mom. Ow. Oh no. No. If I had known I never would have done this."

"Nora, honey, the nurse said to press this pillow against your stomach when you cough. It will help. The pressure."

Cough. Dry. Cough. Pain. Goopy, acidic phlegm. Oh, this is fun. Please, end this.

"Nora."

Nurse. Young. Dirty blond hair. Roots. Dark roots. Impatient. Distant.

"I'm Roseanne, Nora. Here. Feel this? Press this. This is a morphine drip. You can get a new dose every ten minutes. Just press that button."

Beep. Beep. Beep.

"Oh. Um...Nora, straighten your arm again. Try and keep it straight. The tube keeps kinking up."

Well, Roseanne, I'm curled up, trying not to retch, my body has been hacked up into delectable, bite sized morsels, you want me to retch into a pink bucket while pressing a pillow to my stomach, with four different tubes come in and out of me, and you want me to do all this while I keep my arm straight? Okay. Sure! Super! I'll do that just for you, Roseanne.

"Okay. Got it, Roseanne."

How long has it been?

"Grant?"

"What? What? What do you need?"

“How long?”

“The operation was 10 ½ hours. They didn’t find any spread. The lymph nodes are all clear. They were all clear. It’s okay. I love you so much. It’s good.”

I forgot. I forgot that we were going to find that out. I have...my breast is gone. A new mound is there. My breast is gone. Forever. It will never be back. It is in some disposal bag somewhere. Going to be burnt. Or buried.

“It’s great, Nora. You’re going to be fine.”

I’m going to cough again. Pain. Gag. Cough. Spit dry nothingness. Hack. Cough. Rip. Wet mucus. Press the pillow. Press. Push. No. Nothing. Presses the pain but doesn’t change it. This is not great. Mom looks so sad. But calm. But her eyebrows. All that pain in her forehead. She has gray hair. She shouldn’t have to see this. A mother shouldn’t have to see this. She is too old to have to do this. Shut this all out. Close eyes. Black. Make the pain black. Trick it away. Sleep. Sleep.

Sleep won’t come.

Ache. Straining threads against swollen, aching slice across my stomach, my skin. I see it, in my head. Ripped, red, puffy red flesh pulled closed by black thread, cutting into the skin, from hip to hip. My chest feels stiff and raw and puffy but it is the stomach. I thought it would be my breast but it is my stomach. Why did I need a replacement? One breast, one flat plane where the other used to be. How would I have felt about that? No. No. No. Another cough. Push the button. Stop the wave of cough. Wave of retch. Wave of pain. The odor of me, bile, plastic and cheap floor cleaner. Push the pillow. Don’t bend the arm. Mom holding little pink bucket. Grant. Barking, gagging nothing cough.

Restoring Nora/Sergel

Pain.

Gray pain.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

This must end.

I wish I had died.

I am dead. Nora is dead. I am nothing. I want to be nothing. Why did I do this?

* * *

“Are we there yet?” Sammy demanded.

“No,” said Grant and Nora in unison as Nora reached back to Sammy’s car seat with a handful of baby wipes. “Wipe your hands off,” she ordered him as she then grabbed his soaking denim pants off the floor of the car and tossed them over Sammy’s and Viv’s heads to land in the far back of the minivan.

“Don’t let me forget those,” she muttered to Grant.

“Don’t worry,” he countered, rolling down his window to both let the crisp air in and the stale air out.

Viv immediately protested. “Dad! To windy.”

Grant ignored her as he grabbed Nora’s hand. “Pretty cool, eh?” he said, his narrow face breaking into a wide grin. “Going to spend the first night at our new, fancy, old, beat up family cabin!”

“With your fancy kids and old, beat up wife.”

Keeping one hand on the wheel, he began pulling his shirt out of his belt with the other. “You wanna see beat up? I’ll show you...”

Everyone in the car started yelling in mock horror. “No, Dad! Not again! Gross!!”
“No, Daddy, no!” and “Grant, no, not again! Not the appendix scar again!”

Grant waved them all away. “Fine. Fine...but I want you to know, it’s-“

“Three and three quarters inches long” Nora, Viv and Sammy yelled in unison.

Grant continued, unperturbed. “And I was-”

“Nineteen years old!” Nora, Viv and Sammy chorused

“And I...”

“Rode your bike to the hospital, all by yourself, got it taken out and was eating cherry Jell-O by morning...” they finished, singing “was eating cherry Jell-O by morning” in a off-key version of a long-ago invented tune.

Grant swung the car off the main road and they bumped down a gravel road.

“Dad, what’s that smell? Roll up the window,” Viv demanded.

“That’s...hum...” Grant took an exploratory sniff. “That, my sweet gal, is a dollop of tree, a pinch of skunk, a dab of fallen leaves, a mere tablespoon of fireplace smoke and a bunch of water. Namely, you are smelling fresh air. I know, it’s strange. Fresh and air usually are words that don’t go together...” Grant confidently swung the car into the parking area carved out of the hill rising behind the cabin. “But, trust me. It’s a good thing. And we are here.”

Grant was already out of the minivan, fumbling with the cabin keys. Viv unbuckled herself and jumped out as Nora opened the door on Sammy’s side. She found him fast

asleep, thumb in mouth, brown hair matted around his forehead. “Grant,” she called.

“Sammy fell asleep!”

Grant, both he and Viv already halfway down the stairs leading to the cabin, yelled back. “What? Asleep?!”

“Never mind,” Nora muttered, then yelled, “I got it. Go ahead. Go ahead,” as she reached in and smoothed her hand along Sammy’s warm cheek. “Honey, we’re here. Time to get up.”

Sammy didn’t move.

“Sammy, you are too big for me to carry you. Come on, wake up.”

He didn’t move.

Nora, hearing the shouts of joy from the cabin, grunted then, reaching in, unbuckled the sleeping Sammy and with another grunt and a “come on there, honey,” heaved him into her arms and started staggering down the hill.

The sun had burnt off all the early morning haze and it was pouring through the canopy of thick branches and tall pines leading down to the house. A mosaic of color, shadow and light, with brilliant patches of clean blue sky promised a perfect spring afternoon.

Unable to look down because of Sammy’s body flopped against her body; Nora felt her way down the uneven steps, tentatively reaching forward with her foot on each step to locate the next drop. Finally arriving at the cabin entrance, she worked the screen door open with her foot and kicked the inner door wide open. Arms straining, she stumbled towards the couch. Leaning over it, she deposited the sleeping child on it, not even attempting to be gentle.

Sammy didn't stir. With a gasp, she collapsed next to his body in the couch, flinging her head back on to the rough, brown fabric. Raw woods 2 x 4s, hanging extension cords, an impressive collection of cobwebs and dusty lengths of insulation met her eyes. She could hear Grant and Viv pounding around upstairs. Nora took a deep breath and yelled, "Grant!"

A wisp of insulation floated down, coming to rest on the front of her sweater.

She yelled again. "Grant!"

Grant and Viv, chattering away, came down the steps.

"So, Sammy and me are going to sleep in that one room, together?"

"Yup, so we can have friends up. The other room will be the guest room. Oh, Nora! Did you see the lake? It's a perfect day."

Viv wandered around the room. "Mom, it's pretty neat. Where's the T.V.?"

Nora rose. "No. No T.V." and then made her way to the bathroom, adding, "Grant, Wally and Gert turned on the water, right?"

"Yup. Before they came to the closing. Wally left an envelope on the water heater...geez, I should find that..."

Nora and Grant went off in their separate directions but were stopped by Viv. "Mom! Dad! No T.V.!!?"

Nora and Grant stopped, smiled and nodded. Viv, clearly finding this incomprehensible, continued to look at Nora and Grant in horror. "No T.V.!!" she repeated.

Sammy stirred on the couch.

Grant went to the water heater tucked under the stairs.

Viv remained in the center of the room, taking in the new order of things.

Nora went into the bathroom and sat. The old, white plastic seat felt cold against her skin as she relieved herself in the most primitive and satisfying of ways, her eyes traveling around the small room. Exposed cinder block lined the back wall, and wood paneling formed the rest of the bathroom. Her eyes came to the floor. Concrete, gray and wet.

Wet.

The bathroom floor was wet.

Wet. Wet means a leak. Something was leaking.

As Nora took this in, the bathroom door swung open and Sammy appeared.

“Sammy, not now. Mommy’s in here and something is wet and...” Nora stammered as she struggled with her pants, yelling, “Grant!”

Sammy didn’t move, didn’t say a word and then proceeded to projectile vomit directly into Nora’s crotch.

Chapter Thirteen

Buyer's Remorse

At this time, it might be helpful to say a few words about buyer's remorse.

First of all, it is very common so don't take it as a sign from God that you have made the worst decision of your life. Any great change is going to bring up unexpected reactions. A fixer-upper holds within its walls the promise

of much joy and great rewards but, right after signing, the realization will also occur to you that it also holds the promise, in fact most likely the guarantee, of a great deal of work, sweat, decisions and unexpected problems. A fixer-upper is the physical definition of a work-in-progress. But, as you step across its threshold, you are much more likely to just see the “work” because no “progress” has taken place yet.

Standing in your new cabin you may be suddenly struck with the reality of all the problems and projects that you willfully took on when you signed those twenty-eight or so pieces of paper. While your pre-sale inspection should have revealed the most pressing concerns you may be facing, prepare yourself for the unexpected (and usually expensive) event.

So, take a breath, let yourself feel the fear, or uncertainty, or even panic, and then move ahead. You’re in the water now. Time to start swimming.

* * *

I don’t think I’ve ever hated anyone more than I hate this woman.

“So, how was your night?”

Shit, she's perfect. Perfect Dr. Cami Walter, resident plastic surgeon. She's looking at me with that blank, professionally trained stare. Perfect, slim, with tasteful matte foundation, little Cami. Perfect blonde. She is perfection. Can I trust perfection? Can I be honest with someone that has no sense of humor and a forced, flat smile? She looks like those actresses on a soap opera. The ones that are too short to be models. With the smooth, even make up and put-up hair. No. Coifed. Coifed hair.

"It was sort of a rough night. I'm nauseous a lot and..."

"That will pass. I'm going to check now."

Heaven forbid we start having an actual conversation. And in she goes, straight for the new body part. She's not model/actress/trophy wife. She's more...nazi. Nazi Cami wanted to be a plastic surgeon so she could make the rest of the world look like her. It was going to be her contribution to the master plan. The Cami solution. Unfortunately for her, before she gets the luxury of carving noses up and lifting eyelids on twenty-three year old actresses so they all look exactly like each other, exactly like her, and pulling down the high six figures...she has to work with a few real people. Messy, bloody, flawed people. My god, I'm in a rotten mood.

"How does it look? How am I doing?"

I can't look yet. I get glimpses out of the corner of my eye but I can't look.

"It looks great, um...Nora. You've seen it, right?"

I can't look yet. It looks alien. Horrible. Flat and stitched and lumpy and misshapen. But don't trust Cami. She's never felt rage or pain or wildly panicky, paranoid sweaty fear in her bland, simple life. Lie to Cami. Lie.

"Oh sure. Yeah. I've seen it."

“Good. I don’t get women that don’t look. ‘Oh, I can’t! It’s too awful!’ I’m going to Doppler now.”

She’s quite bright, for a vapid, empty, evil lump of...vacant body parts. She’s just nice enough to be able to totally justify to anyone how nice she was to the angry, bitchy, unreasonable, slightly crazy patient in the ICU, angry for the silly little inconvenience of getting basically sliced in half, rearranged, stuffed full of morphine, which only makes me retch and...oh, great. There she goes. Getting the Doppler. How bizarre. The same instrument to listen to a pregnant...a beginning...something nice...using it to make sure this lump they are calling a “beautiful piece of work” won’t turn black and fall off.

“So Nora, how’s the pain on a scale of one to ten?”

My tit was sliced off, you devil spawn of...Barbie and George Hamilton! Wait. Try. She’s here. Try. Go soul shopping. Maybe she wants to fix cleft chins on South American kids. Maybe that’s why she got into plastic surgery. Or is that cleft palates? What are cleft palates? Because Kirk Douglas had a cleft chin and he was cute. Was it Kirk Douglas?

“Actually, I’m feeling pretty...a little sad.”

“Of course. That’s natural.”

Oh my god, Nazi Cami Bitch is nodding her head at me! Where did you learn that move? Patient Empathy 101? All My Children? If she gently touches my shoulder to indicate understanding, I’m gonna rip her left tit off!

“Would you like me to call someone to talk to?”

That’s what I thought I was doing, Cami, you frigid fascist. Talking to someone. Namely, YOU! I guess you didn’t notice, but I occupy space. Flawed by bed-head of

disastrous proportions, eyebrow and chin hair out of control, and big, black ugly threads sticking out where my left nipple used to be, exist in time and space. You are...an unctuous bitch. Is that right? Unctuous? If it's not, it should be. Sort of the verbal love child of ugh and fuck. Unctuous.

“No need. I'm fine. My husband should be here soon.”

I hope you get breast cancer. When you are 40 years old, I hope you get breast cancer. And face cancer. And hair cancer. I want you to be ugly and deformed and sad and when it happens, I want you to call me up and apologize to me.

“ The blood flow sounds fine.”

I feel like this woman standing right here, in her smooth, crisp, white coat that is like a shield...I feel like she's worse than that lumpy, bloody tumor they plucked out of me. Nora, just let it go. Let her go. Cami, please just walk out that door and go to L.A. already. Go give Kirk Douglas a chin job.

* * *

“Why are you mad at me?” muttered Grant, ripping the vomit soaked shirt off of Sammy's body.

Nora yelled, “I'm not mad at you, dammit! Dammit, dammit, oh god!” as she bent over, ass in the air and fumbled with her bootlaces. She could feel the vomit oozing down her thighs as she tried to simultaneously take off her boots, kick her wet jeans off and feel Sammy's forehead.

Viv crowded in the doorway. “What happened...oh, gross!!! Mom! It stinks!”

“Grant, get him by the toilet-”

“I’m trying but you’re sort of standing right in front of it!”

“Viv, get out!” Nora yelled over Sammy’s sobs as she, Grant and Sammy performed an odd pushing and shoving type of dance, Nora hopping on one foot with her hands braced against the walls, one boot on, one boot off, jeans at her ankles, Grant guiding Sammy under her arms towards the toilet. Sammy then let out another barking type cough, gasped and hurled again. He missed the toilet but the majority of the vomit managed to land directly into Nora’s recently removed boot.

Nora, resigned to the inevitable, pulled her pants back up, wincing as the moist fabric dragged against her skin. She grabbed Sammy’s shoulders, which she noted were blazing hot and pushed a grateful Grant out of the bathroom. Hand on Sammy’s forehead; she pointed him directly towards the toilet.

He sighed, shuddered and said in a weak voice, “I’m done now.” The soft skin of his bare shoulders was so hot it felt like he was baking. As Nora guided him out of the small room, her one stocking foot landed in a puddle of water. She looked behind the toilet and spied a small, steady arc of water spraying out of a brass colored pipe. Pushing Sammy in front of her, they made their way to the couch as Viv stood by the front door, fingers pinching her nose.

“Dad went up to the car for some stuff,” she said in a nasal voice she was emphasizing for pleasure and dramatic effect. “Is Sammy sick?” she added as an afterthought.

“Yup, he’s sick,” Nora muttered. “Go help Dad.”

Grant burst back into the room, arms laden with suitcases, sleeping bags and a small cooler. “So, is he sick?” he asked as he dumped everything in the center of the floor.

How can anyone claim that he's a brilliant litigator, Nora fumed as she draped a blanket around the shivering Sammy.

"Well, honey, what do you think?" Nora snapped.

"Well, don't yell at me," Grant said. "What should we do? Maybe we should just pack up and drive home?"

"I am NOT doing a three hour drive with a kid that has the stomach flu! You'll have to go to town...take Viv...and get stuff."

"What stuff? Okay. What stuff?"

"What do you mean, 'what stuff?' A thermometer, um...Pedialite...no, Gatorade, Sammy doesn't like the Pedialite. Lots of clean wipes, Children's Tylenol or Motrin..."

Grant asked, "Which one?" as he pulled out his wallet and fumbled through it, counting the bills.

"Either one! And write this down. You'll forget."

Sammy sat, small and pale on the big brown couch, wrapped in a plaid blanket, tiny white chest rising and falling as Nora, now digging through the bags, pulled out random pajamas, towels and clothes. Grant began poking through Nora's purse for a piece of paper.

Suddenly, Nora looked up. "Grant..."

Grant muttered, "What?" as he hurriedly scratched out a list.

"There's a leak."

Pencil midair, Grant froze. "A what?"

"There's a leak. I think. There's water on the floor by the toilet. I just remembered."

Before she could finish her sentence, he was striding to the bathroom. After a moment, Nora's vomit laden boot came flying out the door, followed by a loud "shit!"

He reappeared in the bathroom doorway, arms braced on either side of the door jam. Head low and voice lower, Grant said, "How could this suck any worse?"

Still standing by the front door, Viv let out a cough, then a gasp and threw up on her shoes.

Chapter Fourteen

GRUNT WORK

The rewards of a fixer-upper, renovated and redecorated by you to suit your desires, needs and vision

will be great but first lays before you hours of blood, sweat and a few tears. And many, many trips to the hardware store. Besides a To-Do list that is constantly open to revisions, a sense of humor and tenacity will be your most helpful allies.

* * *

“Where’s Dad?”

“Taking Sammy’s temperature.”

“Where’s Sammy?”

“He’s sitting on the potty,” said Nora, stroking Viv’s forehead.

Viv lay splayed out on top of the now unfurled sleeping bag. Stripped down to her underwear, wearing one of Grant’s t-shirts, her long, thin arms draped limp across Nora’s lap, her feet twitched restlessly against the soft denim of the sleeping bag, futilely seeking a comfortable resting place. “Dad said we could take the paddle boat out first thing,” Viv stated, more of a memory recalled than a request.

Nora nodded. “I know. Sorry.”

Viv jerked her body; rubbing one leg against the other as she was seized by a bout of limp, dry coughing. Nora grabbed a dirty beige plastic bucket that was resting at her feet and held Viv’s cheek against it. The sputtering cough died after a moment and Viv flopped back on the bed.

“She okay?” Grant called from the bathroom.

“Yes. How’s Sammy?”

Sammy appeared in the doorway of the small bedroom, stumbling slightly as Grant guided him from behind. “Buzz Lightyear here has a temperature of a hundred point nine,” declared Grant as he hoisted Sammy into the other twin bed and tucked the sleeping bag around his small, round body.

“Is that more than Viv’s?” Sammy asked, voice gravelly and dry.

“Mine is a hundred and one,” muttered Viv, wanting to claim victory but too weak to care.

Sammy’s eyes welled up. “Is that more than mine? Does she have more temperatures than me?!”

As Grant comforted Sammy and Viv, assuring each that their fever was a winner, Nora watched the late afternoon sun streaming in the bedroom; filling the narrow room with such a pure light that Nora could see dust particles hovering in the air.

The bedroom, like the master bedroom next to it, was equipped with a pair of large sliding glass doors facing the lake. Nora looked past the narrow wooden deck that ran the length of to small balcony, to the view that lay beyond it. Acres of water, a bold blue field of water, rippled as the stiff spring wind churned the air. She felt her mind detach from her body and float up, clinically observing the contrast between the clean spring day coming to a dramatically blue, diamond and crisply satisfying close and the warm and stale room in which the four of them huddled.

She wanted to stay there, her mind above the vomit and heat and decisions and coughing and dragging weariness of a sleepless night, the hazy hours that lay spread before her. A “we’ll be right back, kids,” popped out of her body, an alien voice, the

voice of her mother. She kissed each sweaty, clammy head and walked out of the room, away from the blue diamond water.

After a few more minutes spent reassuring Viv and Sammy, Grant found Nora sitting on the floor of the upstairs common room, legs crossed, leaning back on her arms as she surveyed the light fixture affixed to the ceiling.

“So, what should we do?” Grant said as he flopped down on the floor beside her.

“First, we cannot forget to give a proper burial to the hundreds of dead bugs that are gathered in that ceiling fixture,” Nora commented, cocking her head towards Grant as he rolled onto his back to survey the carnage.

“Wow. That’s a lot of dead bugs,” Grant said.

Nora yanked her arms towards her body and flopped her back and shoulders down so she too was laying flat on her back. The table and chairs pushed against the back wall, laden with boxes and dusty games and old pool toys behind her, now appeared to be suspended from the ceiling as she craned her head back against the old remnant of red carpet that had been haphazardly cut to fit the dimensions of the small room.

Grant rolled onto his side, looked at Nora and asked again, “So, what do we do?”

Nora yanked herself back up to a sitting position with a grunt and a heave. “We do what we have to do. We wait for the plumber who probably won’t come until tomorrow. Do we have to leave the water turned off?”

“We don’t want to flood the place,” Grant said.

“God, this sucks!” Nora said. “Okay, what did you get and what do we have?”

“I got, well, all that medicine and stuff and I got the jugs of water downstairs, the purified water-“

“And they’ve got towels and sheets and all here,” Nora muttered, itemizing in her mind. “Okay, every time there’s a vomit or diarrhea, we fill the toilet tank and flush but not for pee...yeah, and sheets...well, any accidents, we just strip the bed. Only sheets on the bottom with a towel under them. No top sheets. We should probably get the kids out of the sleeping bags. Those will be a bitch to wash...”

“But Sammy only had a little diarrhea. Let’s just leave them. Maybe they’ll fall asleep.”

As though on cue a plaintive wail rose from the bedroom. Viv’s voice reached them, hoarse and dry. “Mom. Mom? I had a little accident I think...” Grant and Nora began to giggle.

“Oh shit...” Grant sputtered, whispering.

“Literally,” Nora added. “Do you think God is testing us, to see if we deserve a cabin?”

Grant winked at her as he pulled himself to his feet. “God already tested us. This is just a pop quiz,” he said as he offered her his hand, helping Nora to her feet.

Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea, Nora thought as she untangled the limp Viv out of the soiled sleeping bag, glancing over to check on Sammy, sleeping the fitful sleep of the fevered. Her thoughts boiled in her head as she guided the stumbling Viv into the bathroom.

Maybe I can’t do this. Maybe this is a sign that we shouldn’t have bought this place. I mean, really, I’m stuck in an isolated cabin with two kids with the stomach flu, wearing vomit caked jeans and we have no fucking running water! Is God trying to tell me something, like perhaps, “biting off a little too much to chew, Nora, my friend”? And

where did Grant go? And why didn't these people have decent plumbing to begin with? That's it. We've bought a lemon. Can houses be lemons? I know cars can be lemons but houses? Can they?

Stripping Viv free of her dirty underwear, struggling to pour water from the plastic jug into a roughly texture brown and blue hand towel with a family of ducks stitched on the end, gently cleaning Viv's warm and pliant body, Nora's mind berated the cabin, the day, Grant, the world and any other target she could think of.

Finally, perched on the toilet, interrupting Nora's thoughts Viv said, "Mom, I'm sorry I'm sick. I wanted to do all the stuff." She continued. "The fun stuff. I want to be better. Why am I sick? It's like I'm being punished! It's not fair," she declared as Grant leaned in the door and wordlessly handed Nora a clean pair of girl's underwear and disappeared again.

Nora knelt down and worked the pair of underwear up Viv's legs as she dug for words, a way to comfort both her daughter and herself.

"I know. But it's not about fair. But, you're right. It's not fair. And I know you're mad. And frustrated. But sometimes, really bad stuff makes the good stuff seem even better. Maybe this is God's way of saying that life, you know, this cabin, is really, really good and for you to enjoy it, appreciate it, when you get better. And being sick isn't a punishment. You know what you Aunt Connie says..."

"Your destiny is what you do with what chance throws in your path'?"

"Yup."

Viv grumbled, "I don't get that," as she stood up and shuffled back to the bedroom, Nora lightly holding her shoulders to steer her. Grant met them at the door, arms filled

with the soiled sleeping bag, Viv's bed behind him, freshly made. As Viv tentatively crawled back into the now clean bed Nora whispered to Grant, "Thanks," seeking some karmic absolution for her previous imagined railings about him.

Grant shrugged. "Hell, my destiny was before me. It just happened to include Barbie underwear and a crap-filled sleeping bag."

* * *

Okay, Nora girl, enough already. As soon as you can pee on your own, eat, walk and swallow the goddamn pain meds that don't help anyway, you get to get your sorry fanny out of this Intensive Care Underworld and go home. So, let's do it. I mean, there certainly isn't much else to do in the ICU at 2:00 am on a Thursday morning.

Which first? Such a charming array of choices. Let's see. Walking...no. Never been a big fan of walking right after a mastectomy. I mean it's so been done.

Eating. Hum...possibility. But it took me about two hours to finish a saltine this morning so let's bump that to right ahead of walking for the time being.

So it comes down to swallowing two pills or peeing. Tough call. Swallowing should probably belong in the eating category. Sort of a sub-group. Although Codeine that are the size of Volkswagens probably should be considered a food group.

So peeing is the big winner. Peeing. What is actually involved? Catheter is out...charming experience that was. The nurse was nice that time. The nurses all come and go in a blur. I used to be so good with names and all I can remember is the evil Roseanne with the greasy hair. They should make it a requirement. No passive-aggressive

twenty-five year olds with questionable grooming habits and compassionless disdain for sad, grieving, angry people should be allowed to work in the ICU.

Wait. Catheter nurse was....Debbie. That's it. Debbie. Efficient, calm Debbie. I want to remember Debbie. Debbie of the easy smile and quick hands. Not Roseanne of the rolling eyes and hostile smile.

I spy a bedpan. Excellent. Funny, I never really thought of how one exactly uses a bedpan before. Somehow I always thought you just got out of bed and squatted over it but that would actually take the word "bed" out of the bedpan equation. Then it would be, perhaps, squatpan? Oh Jesus, just grab it! So now, I suppose I just wiggle it under my ass and let 'er rip. Ouch. Stretch. Pulling stitches. Tight skin straining. Go fast. Go fast. There. Did it. Now, all I have to do is pee. Well, first gasp for breathe, then pee.

Come on, Nora, it's can't be that hard. Breath. Let go.

Is that pee coming out? Why can't I feel it? I think I'm peeing.

I hear it! I'm peeing by myself! This is the first time I've been in screaming distance of joy in seven weeks. One tiny piece of control over my rampantly out-of-control body, fear-laden heart and dread soaked mind. A thimbleful of urine is my ticket to ride!

Chapter Fifteen

BABY STEPS

Right now, big plans are out of the question.
Painting, redecorating and entertaining are a long way off,

so just put those thoughts right out of your head. You will be making your first, tentative forays into the new world of fixer-upper ownership so make sure you are rested and clear headed and so you are ready to face what this new day, and new life, will bring you.

* * *

I have to pee but I don't want to get up.

Nora, nestled in a sublime arrangement of pillows, soft old flannel sheets and perfect body position, considered her predicament.

I may never be this comfortable again, she thought. This is perhaps the most extraordinary bed in the entire world. Here, in this very bed, I have attained physical, positional nirvana. I am watching the sunrise outside my own cabin's window while my husband has, for the time being, decided to kick that pesky snoring habit of his. The only fly in the ointment is my damn bladder. Well, that and basically being up all night with two vomiting and crapping children with no running water. But all that...small potatoes compared to this peeing thing.

She pondered her situation as the sky continued to change. From black to purple, eventually bold streaks of red began to give way to patches of blue. She observed the drama, her eyes almost aching from the cool, peaceful play of color and space.

Finally Nora cautiously lifted her head and listened to the sound of the house.

Silence.

Silence so loud and so deep it pounded her ears.

She replaced her head on the pillow and, eyes still fixed on the changing show of light and color, reviewed the events of the night. Fitful children, thermometers, jugs of water, an ever growing mountain of sheets and towels, clammy, pasty skin, guttural gasps and hacking coughs all occurring in the unfamiliar dark of the few small rooms that had quickly become their universe.

A fish jumped out of the lake, breaking the shiny plane of still water.

I still have to pee, she realized. No getting around it. Damn. And wait, what's that sound?

A wheezing cough...actually more of a sputter combined with a sneeze than a cough came from the kids' room.

She knew that was it.

I have to get up.

Nora crept into the children's bedroom. Viv lay sprawled on her back, her heavy breathing rattling her small body. Viv's forehead radiated the answer to Nora's unspoken question into her palm with deep, steady heat. Nora quietly shuffled over to Sammy, avoiding the minefield of towels, washcloths, used Kleenex and dropped toys that littered the floor between the two small twin beds.

Sammy slept the sleep of the recovered. Forehead cool, body limp, he curled around his favored stuffed animal, Tikki the Snake, a toy of unknown or forgotten origins.

Nora's hand wrapped around the nape of his neck, enjoying the cool, soft, tactile joy of little boy skin.

Nora tiptoed out of the room, steering clear of the precariously rigged bamboo shade that just covered the length and height of the balcony sliding doors, her mind avoiding the 2:00 am fiasco when a stumbling Grant knocked it off onto the vomiting Viv's bed. It'll make a damn funny story later though, Nora conceded as she cautiously maneuvered through the common room and made her way downstairs.

The stairway situated at the far end of the house brought her right into the kitchen area with the rest of the large room sprawling to her left. A large white porcelain sink unit, clearly from the late forties, dominated the wall opposite the base of the stairway, above it stretching a length of imitation wood kitchen cabinets. On the wall immediately to her right were two small tables, one a metal unit on wheels, possibly a refugee from a long defunct office, and the other a gray plastic end table. Both were piled high with dishtowels, ashtrays, paper plates, plastic cups, matches, flyswatters and other remnants belonging to the broadest interpretation of "kitchen stuff." To Nora's left perched the brown stove and immediately next to it, a huge white refrigerator. Their location, placed mid-room, helped define the space as "kitchen."

Next to the refrigerator in the middle of the room sat the chairs and couch, all piled high with randomly flung clothes, toys, supplies and coats. To the left of the sink unit, on the wall facing the lake, was a door leading to the outer deck, then came the long wooden table with a bench pulled up low under the picture window.

Nora chose to avoid seeing the mountains of debris that filled the farthest corner of the room. Denial gets a bad rap, she told herself as she fumbled with the door leading onto the deck. Throwing the latch and opening the door, she pushed out the screen door, walking straight into a wall of sharp, cold air. The fragrance of earth, pine, smoke and

woody, mulchy, fermenting dirt grabbed her face, shaking her deep down, almost reaching her feet with the rich texture of “cold morning in the woods.” She exhaled, adding her breath to the mix. A touch of Nora, she noted and wondered, do the animals smell me? Does my appearance change the smell? Just a bit?

She smiled and stretched, hard, arms reaching upwards. The skin that still lay taut across her stomach constricted her movement but didn’t prevent her from achieving the sought-after back crack. Her rebuilt breast, solid and numb, usually gave her torso an oddly uneven sensation but this morning, the air, the stretching of long clenched muscles and the satisfying crunch of popping bones realigning brought any thoughts of physical dissatisfaction up short.

Then, feet planted squarely on her concrete deck, hands on hips, head high, Nora surveyed her new domain.

I am the mistress of this land. The Stone Estate. The Family Compound. This sunrise I’m watching...it’s mine. Mine! Mine and a few thousand fish, a few million bugs and some rabbits and deer and other Wisconsin type animals...but mine too. I am alive and here and I own this, this place, rich in sensory delight and I shall stand here, watching the sun initiate a new day, peaceful, serene, content, full of....

Shit! I forgot to pee!

So the day began. Much was accomplished in the next few hours. Coffee was made and breakfast begun. Grant eventually staggered downstairs followed by Viv and then Sammy, Sammy’s arrival heralded by a “Wow! A lawnmower in the living room! Cool!” Skipping over and dancing inches away from the lawnmower, Sammy, with a tuft of hair

sticking bolt upright on the left side of his head and Spiderman pajama bottoms worked up to mid-calf, gazed mesmerized at the greasy, oily contraption.

Eventually a plumber, Brian, (also a volunteer fireman, married to Janey, waitress at the SilverCryst. Three kids, Mike, Katie and Susan. Mike and Susie had the stomach flu last week) had come and, two parts and \$93.50 later, gone.

Water now running, teeth had been brushed (Nora and Grant), hands and faces washed (Grant and, after much prodding and three reminders, Sammy), a brief shower (Nora) and toilets joyfully and repeatedly flushed (Nora, Grant, Sammy and Viv)

Nora had hauled the suitcases and backpacks upstairs, given Viv more medicine, broken up a fight (who had vomited more, Viv or Sammy), read two books aloud (Young Cam Jansen and the Pizza Parlor Mystery and Sir Cumference and the Dragon of Pi) knocked the bamboo shade off the sliding door (twice, second time re-affixing it to the wall with the help of a crumbling Soap-On-A-Rope found in the bathroom cabinet), taken Sammy and Viv's temperatures (Sammy: 98.5, Viv: 100.1 and 99.6) and pulled the duck wallpaper border off the upstairs bathroom wall.

Grant had been to town twice. Once for coffees (two extra large, one with cream) and groceries (Including Captn' Crunch with Spiderman on the box, a pound of coffee beans, French Roast, and various other staples) and then, a second trip (Tampax, Kotex and Midol, Extra-Strength)

"This is an incredibly comfortable couch." Grant's head, flung back against the rough brown fabric, eyes shut, rolled towards Nora. His eyes slowly opened. Actually, Nora observed, his left eye opened. A tiny bit.

“I mean...really, really comfortable.” His head rolled back to its former position. “We should have this couch at home.”

“You’re just tired.”

His eyes flew open as he gasped. Sitting upright, he spun on her. “Mrs. Stone, you are a pathetic snob. A lying, pathetic snob!”

Sammy piped up. “Daddy, what’s a snob? And passetic?” Recovered and enjoying a snack at the table, Sammy was reveling in the luxury of having Viv-less parents all to himself (Viv was napping upstairs).

Grant ignored the question. Rising up, coffee cup clutched in hand, he pointed to the couch as though it were a piece of the most pivotal and conclusive evidence. “Are you to tell me, um...Mrs. Stone, correct? Are you to tell me, Mrs. Stone, that this said couch, is NOT comfortable?!”

“It looks like a T-Rex had an accident.”

“Your Honor, the witness is not answering the question! Please instruct Mrs. Stone to answer the question!” At this point, Sammy leapt into Grant’s arms. Grant looked into Sammy’s eyes and cried, “Tell her, your Honor! Tell Mrs. Mommy to answer the question!”

“Mommy! Mommy! Answer Daddy’s question!” Sammy yelled.

“This is badgering,” Nora protested feebly.

“No, this is ottering.” Grant, groaning at his own pun and amused with himself beyond reason, dumped the giggling Sammy onto said-brown couch and began tickling him.

Nora joined in the tickling for a moment, and they then both steered Sammy back to the table under the window, Nora directing, “finish your cereal. Mommy and Daddy have

to talk.” Sammy complied as Nora and Grant resumed their positions, Nora adding, “Grant, you are punchy.”

“Yup. And exhausted, weary and deeply sleep deprived. And this couch is comfortable.”

“Yes! Man, you won’t let it go,” Nora said. “Ugly beyond possible conception, but, yes, it is incredibly comfortable.”

“We could recover it.”

“Grant honey, look at this ceiling. The plumbing. The septic. The shoreline. The fuse box looks like something from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. And you want to start redecorating? Who are you? Me?”

“I just want this couch.” Leaning forward, resting his arms against his thighs, Grant peered at Nora, his easy smile breaking the long planes of his face. “This couch, we keep. Just because it’s battered doesn’t mean it’s not recoverable...”

“Is that a word? Recoverable?”

“Shut up, smarty-pants. The stuff that has survived here is tough. Simple. Comfortable. Probably reduced to the most functional possible. The most comfortable couch. The sturdiest table. The most solid foundation...”

“The best wooden spoons. Did you see that collection by the sink?”

“Exactly! It’s a theme!”

Here we go, thought Nora. He loved to find themes. The reason he was such a good lawyer, Nora had come to realize, was beyond available smarts or ambition (Grant, although very smart was never particularly ambitious or politically savvy) or even that competitive, adversarial edge lawyers were so famous for. It was his ability to see the big

picture. His concept of justice and fairness extended from his belief in the judicial system as a whole, working, evolving process down to each individual case. Each case he took, he spent hours researching, refining, examining, revealing the theme, understand the individuals involved and the legal issues in play. He passionately believed that if everyone committed to the process, justice would be done. The only time Nora ever saw him truly enraged was when he encountered shoddy, second-rate lawyering. She smiled up at him as he polished off the dredges of his coffee and paced the room.

“Okay, Wisconsin,” he said. “A state of mind! A state of being. Your family cabin, remember? Well, we are reinventing that tradition for our family, but improved! Tweaked for us, the Stones. Comfortable, functional but...”

“Beautiful.”

“Exactly! We are here to edit, strip away the dirty, unused, unnecessary, toxic...”

“Smelly. Oily. Broken. Overgrown.”

“To reveal the true identity of us...I mean, this place, this Wisconsin place. This Wisconsin state of mind. The best possible version of this cabin and ourselves. You’re right, Nora baby. No TV!”

Sammy looked up, mouth open.

“No videos!”

Milk dribbled down Sammy’s chin.

“No DVDs! Just us. Fishing. Reading. Playing games. Exploring. Swimming.”

“Antiquing,” Nora added. “Painting. Redecorating. Baking. Sleeping. Meals outside.”

Grant nodded. “Campfires. I was an Eagle Scout, you know. We could camp out one night on the lawn. Maybe get a telescope. Learn astronomy...”

“No TV?!” Sammy broke into the plans being made with a wail of protest.

Nora and Grant stopped mid-breath, looked at him and slowly nodded.

“Ever?” Sammy said. “Not just this weekend but ever?” The reality was sinking in.

Nora and Grant nodded again.

Sammy wiped his chin, looked at his bowl, looked at them, looked at his bowl again and finally muttered, “whatever.” His casual shrug belied the sudden and vigorous workings of his mind. Nora knew that this TV conversation was far from over. She thought, if I can survive a mastectomy, I can survive two children campaigning for television.

I hope.

* * *

“I can’t. It’ll kill me.”

“Nora, honey. I know you can. Just take little tiny baby bites. It’s just a cracker.”

“I’ll vomit. I don’t want to vomit again. It hurts too much.”

“If you don’t eat, they won’t let you out of here.”

“I think this is the worst day of my life.”

“Try the Jell-O.”

“Is that the shift change?”

“I think.”

“Who’s coming on?”

“Looks like that Rosanne girl.”

“The greasy haired bitch that hates me?”

“Yeah. Sorry...hey, honey, that’s great! Now try taking another bite.”

Chapter Fifteen

The Indian Guide

Watch old westerns on TV and eventually you will come across the character of “The Indian Guide.” A Native

Restoring Nora/Sergel

American, this character would have a knowledge and insight regarding the terrain, leading the heroes through the rough, unforgiving environment of the Old West towards their goal, either to catch the outlaw, find the kidnapped girl or locate the buried treasure.

If you are very, very lucky, you will find your own Indian Guide. Perhaps a neighbor, perhaps a friend who has bought their own fixer-upper cabin in the past, maybe the owner of the local hardware store, this person can help guide you on your journey. Listen to their advice. Weigh their insights and observations. Give their suggestions strong consideration.

Now, don't abuse your Indian Guide with endless questions and requests and don't replace your good judgment with theirs but, when faced with the profusion of tasks that confront the new owner of a fixer-upper, your Indian Guide may save your life.

* * *

"Hey, Lemonhead."

"Connie. Oh my god. Connie."

Connie. Thank you, Grant. Connie. Tall, strong, sweet, bossy Connie.

"Nora, honey, I thought a sister might help. Your mom was tired and..."

“Grant, as your sister-in-law, I’m telling you, with love, please go brush your teeth. God, Lemonhead, you look like they just beat the holy crap out of you. Take me to ‘em. You want me to even the score? Who you want me to kill? I’ll do it. Right now.”

“Well, start with me. Connie, I had no idea. I’m lost.”

“Mom said you were totally whacked out. I made her stay home and made Grant bring me. God, baby sister, I’m so sorry. My poor baby sister.”

Connie. Sister. Like a vessel for the scraps that are left after you’re ripped apart. She smells like the past, the past when I was Nora. She smells like she always smells. Johnson Baby Shampoo, Cover Girl foundation and L’Air Du Temps perfume.

“Connie. Connie, everything hurts. Beyond hurts. And I’m sad and I’m really sad and this is beyond any bad that I thought I could live through.”

Her hug. Better than Mom’s because Mom was so sad. Mom just wanted to baby her baby out of the dark place. Connie is strength. Remember that. Mom = cradle. Connie = lifeline.

“Con, it’s worse than labor or when Dad died or anything and I hate it. I just want...to be somebody else. Somewhere else. The nurses hate me and the doctors look at me like my hair should be better or something. And Grant doesn’t get why I can’t eat and be strong and be me again. And I just feel bad and there is no good corner to even rest in.”

A sister. History. Blood. A dark, rich, pulsing connection. Like a cord.

“And Connie, my breath smells really bad too.”

“I’ll help you brush your teeth. And I brought a scarf thingy for the bed-head.”

“This feels like when Dad died. Really dark and gray and bad. The world is just a curtain of blood. I close my eyes and I see red. I see blood and red and I want this to end.”

“This sucks. My baby sister is hurt and this sucks. I will be here from now on.”

“I love you, Contrary.”

“I love you too, Lemonhead.”

“I wished I was dead for awhile. And I didn’t even think about the kids. Not once. Didn’t even miss them. I still don’t.”

“God! Good! You did the total, ultimate thing for them. You stayed alive. They’re eating ice cream for breakfast and doing Toys R Us for lunch. The Stones are out of control. It’s hysterical.”

“Connie, what do I do?”

“What do you want?”

“I want to be me again. I want to be Nora. How do I do that?”

“When was the last time you felt like her?”

“At home.”

“So, Nora, I guess you need to get out of this rotten place. As soon as possible. If you are asking me, I think we need to get your sorry ass home.”

“I think it’s making me crazy. I think...I’m not going to get better here.”

“Yup. My thoughts exactly.”

“Connie.”

“Yup?”

“Thanks.”

“So, first things first. I brought tweezers. Want me to pluck your chin hairs?”

* * *

“Where’s Dad?”

“I don’t know, Viv. How are you feeling?”

“Mom! Quit feeling my forehead. I feel fine. When’s dinner? Did Dad get stuff for S’Mores? Are we making S’Mores tonight?” Viv, clad in pajamas, wrapped in a blanket, bounced on the couch as Sammy sat at one end staring up at the ceiling trying to figure out a way to rig the exposed electrical wiring so he could get communications from space.

“Viv! This morning you were vomiting into a bucket. Now you want S’Mores?” Viv and Sammy both looked at Nora for a moment and then nodded vigorously, wondering what one thing had to do with the other.

Nora began to giggle, the slightly jittery giggle of the sleep deprived. She rose, announcing, “I’m going to locate that stinker of a daddy,” and, body limp, made her way out of the room.

Maybe the fresh air will revive me and where the hell is Grant, she wondered as she kicked open the side screen door. The later afternoon sun cast deep green shadows across the deck and the long corridor of stairs leading up to the road was taking on an otherworldly look. There should be hobbits lurking about, Nora mused as she walked up the uneven stone steps, heading towards the voices she heard coming from the road. She arrived at the top of the steps to find Grant and another man talking.

Grant looked over to her with an excited smile. “Great, honey. You’re here. This is Roland. Roland Jensen, our new neighbor. Well, actually, we’re the new ones but, hell, Roland, you’re new to us.”

Nora crossed over to them, hand extended. Roland was mid-sixties and tall, slightly balding. He has an easy authority, Nora thought. He’s probably the kind of person that has always seemed to be the same age. Thirty, fifty, sixty, he’s worn them all the same. Retired businessman, maybe? But not the slick kind. Teacher maybe. Grandfather, definitely.

“Nice to meet you, Nora. Shari and I live right over here. We’re here all year long.”

“Really! So you’re natives,” Nora said. “We’re just transplants. The dreaded summer people!”

Roland laughed. “Not dreaded, certainly. And Shari and I used to just come up in summers with the kids. We moved up here full time when I retired.”

Grant piped up, “Roland and Shari used to live in Northbrook. You taught at...?”

“Loyola. And National College for a few years too.”

Nora cried, “My sister Prilly, well in school she was called April, she went to Loyola!”

The social ordering of who, when and where continued for the next few minutes (he had taught math and some sciences, Prilly had majored in business, never had him as an instructor. They all had been to Hackney’s Restaurant, Roland was a Cubs fan but Grant’s father was a White Sox fan...which meant Grant favored football). The conversation, gently steered by Grant, arrived back at the cabin.

“So Roland, what’s that mound, that hill of earth right along my...our...shoreline?”

Roland nodded slowly, eyes towards the lake, seeing it past the trees. “Well, Grant, that’s the ice-shove. Every winter, the lake freezes and the ice shifts and pushes against the shoreline, the movement of the ice pushing into the dirt. Since we are here all the time, in spring, you can just address it...granted you have the proper permits.” Roland nodded for a moment, his eyes wandering over to the cabin. “Wally and Gert, well, the past few years, with their folks being sick, they haven’t really been up here. The place has kind of...well, you’ll need to do a little work,” he finished tactfully. “Now, anything you do to the shoreline...you’ve heard of the DNR? Department of Natural Resources? You’ll need a maintenance permit from them. You’ll get used to it. The permit part of all this,” Roland finished.

Grant watched Roland speak like he was the professor that Grant had gone to graduate school to study under. Grant nodded, eyes narrow, absorbing the information, already ordering and planning.

He had found his cabin guru.

Grant peppered Roland with questions regarding electricians, hardware stores, drainage and road conditions as Nora nodded intently, bored to tears. Eventually she used the time honored excuse of “checking on the kids,” and after a sincere goodbye from Roland and an absent kiss from Grant, she wandered back down the steps.

She peeked in the door and saw Viv and Sammy giggling on the couch, an opened box of Capt’n Crunch between them. She turned the corner and came to a stop in the middle of the large concrete deck, facing the field that was now their field sprawling before her, and the lake (with its ice-shove hill mounded at its edge) just beyond it. It was growing dark and Nora could make out the lights from all the different homes ringing the lake

beginning to glitter, winking like small, square Christmas tree lights. She assessed the situation.

Kids, better.

Grant, incredibly excited. He's found a buddy.

And me?

She took a deep breath, the familiar hitch grabbing at her chest wall, but the muscles pulled, opened and released.

I'm...smooth. I feel smooth. There is no loud rattle of a television nailing down the loose end of the day. My life feels...bigger.

Grant's arms suddenly enveloped her from behind, his rough, stubbly cheek resting side to side with hers. After a moment, he pulled her tighter and, nuzzling her neck, he gently whispered, "I just got the name of the best septic guy in the county."

Chapter Seventeen

Priorities

Since you've gathered all the information you need and you've made an informed judgment of priorities, from absolute necessities that must be addressed at once (most likely any electrical, plumbing or any other infrastructure issues), to the more secondary concerns (landscaping, decorating and renovating) it's now time to get moving.

* * *

"I have to get up."

"Okay. So, honey, how do you want to do this? I'm glad, by the way. The doctors said that..."

"Just...um...I think I should sit all the way up first and then go from there. Connie, maybe you could sort of help hoist me up at my shoulders and Grant, you swing my legs over the side of the bed?"

"Got it, sis."

"Okay, Nora honey, ready? One, two, three..."

Ouch. Shit. Shit. Breath. Wow. Okay. My god, I look like the back of an entertainment unit. How many hoses and lines do I have coming out of me? Or, should I say, going into me? Oh shit. The only problem with moving is that it doesn't stop hurting once you've attained the position you were aiming for. Crap. Fuck. Ouch. Crap.

"Okay, Nora, honey, that's great. Now take a deep breath and I'll help you."

“No, wait a second. Let me just...be here for a minute.” Oh my god, I’m sitting upright. Hunched over so my chin is just clearing my knees but I am definitely vertical.

Wow. Now we just need to get Cami the Nazi in here so I can kick her ass.

“Grant, pull the IV around to this side.”

“Got it.”

“Okay, those weird hose bag things attached to my stomach and chest, the drains.

Okay...got those...Should I do this?”

“Yes, honey.”

“When you’re ready, Nora.”

It feels like George Foreman is grabbing the skin at my belly and clenching it between one of his fucking grills. If I stand up, am I going to rip in two?

Look at Grant’s face.

Breath.

Look at Connie.

Breath.

Come on, Nora; just push yourself off the bed! The floor is eight inches away. Do it. You know the pain won’t stop anyway. But it hurts here and it will hurt there. But there will get you out of Roseanne of the Greasy Hair’s realm of influence. One, two, three...go.

“Good! Nora, baby, you did it! Good! Now, can you take a step?”

What is greater motivation? Going towards a good place or getting away from a bad place? Okay, just take a step. No, A Step sounds way too ambitious. How about...a shuffle? I can do a shuffle.

What a weird word. Shuffle. Like Snuffleupagus from Sesame Street. And actually, I'm sort of walking like the Snuffleupagus. Swaying, hunched. That's it! The new, breakout Sesame Street character. The next Barney. I'm the Shuffle-Hose-Trailing-Uffleupagus.

And I'm gonna bust outta this place.

* * *

"So your folks have the kids until Sunday night?"

"Yup! We are childfree for the weekend. Let's renovate a cabin, More-a-Nora."

Nora propped her feet up on the dashboard and muttered in feigned disdain, "Such a lame nickname. More-a-Nora? What's that mean? More-a-Nora?"

"More-a-Nora? It means I wanna a-more-of Nora!" Grant reached over and somewhat successfully pinched her ass.

"Keep your hands on the wheel, mister!"

"Then get your feet off my dashboard."

Unbuckling her seatbelt, Nora scooted way down in her seat and, wobbling precariously on her shoulders, planted her feet firmly on the roof of the car.

"Cute, Mrs. Stone. Very cute."

Wiggling back up, she elaborately and pointedly wiped off the dashboard with the sleeve of her sweater. "I am very cute. And you are completely anal when it comes to cars. Have you noticed the floor underneath the kids' car seats lately?"

"I've tried not to."

“Denial is a beautiful thing.”

“So, read me the list,” said Grant, keeping his eye on the speedometer as he passed a pickup with a faded “Charlton Heston Is My President” bumper sticker.

Nora pulled out the list. “Locate the city dump. Meet with the electrician. Clean out all the drawers and closets. Clean out the ‘garage corner.’ Find the DNR office. Get groceries...that should be first. Let’s stop on the way through town...”

Grant bobbed his head. “Yup. Let’s hit the hardware too. We need a better flashlight. And I want to talk to Ed. Roland told me to talk to Ed.”

“Is Ed The Man?”

“No way! Roland is The Man. Ed is just a man who knows all the men and has their current phone numbers, that Roland, The Man, said were the best.”

“And god knows, when it comes to renovating...we only want the best.”

“It’s true, honey...don’t screw around with second rate. My poppie used to say, ‘Find the best but ask for a break. It can never hurt to ask for a break. The people who get a discount, ask for one.’”

Grinning at Grant, his profile etched out against the dark pine trees flying past the car windows, Nora thought, he would drive me nuts with his number crunching if he didn’t completely deliver when push came to shove. He budgets within an inch of his life but when it comes to the kids or my life...out comes the checkbook, no questions asked. Well, lots of questions asked but just because he...tries to float over us, casting down every skill, every resource he can muster to protect us. Care for us. Keep us safe and happy and alive and beat back the wolf at the door.

Nora had come to know, after years with the Stone family, years of holidays and get-togethers and casual asides, that the shadow of pogroms, poverty and fear hung over descendants of immigrants like an ancestral cautionary tale, passed silently from one generation to the next. It's all about protecting your own, she had learned. They know you can't depend on government. Handouts can disappear in the blink of a bigot's eye. Save your money so when you need a doctor or lawyer, you can get a doctor or lawyer...better yet, become a doctor or lawyer!

Grant glanced over to Nora. "Why are you staring at me?"

"I was trying to think of another way to make you nuts," she responded lightly.

Grant focused back on the road and muttered, "Just a suggestion but maybe we should wash Sammy's pee soaked jeans from last trip that I found in the back of the car."

"No way. I was using them as sort of a car air freshener. I just couldn't figure out a way to hang them from the rear view mirror."

Grant snorted and made another attempt at pinching Nora's ass.

The festive bickering continued as they drove, past farm after farm, through small towns, past isolated houses sitting alone along the strip of highway. Billboards, increasingly growing familiar to Nora and Grant, popped up with landscape marring frequency. Advertisements for supper clubs, hospitals and supermarkets battled for attention with pronouncements that "Abortion Stops A Beating Heart," "I'm Proud To Be An American," and "Freedom Is Not A Choice."

Nora's head spun around at the last sign. "Since freedom is not a choice, we should be almost to Omro," she commented, eyes back on the list. In between coffee filters and mustard, Grant began to chuckle.

“What’s so funny?”

Grant merely waved his hand, still laughing.

“What?” Nora demanded. “It’s good. I can tell. What?”

Grant took a breath and said, “Well, they’re kinda missing the point, don’t you think?”

“Who? And what point?”

Nora knew whatever was coming would be good. Grant had a mind that could find the wit in a box of corn flakes and the whimsy in a sledgehammer. His off-the-cuff quips had, unbeknownst to him, bought him countless reprieves from will-you-EVER-put your-dirty-socks-inside-the-hamper? tirades.

“The pre-Omro sign” Grant said. “‘Freedom Is Not A Choice.’ Funny, I thought that’s exactly what freedom was. Oops. Guess I got it wrong.”

“God, Grant. You are such a...lawyer! You analyze billboards, for god’s sake,” she moaned, adding his favorite kind of cookies to the list. And condoms.

“Well, honey, think about it,” Grant continued. “I much prefer the ‘No Jesus, No Peace. Know Jesus, Know Peace.’ Even me, a Jew, can appreciate the thought that went into that.”

“Although the best one will always be that bumper sticker...”

Grant hooted, “Yes! ‘Jesus Is Coming. Look Busy.’ Brilliant.”

“Speaking of busy, we will have a little free time this weekend. I mean, we will be incredibly busy but...still...”

I’ve gotta proposed sex, Nora had decided. We’re going to have it anyway. No kids for the weekend. Maybe up here it won’t be so sad. Feel so sad. Because it doesn’t feel. All I think about is “where the hell is his hand now? Oh yeah. I can’t feel it because I had

breast cancer and surgery and half my torso is numb, so numb I can't feel my husband's caress. I may never." Not exactly thoughts to keep you in the mood. It's sort of like right after having a kid. Episiotomies and orgasm don't exactly go together. But you know you have to. Get back on the horse. No! Wrong metaphor. Well, right metaphor but...no....get back in the swim of things. That's good."

Grant, clueless to Nora's train of thought, protested. "Free time? For what? Antiquing, you mean? No, honey, we've got so much to do. Next time, but forty-eight hours is only going to scratch the surface of..."

"Not shopping, you horny devil." Horny. That should get him, she thought.

Grant's back straightened. "Oh. Oh! Yes! Free time! Yes, there will be some free time! Maybe even right when we get there? Open the place up and have some free time."

Grant felt his body twitch, his groin leap with the ache. Hands and mouths reaching, open, easy and deep. The rich, familiar dance of before. Turn off the mind, the world fading, disappearing.

And she was suggesting. Good sign.

He pressed the accelerator, passing another minivan and two guys in leather on Harleys.

Time for some free time.

Chapter Eighteen

And More Grunt Work

Generally speaking, the first big task is the clean-up. While it sounds simple and takes few materials, usually just work gloves, garbage bags, a couple of tools and perhaps a dumpster, it can make a huge difference! Purging your new home of all the old crap...the broken, the ugly, the outdated, will be liberating. Unfortunately, it will also reveal what you have left, which will lead you to thoughts of how far you have to go. Try to focus on the good. Every step of progress, no matter how small, should be celebrated. This is supposed to be fun, after all!

* * *

Okay, so far, this isn't too bad. The seatbelt doesn't hurt too much. Traffic's okay. It's sunny out. The hurling I could have done without but hell, I'll take vomiting in a minivan to vomiting in the ICU any day. George Forman is still clenching my stomach in his fists. Uh oh. Shit. Queasy again. Deep breaths.

"How you feel, honey?"

"Queasy again."

"Open your window more maybe."

"So I can upchuck on that Mercedes one lane over? Tempting but...wait. Sorry. I'm okay. Yeah, it passed. But pull up next to that silver Porsche up ahead and maybe we'll get lucky."

"Almost at the turnoff. Hang in there, honey. Almost home."

Almost home. Quite the phrase. I never would have thought, leaving at 4:00 am on that Tuesday morning, that I would have to go through so much just to get back here, heading in this direction. I can't believe it was just three days ago. Three and a half days of contorted, straining, vomiting, blurry hell and I'm back here. The same strip of concrete I've taken a million times. If I had known how bad it was going to be, would I have done it? Could I have done it?

"Just two more turns. I told you...did I tell you Viv and Sammy will be home on Sunday?"

Viv and Sammy...

Yeah, I would have done it.

Our street. Funny, twenty years ago, the thought living in a subdivision brought on a sort of smothering feeling of cultural death.

That awful party. It must have been almost twenty years ago. The worst date of my life. All those new mothers. And me. I had such disdain for those women. Talking about babies. Not seeing any movies, art galleries, theatre. Just schools, spitting up and croup. Husbands, I dismissed them too. Boring. Lawyers. Doctors. And everybody was so old. Almost forty! So old. And that guy, my date, what was his name? Anyway, boy, was his baby bell going off or what? God, I probably was a real bitch to him. To all of them.

Then came Grant. Marriage. Finding out doctors and lawyers weren't so bad. Looking at the family thing in a slightly different light. Enjoying staying home on a Saturday night. Admit it Nora, you grew up.

So ten years ago, after pricing houses in hip, trendy areas and realizing that I couldn't swallow living in a crappy one bedroom, 1 ½ bath former summer rental house just to be in the "right" neighborhood, these subdivision houses started looking...not so bad.

Then seven years ago, after hauling Viv's car seat up two flights of stairs, dumping endless quarters into temperamental apartment complex washing machines and fighting for street parking every night, these subdivisions started to look like, well, quite a sane answer and reasonable investment.

And right now this cookie cutter two-story pseudo Colonial looks like heaven itself.

"What do you want to do when we get you inside?"

"Crawl into my own bed. Sleep. Then shower. I haven't showered in days. Just those silly sponge wipe downs they give you. God, I am so ripe."

"Well, honey, I didn't want to say anything..."

"Grant! You mean I stink?"

"No! Not stink. Just...um...ripe is a good word. All right, Mrs. Stone, you are home. You want to press the garage door opener?"

"Is it my turn?"

"Well, actually Sammy traded away all his turns this week to Viv for a pack of Pokeman cards but since she's not here...you're up!"

God, we've got to clean this garage. Look at those shelves. And we've gotta get the bikes down.

"Grant, we keep forgetting to put those training wheels on Sammy's new bike."

“Unbelievable! How could I have forgotten to do that? What could I have possibly had on my mind that I forgot to put the training wheels on Sammy’s bike? I mean honestly, Nora, you’re right. I’ve got to learn to prioritize.”

“Okay. Okay. Point taken. Get out and unlock the door...”

“You need any help getting out? I can...”

“I got it.”

Car door open. Don’t hit the garage wall with it. Inch out. Contact. Feet on cement floor. That’s good. Is my stomach ever not going to feel like the skin across a drum? Shuffle, shuffle. Try and walk straight, Nora. Straighten up and...just walk. My god, my entire life has been about the neck down. When was the last time I forgot about my body?

“Okay, Nora, here we are. Your mom will be here tonight. She staying the week, you knew that, right? She is...”

“Grant.”

“What? You okay? Why don’t you sit down. Or, you want to just go upstairs? I changed the sheets and...”

“Grant...no.”

“What?”

“I’m home. We did it.”

Kitchen. Wood. Family room. Books. Soft chairs. Grant cleaned up. I’m so glad we painted the walls Venetian Umber. The name, well, sounded so desperate...two suburbanites longing for Old World panache but hell, I am a desperate suburbanite longing for Old World panache. Late afternoon sun. Sunlight glancing across my freckled

hand resting on the countertop. My hand in my home. I'm still alive. The blood in my body continues to move.

"You did it, Nora."

"Grant, we did it."

It is so fragrant. Is this how my home smells to an outsider? Coffee, warm, a little dusty. And what's that other smell? It doesn't belong. A banana smell. Oh, there. In the fruit bowl. An brown old banana.

"Nora, don't clean up!"

"I want to throw away the banana. It's my house. I'm home and I can do what I want in my home. I can walk, I can pee, I can eat, I'm alive and I can throw away a stinky, brown, old banana."

"Okay, okay. It's just your mom will be here soon. She's going to do the housework and stuff since I have to go back to work soon. Connie will drive the kids all the places and I'll pick up any slack. The kids are back on Sunday...tomorrow. So, you can just rest, you know, so leave stuff alone. It's all under control"

But that's what I want. Control. I want my control back. Okay, so what do I want to do first? It feels like the first time right after you have a child, when you finally get some free time. The act of choosing to do one certain thing somehow eliminates the rest, the other twenty-five things, that you've been waiting to do.

Go upstairs. Good start. God, when was the last time I vacuumed these? Ignore the dust, Nora. Ah, the bedroom. I love this room. I am in love with this room. I am here, in my bedroom, Roseanne The Bitch far behind, never to be seen again.

All right, my options are, obviously, first and foremost, to shower, which covers shaving legs, washing hair, and purging my body of this awful, hospital smell.

But there's a downside. Getting naked. Seeing everything all at once. Not getting bandages wet. "Sure, Dr. Gray, I can take a shower without getting my breast wet." And then there are these damn drains.

These drains! So lovely, having two plastic hoses with oval balls at the ends attached to my hacked up little body. The balls, what do they remind me of? Yes! They're about the size of those fake lemons you get at Dominick's, that have the reconstituted lemon juice that all those chefs on the Food Channel tell you never to use.

How charming. They don't tell you that you are going to have these two new friends tagging along when you leave the Intensive-Crap Unit. Sammy would love to play with these in the wading pool this summer...if they weren't attached to this mommy's body, slowly filling with this odd, pink liquid discharge. It feels like they are two tentacles extending across forty-eight miles, the hospital Mother Ship keeping me firmly grasped in her alien clutches. "I'm not done with you yet, you weak, human scum! You shall return. You will be back for alien probe removal! These are merely a reminder: Mother Ship is still out there...waiting..."

So, if I do take a shower, what do I do with these things? I can't keep the new pseudo-tit's bandages dry, clean myself and hang onto these bulby, drainy things. And I can't just let them hang there. What if they pull out? Can they pull out? If they do pull out, will I have to go back to the Mother Ship for re-insertion of the Borg Assimilation Devices?

Okay, so maybe I'll wait on the shower.

I'll undress, get into bed and stink up the sheets. Good plan but everything hinges on me getting undressed and into...what? T-shirt? Nightgown? Naked? No, not naked. Nice Nurse Jeannie said, "Pin the drains and hoses to your nightgown." Okay, nightgown.

This is good! I'm making progress. Stretch pants off. Thank god for stretch pants. Fuck Vogue Magazine. Saying that stretch pants are "Forever-Out". These are the same people that say Manulo Blanic 7" inch stiletto heeled shoes that cost twelve hundred dollars are a "Must-Have For Spring".

Vogue Magazine=Definitely Mother Ship propaganda.

Shit, I do stink. Yikes. Okay, get the nightgown. Don't look at your body. Don't look. Drains in one hand, nightgown in the other. Hum. A logistical riddle. How to get the nightgown on without dropping the drains? I can sort of lean against the bed; let the drains sit on the mattress while I...got it!

Pin drains inside...done...I'm getting the hang of this!

He put on clean sheets. They don't match but they are clean.

I am home.

My bed.

The cancer is gone.

How do I feel? Do I feel better? That was the problem. I never felt sick. Well, not until they whacked me up like a Thanksgiving turkey.

That is the scariest part. (No, scary "contests" don't cut it anymore...too many possible entries. One scary thing...better). One scary thing is that I didn't know. You're supposed to KNOW, deep down, somewhere in the recesses of your soul, your gut, that

you're sick. I never knew! I never even guessed that I had cancer just growing away. Not for a second. I never felt sick. Which means...what?

It means it can be happening right now and I don't know it. More cancer can just be square dancing away in my other breast, a lung, colon, spine, my blood, and I have nary a hint.

I should have known. I'm actualized. I have a subscription to Oprah and Healthy Living! I've journaled. I hated it but I did it. I live in the moment, hugging my kids instead of mopping the floor. I embrace life, god dammit. And I still didn't figure it out. Even a huge, big ol' lump the size of Texas was going to be a cyst. It had to be. I'm me. I'm Nora. I'm young. I run. I eat blueberries.

How do I live with this?

Connie said it was denial.

Denial. Maybe it's got its good side.

Denial. I'm going to try that for a while.

* * *

"Wow, it is sort of scary." Grant gazed at what had now been dubbed "the garage corner."

Nora, hands on hips, nodded, jaw slightly slack. "It's so big, I almost don't know where to begin."

They stood, hip to hip, facing the dark corner. The late afternoon light streamed into the long room but didn't quite reach the dusty mountain of debris, wood and furniture.

Grant peeled off his green army jacket. “Let’s attack step by step. That’s what Roland said to do. We’ll just dissect this monster piece by piece.”

“It may be alive you know,” said Nora, grabbing a broom from under the stairs and approaching the pile warily, broom handle before her like a lion tamer. She elaborately, tentatively poked at a half deflated inner tube.

Grant let out a scream.

“Shit!” cried Nora, jumping back and bursting into laughter.

Grant roared happily at Nora’s expense. “Are you mad?! Don’t wake it up, woman!”

Nora and Grant stood, gasping with the delicious joy of shared laughter.

Grant egged his laughter on, indulging in the ripple, feeding the spasms. I stop myself from laughing too often, he thought. I suppress it. Push it down. As though it is a vulnerability. A state to only be shared with the few. I have to give myself permission to let it out. And I don’t. Why do I do that? Work, of course. Life and death. Being serious. Gravitas. Authority. Dignity. A smart and confident lawyer doesn’t dissolve into giggles. But even at home...I push it away. I let the worry about money and safety and Nora and the kids become...well, it seems like if I worry, I will be prepared for any bad thing that can come our way. If I am prepared, I can stop it. I can protect them. Give them happiness.

So, I end up not laughing with my wife. Nora. Dark hair shaking, hip thrust out, she quivers with life. Movement. Opinions. Flaring, brief temper. Gentle hands and big feet. She could have died. She could still die. She may be a cancer person. One that keeps getting it. Maybe they didn’t get it all. She knows that too.

And she’s laughing anyway.

Nora finally composed herself and, prodding a folded metal TV table with her foot, said, “It’s kind of hard to know where to begin.” The TV table slowly slid down along a plastic lawn chair to reveal the top of its tray, an image of white and orange daisies painted in a circle with a cartoonish image of a log cabin in the middle. Rust was eating away at the edges of the flowers and a burn mark from a long ago neglected cigarette cut through the chimney of the cabin.

Jaw thrust forward, Grant suddenly slapped his hands together. “Alright,” he barked. “This is what we are going to do. First, we make room in the utility area under the stairs for all tool and hardware kind of stuff. The upstairs common room will take definite keepers, like those waders. Roland said we would need those.”

Nora interrupted to add, “I can just put them in the guest room closet. I can’t wait to paint this place and...”

“Honey! Let me finish.”

“Sorry.”

Grant shook his head to get his thoughts back on track. She always zeros in on the small picture too soon, he thought. Details are meaningless unless you know where you are going. We haven’t even won the hill and she is already planting flowerbeds. I can’t believe it. Look! She’s already yanking stuff out before we’ve got a plan on where to put it all.

“Nora, wait!”

“Okay. Sorry. But Grant, this broom is hooked up on those TV tables and I want to...”

“I know! But WAIT.”

Nora dropped the broom.

He was getting mad. I'll just stand here, she thought. Let him finish. Hear the plan. Then get the god-ugly TV tables and pitch them.

"Tools and hardware, in the utility area. Stuff we want to keep for sure and anything we can't decide about, upstairs. All junk, outside on the side of the house. The dump opens at 9:30 tomorrow and we'll make a run then. Okay?"

Nora nodded, the picture of obedience.

"That big shelf thing with all the wood, we'll leave that, hell we can't even reach it right now. But we'll leave that for now. But everything else, we attack. No sentiment. If it 'aint useful or working...out it goes."

Nora nodded again.

Grant took a deep breath. "Okay. Any questions?"

Nora shook her head. "Can we start now?"

Grant nodded.

Nora dove for the TV tables and wrestled them free from the clutches a pair of green garden hoses wrapped together with twine and a deflated pool toy shaped like a snake. She triumphantly staggered with three of them towards the door, their metal legs swinging down and tangling with her own. "Get the door," she cried. Grant pulled open the door and Nora dragged them outside, depositing it all with a clatter against the side of the cabin. She turned and stood in the doorway, braids askew and exhaled with a groan.

"Was it good for you?" Grant asked.

Nora merely strode in and, after a quick slap on Grant's ass, marital code for, "yes, we will have sex today," she returned to the pile. "Let's get a grip on this monster," she said.

Piece by piece, they began dissecting the mountain of debris. Quickly, several smaller sub-groups emerged. Kitchen. Lawn care. Reading material. Bathroom fixtures. They worked in silence, broken only by the occasional grunt or “Honey, could you lift that while I pull out that thing? Thanks.”

An hour later, they both stood staring at the results of their labor.

At first glance, the room looked worse than before.

The kitchen’s small counter, double sink and even the oven top were now all filled with boxes holding, among other things, dinnerware of various design, two electric can openers, a blender from the ‘70s, silverware, plastic pitchers, packages of paper plates, a towering stack of plastic paper plate holders, various ashtrays, three Betty Crocker cookbooks and a few dozen ancient dishtowels.

The now formally dubbed “utility room” under the steps, had tools, rakes, brooms, shovels, rusted coffee cans filled with nails, a few tarps, and three oars spilling out from its boundaries.

A modern toilet, various lengths of pipes, four rolls of wallpaper, and a new shower curtain rod, still encased in plastic, all leaned against the outer wall of the bathroom.

The couch which sat in the center of the room, was now piled high with three small wooden end tables (“I can paint those white. They’ll be so cute”), two stools, one white plastic, one wood, and a chrome dinette chair from the 60s.

Upstairs, beyond view in the common room, rested boxes of light fixtures, books, paperwork to be sorted, light bulbs and two black rotary telephones (“Honey, they’re retro”). There were also the waders, an antique file cabinet, some old picture frames, a collapsible army cot and a few salvageable pool toys.

Nora sat on the bottom step of the stairway, a shot glass with “Brew Crew” emblazoned on its side in one hand and a package of thumbtacks in the other, while Grant crouched near the back wall of the garage corner shaking a dusty cardboard box full of rusted nails and screws.

“Honey,” Nora called.

No response from Grant.

She tried again, this time adding a sharper edge to her voice. “Honey.”

No response.

“This selective listening thing men do really sucks,” she muttered as loudly as possible. She was rewarded with a “huh?” from the back corner, followed by a “were you swearing at me behind my back?”

Nora retorted, “I’d do it to your front if you would listen! I called you three times. You have to help me!” She dragged herself to her feet and crossed to the center of the room. “I’ve got Alzheimer’s. I must. I have completely forgotten where I was going with these. And you were ignoring me.”

Now standing, Grant listened patiently to the opening shots of the monologue he knew was coming.

“It’s gotta be Alzheimer’s,” she continued. “I’ve forgotten! For some reason, I was choosing to not pitch this god awful shot glass that says ‘Brew Crew.’ I was going upstairs with this and these thumbtacks but I don’t know why. Why, I ask you?! Why?”

Grant kicked the box of nails back to the corner it had been resting in, knowing that all work was finished for the day and began digging for his jacket that lay buried under a box of National Geographics sitting on one of the brown armchairs.

“Antonia,” he said, pointing to the shot glass. “That friend of yours that says she’s a witch...”

“Wiccan,” Nora corrected him.

“Whatever. ‘Brew Crew.’ Forty-five minutes ago, you said you should save that for her birthday. And you were going to pack the thumbtacks for...”

“Viv’s bulletin board at home!” Nora finished triumphantly.

“So, let’s go.”

Nora stared at him. “Go where? What?”

“Dinner!”

“We’re not finished.”

Grant burst out laughing. “Oh yes we are! Whenever you start yelling at me...”

“I wasn’t yelling at you....”

“Whenever you start yelling at me for something I’m NOT doing, it means you’re hungry. We’re going to eat.”

“Okay. I am a little hungry” Nora conceded, adding, “and I wasn’t yelling at you. And how could you even know I was yelling at you if you were ignoring me?”

Grant cast his eyes around the room as he grabbed his car keys, finally spying a box of Scooby Doo Fruit Snackeroos. He snatched them and handed them to Nora as he dragged her out the door, Nora still chattering. “Okay, yes, and maybe I’m a little cranky. And I’m really hungry. Really hungry. But that’s no excuse for ignoring me. Oh look. The one shaped like Shaggy is pretty realistic. These are pretty good. I wonder if there are anymore in the car?”

They made their way up the car, Grant well familiar with her temper. It flared and died quickly. Nora didn't like to be unhappy. She insisted on happiness, almost militant in the way she kicked things out of her way that stood in the path of it. Any dissatisfaction was yanked out into the light of day, turned over, ruthlessly examined, analyzed and dealt with. At times she missed the mark, railing at television evangelists condemning this or that when she was really mad at her mother, but she would never let a mood lie. Grant had to tolerate her occasional "hissy fits," as Nora accurately described her eruptions, but he always knew where she stood. And, even better, where he stood.

Her determination swept him along in its wake. I'm a freeloader on her happiness and fulfillment quest, he acknowledged. If anything was not working in their lives, Nora would zoom in with the focus of a trained assassin, design and execute a remedy.

With Nora still chattering about the cabin as she munched on some stale Goldfish crackers she had retrieved from the glove compartment, Grant reflected on the past month as he pointed the car up the hill.

Viv had been having a little trouble in school, Sammy needed a playmate and Grant was fretting about money. So Nora had moved in. In one week, Grant witnessed Nora charm Viv's teacher, locate a five-year-old boy with a Woody obsession to match Sammy's Buzz Lightyear fixation and organize an impromptu dinner party with Grant's cousin and her husband, a couple who lived their lives saddled with debt, an evening that had left Grant feeling at least a bit more optimistic that he wasn't a complete fiscal failure.

"Grant!" Nora shouted, breaking into his thoughts. "I've asked you twice, where are we going for dinner? Geez, sometimes, you make me nuts!"

Grant grinned. “Sorry. Sorry. That supper club. The SilverCryst? It’s a dinner place. Looks good.”

“Good. The one with the big black cow statue standing beside the road?”

“Actually, I think it’s a bull, but yes.”

“Good. Okay, I forgot to tell you, Sammy’s teacher, Miss Debbie...are you listening to me?”

“All ears.”

“She said Sammy was having some trouble with his tablework, it’s his fine motor skills. So I already contacted Emily, the Special Ed gal at the Primary School. We’re getting him evaluated but I’ve already started some work with him at home. Emily gave me some tips for occupational therapy exercises and...”

Grant steered the car through the darkness as Nora, trained assassin, focused her sights on her next target.

Weak fine motor skills didn’t stand a chance.

Hidden Treasures

Now that you have the time, examine each closet. Open every drawer. Poke in the corners. Many old cabins have a great deal of old and outdated items that must be discarded but keep your eyes open. Decades of previous use oftentimes have whittled utilitarian elements down to their most useful and basic. Keep your eye open for the possible treasure in the dust. Items such as cast iron skillets, wooden spoons, basic tools such as hammers and screwdrivers, simple wooden furniture that can be spruced up with a coat of paint or refinishing are classics to watch out for. There are some things that can never be improved upon.

* * *

“I’m in the bathroom,” yelled Nora. Back wedged against the wall, she was squatting in the upstairs bathroom examining the contents of a drawer.

Do I need to sort this stuff, she wondered. Kotex, bobby pins, old suntan lotion bottles, half filled. And this one’s SPF 6! Gotta be twenty years old. Shit, this stuff is basically baby oil. Yup, it says, “For a rich, bronze tan that comes directly from the south

of France.” Well, I only like to get my rich bronze tans from Cleveland, so I’m definitely pitching this. Hell, I’ll just dump the whole drawer.

She yanked out the drawer and unceremoniously heaved its contents into a half filled garbage bag resting on the floor. Grant suddenly appeared, reaching in and helping her tip the drawer and reinsert it into the vanity.

“Thanks, honey. How’s the downstairs coming?” said Nora, opening the cabinet under the sink.

“Good. Wanna take a break?”

“Maybe we should finish all the closets up here and then...oh. I see.” She closed the cabinet and rested back on her heels. “You want to take a break.”

Grant grinned, nodding vigorously.

“With me.”

Grant nodded again.

“Together, the two of us...taking a break. During the day.”

Grant began a shuffle step, throwing in a poorly executed hip wiggle.

Rising, Nora said, “Who are you, Tommy Tune?” and eyed him, her hip thrust out to the side.

Grant abandoned his dance and broke into a bounce. “So, can we, honey? Take a break? A horizontal one? I’ll rub your legs.” By this time, Grant knew he had it in the bag and was already in the bedroom pulling off his sweatshirt and kicking off his sneakers.

Nora followed him in and began wiggling out of her jeans, thinking, I hope this works. I hope it’s better up here. Sometimes, it just feels like one more thing to do. One more demand on my battered, beat-up body, the endless lists scrolling in my brain.

The sun had just passed below the line of trees across the lake so while there was still light, it had taken on a cooler cast, reaching into the room with a final sweep.

Grant flopped on the bed and watched Nora. Her dark hair, with a few gray strands wandering out from her braids, rose in the breeze created when she yanked her sweater off. Still favoring her left side, the old sweater slid down her arm and hung for a moment from her hand as she stared out the window, her lightly freckled skin standing out in contrast to her faded black sports bra. She turned back and grinned at him and a strand of dark hair caught on her eyelashes, accenting the half moon of fine lines resting under each eye. Grant had never noticed them before, the small, delicate patterns of texture.

He felt blood and heat rush to his penis. He was growing old with this smart, complex, gorgeous woman. She wanted him. He knew the moist, close depth of her, the way her braids would bounce and dance and then lay flung across the pillow, the tender reach of her hands and how her mouth would grimace as she leaned into him.

“Come on, woman, I’ll rub your legs,” said Grant.

Nora boosted herself into bed, underwear still on. She rolled back to look at the ceiling as Grant grabbed a foot and, bending her knee for her, began the familiar ritual. Ankle, calf, then thigh, his hands worked up.

Nora took inventory.

I’m awake. That’s good. My legs feel loose in his hands. I’ve lost a lot of muscle. Running...hasn’t felt right. Too hard on the breasts. Right breast: still there. Left breast: numb. Still tight. Take bra off.

I need new bras.

The skin still hitches, like a muscle that’s been built up and then pulled.

Do I feel sexy? Am I wet? Stop thinking, Nora! Feel. Close your eyes. Now, he's taking off the underwear. Help him. Lift hips. Take a breath in. Another. Sensation. Now the bra. Hands on calf. Spine on bed, sinking into soft, easy, watery spaces. Where is that desire? There. A wiggle. Deep in. A twitch of want. Small. A tickle, a tensing, a fragment of clutching muscle reaching out to be opened.

The dance, the order of things. Me. Rolling him to his back. This is the hard part. He will touch and I won't feel. My skin is flabby, pliant. His hands. One hand on one side, the other...where? Look at it. It is there, touching me and I can't feel it. Pressure but no warmth. Scars, seams, constructed parts giving the outline of form but the details are off, skewed. I look like a layout in "Playboy for Frankensteins."

Grant gazed at her. God, she's beautiful. I don't want to hurt her. Gentle, strong scarred and alive. She lived for me. I almost lost this heat, this full, funny, erotic woman who loves me.

Okay, Nora, your job is to get the condom. Are they still there? Yup...bedside table drawer. No more pills. You had breast cancer so no more birth control pills, ever. Breast cancer. Cancer.

Stop! Kick the cancer out of bed.

Close your eyes. Open them and roll it on. Condom on. Climb on. Hands on his chest. I love his chest. So wide and strong and dark and male. Get the right angle. Lean forward. Good. I am wet. Moist. Ready. Pressure inside, filling me. The rhythm. The rhythm feels...good. This part feels and it feels good. I'm sad but I feel good. It is sensation. Can a part of me feel good and another part, not feel at all? I'm tired. My legs. Tired. Yank his shoulder.

“Let’s roll over.”

Grant braced his legs, angling his torso for gentle, protective, sexual guardianship. Thoughts flashed across his mind. Be easy. She feels fragile. Soft, pliant, less firm. Her rhythm is off. Gentle and wet and open and Nora. Be the motion for us. We are us. Reach inside and heal her hurt and ache and pour into my wife. All is quiet, loud and sweeping. Thrust and heal. Reach her darkest parts and love them. Nora is alive. I am. I am. Let it. Let it. Now. Us.

* * *

“I think I need to take a shower, Grant. In fact, I know I need to take a shower. If I don’t, the neighbors may start complaining.”

“Okay. Shower. Good. I’ll help you get out of bed and we’ll take it step by step. Just tell me what to do.”

“Well, I’ve never exactly taken a shower after a mastectomy before so we’ll just have to improvise. You game?”

“Oh yeah. Bring it on, Nora Girl.”

“God, being a trailblazer sucks. Okay, I can get to the bathroom. First I’ve got to get out of bed. Here I go.”

“Be careful, Nora. Don’t use your left arm to push yourself up. The physical therapist said to kind of roll and then...don’t push yourself up! Good.”

“Grant. I can do this part.”

“But I’m just reminding you what she said. Your left side is weak. Vulnerable.”

“I know my left side is weak!”

“I’m just saying...I’m trying to help.”

“I know. There. I’m up.”

Don’t tell me how to get out of bed, bastard man-guy. Do you have breasts? Have you just gotten a mastectomy? Huh? Just help me.

“Well, Nora, you have to be careful. You did push a little on that side. The muscles are very weak. Traumatized. They said. Next time, roll more. So, what should I do now?”

Don’t get on my nerves anymore.

“Help me off with the nightgown, I guess. Wait, I have to unpin the drains. Why don’t you start the water and I’ll do this.”

“You sure? You okay? I can unpin them for you. Here...”

“I’ve got them, Grant. Just start the shower.”

Get away from me!

“You sure?”

Yes, dammit! Yes!!! Just be on the other side of a door for a second. Stop it, Nora. Stop it. Don’t snap at him. He’s trying to help. He’s the best guy in the world. Steady. True. Funny. Handsome. Honest and kind. So just ignore the shattering urge to rip his head off.

“Grant, yup. I’m fine. Just start the shower.”

Smile. Not a fake one. Search. There it is. Slap it onto your face and smile!

“See, honey. I’m fine. Just get the water nice and warm for me. But not too hot, okay?”

Say “please.” (Not sarcastically).

“Please, Grant. Thanks.”

You interfering...male person. Okay. Almost naked. Great. Drains in one hand, nightgown in the other. Underpants. Scoot those off. Now, officially naked. Just don't look.

"Okay, Grant, I'm coming in. Staggering, hunched over, smelly, hairy, puffy, scarred and cranky wife entering bathroom. Take cover."

"Take cover? I'm trying to stop myself from grabbing your ass."

What is that? A flooding, ripping current of strange feeling. A good feeling. That's what it is. Grand, big, fat love. I love this man for twenty reincarnations. He is coming on to me. I'm the Thing From The Black Lagoon of Bitch and he is flirting with me. Ugly, hairy, half-woman Nora. And he still wants me. This. This awful body. This bitch of pissy, snapping rage.

I have never loved him more than at this instant.

Thank you God, for this man. Thank you God, for this moment.

Chapter Twenty

Progress

Right now, everything probably seems worse than when you started but with a few trips to the city dump, the local shelter or church resale shop, things should start looking up. Just don't expect your dream house to suddenly appear after only a few days of work. You've entered into a "long haul" type of project so try to keep expectations within the bounds of reality. And don't get discouraged!

* * *

This should be making me happy.

My first shower since...before. I should be happy. Everyone said, "Oh, you'll feel so much better after you get home and take a shower."

"Feel good, Nora?"

See! Even Grant assumes it feels good. But it just feels...raw. And my legs are trembling. And how do I get this shampoo to my head without getting my front wet?

“Well, honey, actually...it’s hard. I don’t know...”

“What?! Something wrong?”

“No. It’s okay. Showers just used to be easier. Before.”

Before. Everything is “before” and “after.” Before, I didn’t have to juggle two long, tangling hoses with discharged-filled bulbs on the ends while I tried to shampoo my hair with one hand...while trying to not get my left breast...no...my left mound, wet.

“I’m just having trouble shampooing, that’s all. Shit! I dropped a drain.”

Shit. I hate this. I hate my body. I can’t do this. I can’t even feel the water on my skin. My whole front of me. I can’t feel my hand on my stomach and I have this stupid fucking drain swinging between my fat and hairy legs. I am naked and wet and numb and sad and raw and clumsy and I wish I had died. This shower was supposed to be great and it is just another bad, awful sad thing and I am sick to fucking death of bad, awful sad things. I will be ugly and weak forever.

“Oh, Nora, don’t cry, baby. Here, I’ll hold them.”

“Grant, no, you don’t have to hold the drains. You’ll get your shirt wet.”

“My shirt is already wet. I’ll hold them so you can use both hands. See?”

“Okay. Just...I’m pretty ugly right now. I’m really ugly. God, this is hard.”

“You’re the most gorgeous woman in the world.”

“Remind me why we did this again?”

“You didn’t want to die before the Olsen twins got out of rehab.”

“That was it.”

Okay, I’m too busy to cry. Just get this done. My god, I get hairy fast. I’ll shave next time. Next time. What an awful thought. I’m going to have to do this again. This shower

thing. Again and again. Step in here and feel the feeling of not feeling. Drains dropping. Raw, weak, shaking muscles. How will I do this every day? This is too hard. I need to get out of here. I can't even shower by myself. Okay, find a scrap of happiness. Where is it? Maybe...just let the water wash the sad away? That's a nice, actualized New Agey kind of thought.

"Nora, do you need me to wash your feet?"

I hate being the weak one.

"Boy, Grant, I dunno. Feet washing. Just a little too symbolic. But then Jesus was a Jewish boy."

"Sorry honey, don't know the reference. I'm suspecting...New Testament? Not my book, baby."

Maybe happiness isn't possible today. Maybe just doing what everyone else thinks will make me happy will get me going in the right direction. Because I'm running out of ideas.

"I'm going to get out now."

Wow! That made me a little happy. A teeny tiny bit. I finished this shower. Sobbing, weak and raw but I'm done.

And I never have to see Roxanne, The Surly Nurse or Dr. Cami the Nazi ever again.

Things are looking up. Sometimes happy is just the ending of bad.

Just don't look in the mirror.

* * *

“Is that the last trip?” Nora asked as the minivan bounced down the dirt road, the town dump receding behind them. There was no response from Grant, eyes on the road, Beatles (The White Album) blaring on the CD player; he was furiously working his jaw back and forth. Nora instantly recognized the worrying-about-money face. She considered her possibilities.

One: Interrupt his thoughts by asking him what he was thinking about, which would result in a “money talk” that wouldn’t solve anything except to wind him even tighter.

Two: Interrupt his thoughts, distracting him from his calculations. Possible topics included, the kids, the defacto position of each conversation. Work, quickly discarded for being too closely linked to the money issue. Cabin projects, discarded, same reason. What to have for dinner, strong possibility. Discussion of the foibles and idiosyncrasies of extended family, including parents. Another strong contender. Scheduling of future trips up here. Excellent. Calls for optimistically looking ahead, can introduce the “kids” topic, always-fertile ground, and is just concrete enough to get him off the money fret.

“So, Grant, can we make it up here next weekend? Bring the kids? The weather is supposed to be nice. The cabin will be basically clean except for all that junk in the guest room. We could try a little fishing. Maybe make some cookies, take a nature walk or two. Actually begin enjoying the place.”

“Good. Then I can schedule the electricians to come in. Re-wiring is going to cost an arm and a leg. Did you take a good look at that fuse box? It’s gotta be thirty years old. The inspector said it was okay but he did suggest...” Grant continued, the next five minutes of conversation peppered with words like “ancient septic” and “at least a few thousands to start” and frequent mentions of “budget” “careful” and “tight, very tight.”

Nora occasionally murmured, “I know” and “I’ll be careful” and once or twice adding, “But, honey, we did plan for that,” as her eyes drifted over the farms and fields outside her window. The sun was approaching the treetops, ending the vibration of early summer afternoon and opening up the possibility of evening’s activities. She suppressed the tickle of irritation with Grant and his exacting disciple surrounding all things financial. She was well aware that his attention to the fiscal life of the family saved her from countless hours pouring over bank statements, checkbook balancing and credit reports (always glowing). Occasionally she would scan the savings passbooks and stock reports, more in deference to the exhortations from women’s magazines than anything else. Her knowledge of the true bottom line eased her mind. Once, mid-rant during a Grant monologue about money and the attendant responsibilities, she had offered to take on the job of balancing the checkbook. Grant had stopped cold, blanched, and then never offered up a complaint about the chore again. Clearly for Grant, the fear of loss of control far outweighed the inconvenience. She knew he was certain in the deepest marrow of his bones that, although he adored her, she would send the family into instant monetary ruin in the first month. Checks would bounce. Evictions would come. The earth would break in two, tearing them asunder.

Grant, finishing his clear, calm statement of their potentially disastrous financial future, looked over at Nora, serenely staring out the window and thought, how the hell can she just stare out the window?

Chapter Twenty-One

Clean Slate

Now that you've cleaned house, removing the outdated and broken, you can get a clear view of what you've got to work with. As tempting as it is to instantly jump to the marquee items such as new carpeting, new furniture or painting, now is the time to address any more basic foundational or functional issues such as insufficient plumbing, substandard wiring or any old or outdated systems, which could including heating, cooling, poorly fitted windows or doors, etc.

The more basic or messier the project, the sooner it should be addressed.

* * *

Clean sheets. Oh my god, clean, soft, non-hospitaly sheets. And my pillow. And my body, smelling of soap and deodorant. And clean hair.

Clean hair! No more bed head. Just slightly damp, sweet-smelling hair. My body got home an hour ago but now, with clean hair, I think it's safe to let my soul return. I clearly must have forgotten it in the closet when we left for the hospital because it sure as hell wasn't around when I was parked in ICU.

"Hey Nora, you hungry? Want me to make you something?"

Hum. Am I hungry? What a complex, interesting question. Am I hungry?

"Nora?"

"I heard you! I'm deciding. I don't know yet. Come up here. Help me decide."

"Coming..."

What would be good? I must be hungry, considering I've only managed to choke down three saltines and watery Jell-O since Wednesday. So I probably should eat. Something simple. Definitely nothing too complicated. I can't figure out complicated food yet. Whatever that means. Figuring out food. Oh, yeah, I'm afraid of retching. The pain. The stitches. That's it.

"I could order something in. Pizza? Chinese?"

Not my idea of simple.

"Wow. No. I mean, if you want, go for it. Can you make me...um...scrambled eggs, maybe? Yeah, scrambled eggs."

"How about an omelet? I could throw in some cheese, a little bacon maybe? And some toast. Butter? And jelly. We've got jelly too."

“I think bacon and butter would send me back to the hospital. Just eggs. And dry toast.”

God, I sound like my mother. “When’s my mom coming?”

“She’ll be here later. Oh, yeah. I’ve gotta put sheets on the bed in the guest room. She’s at the grocery store. Okay, eggs, sheets. And you should sleep. Okay, eggs. Orange juice good?”

“Whatever.”

I am hungry. I’m hungry! This is good. And Mom is coming. And I’m in my bed. Grant is making me food, I won’t have to clean the dishes. I can just...sleep, I guess. No, wait, before sleep...there is something else. Something more important. Vital, in fact.

Pluck. I have got to pluck my eyebrows and chin.

Then sleep.

Priorities, priorities.

* * *

“First things first, Nora...great eggs, by the way, honey.” Grant leaned back in his chair, tapping his finger against a Home Dept flyer. “We’ve gotten the electrical upgraded. Now we need to get some sort of outdoor shed. Maybe put it along the back side of the house.”

The evidence of a full yet leisurely morning was everywhere. The Sunday paper lay strewn across the kitchen table and the faint sounds of animated laser blasts floated up from the basement. An egg-crusted frying pan had been unceremoniously dropped in the

sink and was sitting half-filled with soapy water. An orange juice soaked Spiderman pajama top had been dropped on the counter and a fresh pot of coffee was gurgling. Hair askance, Viv was pouring over the week's new TV Guide while Grant leaned back, gulping down the final dregs of coffee from the previous pot's final offering.

"So, if we get an outdoor shed," Nora said, leaning into an already full dishwasher, trying to wiggle in another plate, "will it have room for the frickin' lawn mower that is still parked in the living room?"

"Well...I don't know. I'll have to check the shed dimensions and see if a lawn mower will..."

"Grant! This is non-negotiable. That damn lawn mower is stinking up the place and making me absolutely crazy. Either it goes or I go."

"Wow. Okay. Let me think. That's sort of a tough call."

A dishtowel hit him full in the face. "OH! I've seen the light," Grant cried. "Lawn mower goes, of course! What was I thinking?"

Viv walked over to the table, TV Guide in hand. "Are we going up this weekend?"

Nora and Grant responded in unison, "Yes."

"Again? But there's a Kim Marathon on Nickelodeon on Saturday!"

Grant turned back to the paper as Nora shrugged, saying, "Sorry, sweetie. I could program the VCR to tape it?"

"Mom!" Viv wailed, "The last time you did that, I got six hours of that stupid West Wing show!"

"Oh yeah. Ask Aunt Connie to do it. But you have to ask her, not me."

“Why can’t we just have a TV up there? It’s stupid. It’s not like we don’t have electricity. There’s like nothing up there. It’s just totally empty. Just books and crayons and nature and stuff. Can’t we just have one TV? A little one, like Grandma has?”

Nora and Grant responded, again in unison, this time with a “No.”

“Why ‘no’?” countered Viv.

Grant held up his hand to Nora with an I’ll-take-this-one gesture. “Because, my dear Vivienne,” Grant stated, “Too much television rots your brain, dulls the imagination, weakens social skills and is just plain irritating.”

Viv eyed him levelly. “Not to me,” she shot back.

Grant smiled. “Well, when you have your own home, pay the bills, have a job and run the World Of Vivienne Stone, you can have TV anytime, anywhere you want it.”

Viv merely groaned and looked at Nora. “Mom,” she pleaded, “He’s doing the ‘World Of Vivienne Stone’ thing again.”

Grant rose, paper over his head. “I am the king, you hear me? The King Of The World Of Vivienne and Samuel Stone! King Daddy of the world declares first things first. No fun! No good stuff! No happiness or joy whatsoever for Vivienne and Samuel Stone!”

Sammy’s footsteps could be heard pounding up the basement stairs.

“And as king, I declare...of course, the greatest hardship of them all...no television at the cabin!”

Sammy burst into the room and joined Viv mid-groan.

“No computer!”

Groans.

“No fun for you. Only work! Chores! Hardship and toil! And most of all...”

Viv and Sammy were now jumping up and down with anticipation and groaning loudly.

“TICKLING!!!!”

Grant tossed the paper up in the air and lunged for the kids as they ran screaming into the family room, jumping on the couch, feet flailing in the air. Grant lunged at them, with Nora not far behind. They tickled the warm, wiggling bodies, Grant then scooping Nora around the waist and dumping her onto the couch with them. Little and large fingers reached everywhere, tickling and dancing. Grant allowed himself to be pulled on top of the pile of bodies, splaying his body fully across them with a loud moan and an announcement of “Yikes. King Daddy is exhausted, ruining everyone’s life. I shall have to nap on my lumpy, moving king’s bed.”

Bracing himself against the floor with one leg and against the back of the couch with his opposing hand, he buried his face into his family.

Words like “healed”, “alive”, “together” and “happy” flooded his head. He allowed the words to come. We are beginning again, he thought. Alive, healthy, the kids complaining, not trying to be good or helpful, Nora recklessly throwing her body into the mix. Time to go forward. I can breath. I can plan a little. We are healed. Different. Scarred. But the gaping, bloody wounds are gone.

Allowing his body to slump against Nora and his children, all screaming with joy and laughter, he thought, I can rest. Thank you God. For Viv. For Sammy. Thank you for saving my wife. For the cabin. Thank you for this life.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Elbow Grease

Congratulations! It's time to tackle your first do-it-yourself project.

The decision about what project to take on first will involve many factors, including money, time and what is your most pressing need. Whatever the project is, apply the same methods you used when finding and buying your cabin.

Do your research.

Seek out knowledgeable advice.

Make all the necessary preparations before proceeding.

Have a first-aid kit and know where the closest emergency room is.

Restoring Nora/Sergel

Be prepared to get a few emotional bumps along with the to-be-expected splinters, scrapes and bruises.

* * *

“Nora, you’ve got to try to straighten up a little when you walk. You look like a question mark. I don’t think you’re supposed to be all bent over like that.”

It hurts to straighten up, you big, bossy jerk!

“It hurts to straighten up, honey.”

“I know, but you’ve got to stretch the skin, Nora. The doctor said.”

“It just feels like there isn’t enough. It’s so tight, Grant. So taut. And the stitches and everything...”

“Dr. Gray said that it will get easier but you have to. It’s not good to stay hunched over.”

You’re supposed to be sympathetic, you bastard! And I don’t care that you’re right. Turd-Face. Grant Turd-Face Stone. Bossy Grant Turd-Face Stone. Change the subject. Sit down, stall and change the subject.

“That t-shirt looks good on you. Did I buy that for you? I must have.”

“Nora, don’t change the subject. And try stretching just a little before you sit. You have to do this, Nora. You want the kids to see you all hunched up and hobbling all around?”

You jerk! The big guns! The kids. Don’t cause the kids anymore trauma. Fine. Mr. Turd-O’Matic Stone.

Take a breath. One, two, three...go. Oh my god, I'm going to rip in two. My abdomen is going to split wide open. These stitches are going to pop, one by one. It's just not enough skin. I'm short five inches of skin. There. Sticking my butt out helps. Just pretend it's some yoga stretch.

I hate yoga. Cheat the stretch a little. Pull one hip in. Then the other. This sucks!
Happy now, Fart-Face?

"How's that, Grant baby? Pretty good, eh?"

"Great, Nora. Great. You just earned yourself a People magazine and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

Sit down now. Sit and curl up. Damn. Those hoses and drains. There, just wrap the nightgown around them. Hey, I'm getting good at this. Maybe I should try stretching a little again.

Nah.

"People AND peanut butter and jelly? Say it 'aint so, Mr. Stone."

"It's so, Mrs. Stone. Plus....drum roll, please...three shiny, wildly overpriced magazines with 'house' and 'beautiful'...and one has 'country' on the cover."

You are a god.

"You are a god, Grant."

"See, Nora. Life is getting better, right? You're home. We're home. And your mom will be here any minute to help."

"You know you've grown up when you want your mommy to come live with you."

The kids tomorrow morning. Mom today. I'm sitting in my own living room, reading a trashy magazine. The drains, those hoses, are still sticking to my side but the cancer is gone. Life is moving away from bad. I did it. And now I need to sit up straighter.

Project Nora...unhunch.

"Hey, Nora. Your mom's here."

Wow. I am all grown up. I'm thrilled! Truly thrilled. Excellent.

"Hi Mom."

"Why aren't you in bed?"

"I was waiting for you."

"Grant, why isn't she in bed? Here, take these groceries."

"You know her, Maggie."

"Nora, get up to bed. I am here to help you and if you try to play hostess, I will get very, very angry. Understand?"

My mommy is here to take care of me.

"Yup. Sorry. I'm going. See, I'm going."

"Grant, put that bag upstairs. I assume I'm in the guest room."

"Yup."

"Nora, why are you still here? Go to bed!"

I hope this works out. Will this make me feel like a baby, with her staying here? Will it feel like that weird, have-to-put-on-a-good-face-for-a-guest feeling? No. I won't let it. I can't let it. I don't have the energy for this not to work. If anything feels strange or strained, I'll just take a nap. I can't worry about...stupid things. She's a grown-up. Let her do this. Be a grown-up, Nora, and let your mother baby you.

Oh boy. The stairs. Okay, pull the nightgown to the side and sort of grab the hoses...I hate that plastic feeling against my skin.... sticking, sort of snagging on my side...now, go up...hold the railing.

“Hey, honey.”

“Grant, I can get into bed by myself.”

“I know. I got your mom’s stuff into her room. We have to empty and measure your drains now.”

How delightful.

“No, we don’t.”

“Yes, we do.”

“I hate these stupid things.”

“I know, but they’re helping you get better.”

“Yeah? How?”

“Don’t be a smart-ass. Now, get in the bathroom and lift up your nightgown. You unscrew the first one...”

“Oh, I can do this, Grant. Go bother my mother.”

“You sure?”

“It’s time. I’m a big girl. I can measure a little...what’s their term? Fluid. Sounds nice, doesn’t it? Fluid. Anyway, go away.”

“Okay.”

He looks relieved. One less thing to do. I can’t say I blame him. Now, I need to get the notebook to write down the amount, that little measure cup thingy and I’m ready to go. Ready. Okay.

Working out the logistics of every single tiny little action, how to do it everything while hunched and staggering, keeping track of all this physical minutia feels so...clumsy. And thick. Puffy. Raw. And small. The entire focus of each moment is constantly centered around the condition of this drain or that hose, or my posture, or how I'm supposed to lie down without hurting myself.

Now, unscrew the drain. Pour it out. Okay, 10 mils. That's good. Shit! I forgot the pen. Okay, Nora, just dump the pink stuff...I mean, fluid. Flush. Don't forget. 10 mils. 10 mils. Re-pin the drains and hoses. 10 mils. While I'm in here I should pee. 10 mils. Don't forget...

"Nora, why aren't you in bed? I made you something to eat."

Mom. Food.

"I had to...um..."

Should I tell her? Tell her about having to negotiate the stairs, the drains, the hoses, hike up my nightgown, all the contortions I have to go through three times a day to make sure my body isn't riddled with infection? Do I even have the energy to tell her? Telling is like reliving something. What do I say? Well Mom, I just unscrewed these lovely little bulbs from these delightful hoses, emptied them, measured the discharge, flushed the discharge...no, fluid is definitely a better word...flushed the fluid, re-screwed the drains back to the hoses, re-pinned the drains and hoses to my nightgown, all while perched on a wobbly toilet seat in a cramped bathroom.

"I was peeing. Mom, I just had to pee."

"Okay. But I want you back in bed. I made eggs."

Move forward. Put notebook back on bureau. Smile at Mom. Get to the bed. Try to walk a little straighter. Damn! I pinned the drains wrong to my nightgown. They're hanging too low. Be careful getting into bed.

"Good, Nora honey. You want me to tuck you in like I did when you were a little girl?"

"Yes, please. No, wait. Eggs first and talk to me. Then tuck me in."

"You sure? I want you to sleep."

"I know. But talk to me while I eat."

No one, no one, makes scrambled eggs like Mom. How does she do it? For forty years, they've tasted just the same. Connie, Prilly and I have eaten the same eggs for decades. And still, none of us can do them like Mom.

"I put butter on the toast like you like it. So, Connie's coming by to help when the kids get back, but you know that already. Prilly wants to fly in but you said 'no' to that for right now, right? Very wise. Prilly can be so...well, you know..."

"Frilly."

"Exactly. Frilly Prilly."

"Mom! You always got mad before when we called her that!"

"I didn't want to somehow encourage Prilly's excesses. But by now, I think it's too late."

"Mom! I'm shocked. What brought this on?"

"Well, Prilly, your beautiful, young thirty-five year old sister...the one with the perfect skin? She's been getting that silly Botox."

"No."

“Yes.”

“No! Oh my god! That is so...Prilly.”

“It’s ridiculous. She points to an imaginary wrinkle between her eyebrows and says, ‘See? See that? I can’t live like this!’ It’s incredibly silly. I always try support you girls in whatever you want to do but this...”

“Does Connie know?”

“Oh, they’re in the middle of something, some little spat.”

“Mom, tell!”

“No honey, you need you rest.”

“Are you nuts?! This is better than a thousand milligrams of Codeine! Please, you have to tell. I had cancer. And a breast whacked off. I’m weak and feeble. You have to do things that I want...help give me strength to go on...”

“You are such a con artist. Eat all that orange too. Well, Connie was filling Prilly in on the results from your surgery and then they got to talking about Prill’s last visit over Christmas and April said something about Connie’s parenting choices with little Jack. From what I heard...well, my first source claimed she said, ‘If you don’t reign that kid in, he’s going to become a serial killer by fifteen.’ My other source alleged she said, ‘Connie, I’m worried about little Jack. What does your pediatrician say about his whining?’”

“Let me guess which source was which.”

“Anyway, I gather it quickly escalated from that to ‘you try having kids, you spoiled, superficial...whatever,’ to ‘when I do, not only will they behave but I’ll also manage to brush my hair more than once a week.’”

“Good one.”

“Connie does need a haircut.”

“When did this all happen?”

“Oh, Tuesday or Wednesday. They’ve been so good, trying to appreciate each other, with you being sick and all. The ‘value life and every moment’ feeling. I think it all built up. The dam just broke after they knew you were better. You know, that the surgery went well.”

“So Mom, did you hear about the Botox before or after the fight?”

“Oh, way before.”

“Mom! And you kept it from me?”

“I don’t tell what one of you girls say to me to another.”

“But you just did.”

“Oh...well, these are extraordinary circumstances. Don’t get used to it. You’ll have to go back to your old sources soon.”

“Are you kidding? I’m calling them both tonight!”

This feels so good, to be talking about something besides me. To be talking about something small, real, human and shallow and not at all life threatening.

“Well, Nora, I’m going to take the tray downstairs. I’ll leave the juice. Do you want anything else?”

“Tuck, Mom!”

“Oops! Sorry. Okay. I feel some cold little girl feet. Let me take care of those. I see some cold little girl knees. Let’s get those all bundled up. Oh no! Look at that little girl

butt! It must be freezing. And now, I've got to make sure this little girl's back stays warm all night. Does this warm little girl want a kiss?"

"Yes, Mommy."

"Sleep tight, my warm-as-toast little girl. Call me if you need me."

"Thanks, Mom."

Bed is soft, I am home and Connie and Prilly are fighting. All is right with the world.
Oh shit! I forgot to write down the 10 mls.!

* * *

A shaft of searing groin pain jolted Grant upwards, abruptly rousing him out of a deep, dreamless sleep. He cried, "Get off! Get off!" but Sammy had already removed his knee from Grant's groin and was on the other side, curling against the bundle of covers that was Nora. Eyes still half-closed, snuggled between Nora and Grant, he stuck his thumb in his mouth and settled into the middle of the bed.

The pain now subsided, Grant watched Sammy as, eyes closed, his free hand wandered over to Nora. Still almost completely asleep, she pushed the blanket down off her arm so Sammy could reach it.

Ever since Sammy was an infant, when he felt safe and loved, or wanted to feel safe and loved, he would stroke his mother's skin. He would find an available patch of skin, mostly her arm, but it could be her leg, her cheek or her back, and with short, regular motions he would pet her. When he was breast-feeding, he would suckle, slowly and rhythmically petting Nora's breast with his hand. Even now, a boy of five, he would find

time to reach for Nora's arm and "pet Mommy" at least once every day. Grant occasional would be able to score a "Sammy pet" usually if Nora was out for the evening or busy making dinner. Petting Grant was clearly a compromise on Sammy's part but he was a kind child and would oblige Grant with a few minutes of cheek or forearm action. Even Viv would get the periodic stroke, a baby brother habit she never objected to no matter what her mood.

So Grant watched as the morning light warmed Nora and Sammy, both back asleep, Sammy's hand slowing, slowing some more, and finally coming to a stop mid-stroke. His thumb fell out of his partially opened mouth, the hand coming to rest on the pillow that had just moments before been under Grant's head.

Grant could hear the distant squawk of a duck. Or maybe it's just geese, he thought. We have some kind of geese up here. Grant couldn't see whether the day was clear or overcast because the curtains (recently purchased from Target, "Grant, I had to. Those rotten imitation bamboo shades have got to go. And these were on sale. 100% cotton! Do you have any idea how expensive decent curtains are?") were pulled shut, blocking the view out the sliding doors although he suspected a nice day from the quality of the light.

"Hey." A rumpled, soft, tangled Viv stood in the doorway. She wordlessly climbed into bed, across Grant as he guided her legs over and away from his crotch; she arrived next to Sammy and snuggled in between him and Grant. The two sleeping bodies of Sammy and Nora wiggled and scooted slightly, making room for the new addition. Viv looked up at the ceiling and then over to Grant, not at all surprised to find him watching her.

Grant said, "Morning, sweetie."

Viv looked back up to the ceiling and asked, “What are we doing today?”

Today. Today is the first official “fun” day at the cabin, Grant thought. Everything is in working order, pretty much. No one has stomach flu. We own it, sort of. Us and the bank. Grant considered the long day that lay before them. Usually, on Saturday mornings, the kids would eat a breakfast of some sugary cereal, bicker for a few minutes and then retire to the basement to join Scooby and the gang, Buzz Lightyear and the CyberChase kids. A parent, either Grant or Nora, in accordance of whatever compromise they had reached the night before, would get up with them, said parent getting to pick which morning news show to watch and decide on the strength of the coffee.

Last night, Grant had been selected to be the “first-up parent” after a particularly long negotiation begun in the car and continuing in fits and starts for the entire three-hour drive. A settlement had finally been reached, but not until after statements had been made along the lines of “two days of packing,” “At work all day,” “what was I doing, eating bon bons?” and the ever popular “I got up last Saturday.” They both preferred the Sunday wake-up because the Sunday paper provided an additional perk for the early rising parent. Grant had eventually been trumped with a combination attack of “I did it last Saturday,” and a “remember Passover? You said you owed me big, after not only doing the seder but also having passive-aggressive cousin Twyla sit next to me instead of you.” Grant had to concede, having used up the best of his ammunition too early in negotiations.

He felt Nora not-so-gently kick his calf. He ignored it, still feigning to consider Viv’s question.

Then a not-so-nice “Honey!” rose from Nora’s side of the bed.

Grant knew his time was up. Eagerness suddenly replaced sleepiness. First up, first real morning in the cabin.

“Okay,” said Grant, and with a grunt he reared himself out of bed and made his way to the curtains, pushing them open.

He stood in his t-shirt and trunks, gazing at the view. Morning sun, the cool kind reserved only for the earliest moments of the day, filtered through the tall pines and lay in broad streaks across the surface of the lake. A family of ducks was gliding through the water, a large wake rippling behind them, sending a V-shaped wake to the recently departed shore. It promised to be a clear day. Grant reached his hand out and lightly touched the glass. It was cool, almost cold to the touch. He realized he was still in his trunks and came close to shivering.

“Dad. What are we doing?” Viv implored again, this time much more clearly awake. Grant knew he was tempting the Wrath of Nora.

“Getting up,” he replied, turning towards her. “Both you and Sammy. Let Mommy sleep.”

Viv jumped out of bed but Sammy took a little coaxing. After a few hugs, the promise that “Yes, the cabin has Trix cereal” and a final kiss from Nora, he was up too. Still in their pajamas, the kids raced down the stairs as Grant slid on his jeans from last night, taking inventory as he went.

Got to pee. Jeans are cold. Need coffee. And food. Where can I get a paper? I guess I could just get the paper later. Listen to the news on the radio. No TV. No CNN. No cartoons.

No cartoons.

The thought suddenly loomed in his thoughts, bigger than all the others. Two kids, no TV, no friends around, no computer games, no playdates. Just us. Us and nature and...cabin stuff. And sixteen hours lie before us. Okay. Okay! I can do this! We can do this. People have been doing it for hundreds, thousands of years.

Grant made his way down the stairs, trying to come up with an idea that would get the kids occupied while he made coffee and breakfast. He arrived to find Sammy sprawled on the brown couch, thumb in mouth, staring at the wires and insulation that compromised the ceiling, and Viv sitting at the table, staring at the ducks on the lake who, having reached their destination, were getting out of the water, one by one.

Viv and Sammy's heads swung around and watched Grant as he reached the final, bottom step. Grant thought, oh my god, they have a look in their eye. A look of "Okay, buster, you decided no TV. So now what, Mr. Brilliant Dad? Huh? Now what?"

Grant clapped his hands. "Okay," he announced. "Breakfast. First I have to make coffee..."

"Trix," Sammy demanded.

"And Trix. What, me forget Trix? Never!" Grant strode over to the refrigerator and pulled out the can of coffee. "Just let Daddy get the coffee going first. Then Trix and juice and...um..."

Sammy, eyes back on the ceiling, asked, "What? Then what?"

Grant stalled. "Um...good stuff. Good cabin stuff." He fumbled deep in a cabinet, fishing for the filters.

"Can we swim?" Viv asked.

“Well, it may be a little cold for swimming,” Grant ventured as peeled a paper filter back from the rest, “but maybe later. First, just let me make coffee and get breakfast started. Didn’t Mom pack a bag of toys and books and stuff?”

Both kids shrugged. Grant considered sending them upstairs in search of the bag but decided against it since they both seemed relatively content for the moment and the possibility of them rousing Nora before he had some coffee was too ugly to think about. Grant moved slowly around the small kitchen, assembling breakfast. Still learning where everything was, he kept having to retrace his steps for spoons, bowls, paper towels and cups. Breakfast for the kids finally settled on the table, coffee beginning to percolate, he ordered them to “eat!” as he made his way to the bathroom.

After he relieved himself, the future looked considerably brighter.

Some coffee, he thought, and I’ll be good to go. I can do this. They’re great kids. Smart. Funny. We’ll be a family that does things. Together. They’ll grow up to be successful artists or writers or scientists or something like that, and when they’re interviewed they’ll say, “Oh, my childhood was incredible. We were surrounded by music, art and books. Our parents....inspiring. So in love and also so incredibly creative. Brilliant. Taught us both how to think critically, debate, express ourselves. We would spend hours together, exploring nature, fishing, studying the stars and astronomy. Creating experiments in the woods. That’s when I developed my passion for science. And all the reading we did, the classics, modern fiction...that was truly the beginning of my literary education. Both of my parents...still creative, intelligent, passionate people. You may have heard of them...Grant Stone is...”

“Dad!”

Sammy's wail pierced through Grant's reverie. He quickly finished washing his hands, wiped them dry on his jeans as he came out of the bathroom, ready to inspire and guide his children to greatness.

Sammy's bowl of Trix lay upturned on the table and he was in his chair, wailing, as milk and cereal dripped into his lap. Viv calmly watched the event as she methodically shoveled heaping spoonfuls of Capt'n Crunch into her mouth.

"Viv!" Grant barked. "What are you doing? Get some paper towel. And Sammy, get up for god's sake! Don't just sit in the milk, dammit! Get something to clean up with!"

"But I'm wet!" Sammy moaned, head thrown back in despair.

"Why do I have to clean it up?" Viv, still chewing, protested. "I didn't spill it."

By now, Grant had pulled Sammy to his feet, steered him away from the table and was letting him stand there and sob while Grant mopped up the table and chair, muttering, "You two! Sammy, when you spill something, don't just sit there. Get up and get a dishtowel or paper towel to wipe it up. And Viv, it's your job to help."

Viv's jaw dropped, exposing remnants of crunched Capt'n Crunch. "Why?"

Grant had now moved on to Sammy's body, which he swiped at with broad strokes. "Because he's your brother," he responded. "Now, go upstairs and find some clothes," he added, pushing Sammy towards the stairs. Sammy staggered towards them, grumbling, "stupid cabin place. I hate this place. I wanna be home right now."

Inspiring them to greatness would clearly have to wait.

Now he was on his knees, picking some of the larger Trix up and rubbing the smaller, disintegrated pieces into the carpet, he heard Sammy pipe up. "Mommy! I spilled."

“I heard,” Nora answered, making her way down the stairs to Sammy. Grant peered around behind him and saw Nora appear, clean little boy clothes in her hand.

“I was too excited to sleep,” she explained, which in marital code meant: I chose to get up. I’m not mad at you. Yes, you get to sleep in tomorrow.

She continued as she pulled Sammy’s wet clothes off of him, “But I am going to take a nap later, okay.” Her statement was voiced as a fact, not a question. Grant nodded in acceptance of the codicil.

Anything for help on this non-TV, as-yet-coffeeless morning.

“I was just thinking about what a creative, inspiring parent I was going to be,” Grant said.

Nora threw back her head, laughing. “Me too! I was lying up in bed, thinking about what the heck to do with this day.”

Viv stared at them. “You mean, you don’t know?”

Nora waved her hand at Viv and pulled two coffee mugs out of the cabinet, one had WAUH *The Bug* on it, the other, *Joanna’s Bar and Grill*. Pouring out two cups of coffee, she continued. “Time to walk the walk, my dear husband. But not to fear. I have a plan.”

Thank god, Grant thought. She has a plan. Trust Nora to have a plan. I’m finally drinking coffee and she has a plan.

“Okay,” she said. “We have errands to do, of course,” quickly continuing as both children rolled their eyes. “But we will get fixin’s to make cookies...”

Heads perked up.

“Also, we should get some fishing stuff like...um...bait, I guess...”

“And a fishing license,” Grant added.

“And other stuff. So we will come home and make cookies while Daddy figures out all those fishing poles in the utility room, area, place in the corner under the stairs. And maybe later, you and I, Viv, could play Scrabble...I saw a board upstairs in the closet...”

“Me too! Me too!” Sammy yelled, jumping up and down.

“Well, it’s a spelling game but okay. We’ll see...”

As Nora rambled on, Grant realized that she too, had been working on the “brilliant and inspiring parent” thing. Nora caught his eye and, grinning at him over the rim of her coffee cup, said “Project Cabin...launch.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Rustic Charm

Amidst the busyness of your first big projects, try to be open to discovering the pleasures that a cabin can bring to your life. They will be different from the usual activities of everyday life. Be alert to the possibility of creating new rituals, breaking old habits and enjoying a fresh outlook on life that a change in location can bring. Welcome the unexpected insights that can arise while you

enjoying the quiet joy of a dark, starry night, the satisfaction of pounding a nail, savoring farm-stand fresh produce or taking the time for a long walk along water's edge.

* * *

"I'm bored," Viv declared.

Nora's heart sank.

It was 2:00 in the afternoon. It had been a full morning. Not only had they been to the grocery store (cookie ingredients, toilet paper, wine and three coloring books), Mark's Marine (fishing line, hooks, bait, a quick tour of the boats for sale, some much needed advice and 2 lollipops), McDonalds (2 Happy Meals, 2 large coffees and Playland for an hour) and the gas station but they had also discovered an ice cream stand. Quaint, old fashioned with fabulous, rich creamery ice cream, behind it there was a rusty but functional set of swings and a duck food dispenser from which, for a quarter, a handful of corn could be had. They had spent a glorious forty-five minutes eating ice cream and feeding the ducks and geese that wandered up to them.

They then had returned home, had a big snack and made chocolate chip cookies, Nora congratulating herself the whole time on how she was connecting with her children, being a great parent and creating memories that would last a lifetime.

But now, she was tired. Hands wet and slightly raw from scrubbing the last of the cookie sheets, she leaned her body against the sink's edge, bracing herself to finish this

job before she faced the next one. Tepid water soaked into the waistband of her jeans, instantly creating a clammy, damp spot on her stomach.

“I’m bored,” Viv repeated.

At home, this would be the time she would kick the kids downstairs, telling them, “Watch some TV. No Ed, Edd and Eddy,” and then take a catnap. Or read. Or do chores. Or channel surf.

But not here.

Grant was gone, down by the lake fumbling with fishing poles, with strict orders left behind of, “No one bother me. I’m figuring this out. I’m trying to work out the hook, bait thing.”

The sky was growing more overcast by the moment.

Viv was sprawled on the couch and Sammy was sitting at the table, finishing off the last cookie. He looked up and echoed Viv. “I’m bored too.”

Nora dropped the wet cookie sheet down on the kitchen table with a clatter. It slid against the cleaned mixing bowls and measuring cups, causing the precarious pile to shift and collapse, sending dishes skittering across the surface. Grabbing for them, possibilities banged around Nora’s brain.

I could read to them, she thought. Or play a board game. Teach ‘em cards. Create a stage out of chairs, a table, blankets and put on a show. Invent some sort of science, naturey kind of experiment to stimulate their minds and start them on the road to Harvard.

But it all just feels like so much damn work, she thought. I am failing, Nora suddenly realized. I hate this moment. This was a mistake. This cabin was a mistake. I can’t do

this. This sucks and I suck as a mother. Could I possibly be one of those uninvolved, spoiled Baby Boomers parents that is letting the media raise their kids because I am too lazy to do it myself? She physically felt her patience pull tissue fine as she heard Viv bark, “Mom! I said I’m bored!”

Nora snapped back. “So, be bored!”

Viv’s head popped up from it’s reclined state. “What?”

“I said, be bored. It won’t kill you. I’m not your playmate. I’m not this cruise ship’s entertainment director. I’m your mother.”

Viv struggled up, pulling her shoulders away from the brown couch with an elaborate heave. “But Mom, what can we do?” she moaned, pulling the word “do” out with an elaborate “ooh” on the end.

Nora shrugged.

Crumbs around his mouth, Sammy watched the exchange with great interest.

Viv stared at Nora, seemingly caught in a thought loop. “But what should we do?” she repeated.

Viv looked at Nora

Sammy looked at Nora.

“I don’t know,” Nora declared and, with a final wipe of a dishtowel, she walked upstairs. “Just don’t leave the cabin and don’t fight,” she tossed back over her shoulder. “I’m going to take a nap.”

Nora marched up the stairs, revived and excited at the thought of a nap. I’m going to sleep, she thought, a little jolt of adrenaline getting her up the last step. I’m going to just let their little minds rot and I’m going to relax, get some sleep and then get back up with

that easy, slow languid sensation that comes after letting it all go. So what if I'm a terrible, awful mother that raises two completely media, culture consumed, boring kids that are only happy if they get a new toy everyday? They'll fit right in. I'm doing them a favor!

Nora continued her mental rant as she simultaneously pushed and kicked her damp jeans off and climbed into bed.

I'm sick of always being the "idea man." It's always, "Mom, what can we do? Mom, what's next? Mom, who's coming over? Mom, what are we doing for breakfast, lunch, dinner, spring break, winter break, summer break, the holidays, for after school, for right now? Huh, Mom? Huh? Mom? Mom! MOM!!!!!"

Nora punched her pillows, getting them just right and burrowed her feet down, reaching for the foot of the bed.

If they start fighting, I'm going to drag Grant's sorry butt up that hill and make him come up with a few frickin' ideas. Wait a minute. I'm daydreaming and I'm still watching my language?! Shit! I'll drag Grant's goddamn, stupid ass up that shitty, cock-sucking hill and make him come up with some fucking ideas!

Better.

This feels good.

It's quiet downstairs.

I wonder what they're doing?

Stop it! Just let it be quiet.

Okay, Nora, let it all be.

Sink into the bed. Quiet sound. How can sound be quiet? Warm pillow. Soft. Skin. Cool air on my nose. Grant. Dinner. Did I put the meat in fridge or freezer? Giggle. Sammy giggle. Good giggle. Good kids. Let shoulders go into the limp, easy place. Legs are heavy. I had cancer. Silly. Old cotton sheets on legs. Keep tiny crack awake. To hear kids. To hear trouble. No trouble. Easy, heavy warm air. Easy. Slow. Soft, gray nap not dark, black sleep. Hazy gray ease. A tiny listen. Viv old enough. Haze float to me. Ease. Heavy. Hazy me.

* * *

“Okay, Nora, my mom just called from the cell. They are about two minutes away.”

“I’m excited. And a little, I don’t know...nervous?”

“Me too. First big step back. I want my family, you, me and the kids, all in our house. All of us together. It’s good you’re sitting up. Keep the pillows against the arm of the couch so they can’t jump on your left side.”

“I got it, honey.”

“Mom and Dad said Sammy kept asking about you but he was fine. And Viv was fine too. I guess they got some new clothes and a few toys. And probably watched too much TV”

“I’m shocked.”

“Yeah, well...”

“Hell, it’s okay. It’s great. Anything to have the kids there and you not having to deal with them...that’s worth a few million atrophied brain cells.”

“There’s the car.”

I’m a little scared. They’ll want mommy back, full throttle. Everyone does. Me especially. And right away. How do I do this? Have I forgotten how to be Mom? Will this work? Will I fall back into the habit, the routine? I need more time!

“Mommy!”

Sammy.

“Whoa! Slow down, Sammy. Don’t jump on Mommy’s bruise!”

“Sammy! It’s okay. Sammy, come here and give me a hug. Right now. That’s a Mommy order!”

My warm baby’s body. Warm Sammy hair in my face.

“Mommy, Mommy, Mommy. I love you, Mommy. I got a Buzz Lightyear laser blaster AND a Buzz Lightyear video and I saw an alligator!”

“An alligator? Really?!”

“Really. He was BIG and had big teeth and then we had to go to lunch. Are you home now?”

“I’m home. Viv, come here.”

She is doing her half-smile, hiding the really happy, relieved face. Trying to be a little grown up. Leaning hug on top of Sammy. My kids in my arms. I can do this.

“Now, be careful of your mother!”

Marty. Big, strong, loud, protective Marty. Thank you, God, for this man. It’s like he’s built from slabs of street smarts and pragmatic wisdom; he blasts love from every pore. It bounces off the walls. God, I just adore this man...well, except when he’s driving me absolutely crazy.

“Marty, it’s fine. They’re great.”

“Grant, tell them to be careful. Janice, tell them.”

“Marty, they’re fine. Nora, how are you? Where’s your mother?”

“Janice, Marty, I’m coming up with laundry.”

“Maggie! There you are. How does it feel to have your daughter home?”

“Janice, so good to see you. And Marty, hello. Hello!”

This is all very loud. Big personalities colliding, trying to heal me, protect my kids, make my house keep going. Sammy jumping on Grant as he and Marty go to empty the car. Viv grabbing a juice box. It feels as though normal is just in arms reach. Almost but not quite. Too many people. Noise. Hugs. Flustering, fluttering carings requiring me to be all right. To show how well I’m doing. Show them that I’m showing the kids how well I’m doing.

“Mom, can I go downstairs and play a computer game?”

Viv wants easy, quiet normal too. Finding her way back to ignoring me from missing me. Help her.

“Sure. But no juice by the computer.”

“But Mom!”

She’s thrilled. I’m back, setting rules, ruining her fun. I’m not making exceptions for her because “Mommy is sick.”

“Listen to your mother, Vivienne! She’s been sick.”

The men are back. Marty...shut up! Let me be mommy.

“Marty. I’m fine. Viv, honey, I’m fine. Go on.”

Shit, Marty. Can’t it be at least three minutes before you make me crazy?

“Marty, I’m fine. She’s been through enough. She needs to know everything is okay. That I’m okay. Okay? Everything’s under control.”

Remind yourself: They’ve been terrified for you. Marty and Janice. This was not fixable with love. This cancer. Their son, their grandchildren...their life, was almost torn asunder by this thing. This cancer was a small, microscopic pogrom at the edge of their emotional village, close to invading. Marty, the patriarch, the king, couldn’t control this with strength, smarts or force of personality. He couldn’t be boss of this. Oh boy, he’s scanning the room, checking out the situation. Surveying the foxhole.

“I know, Nora. I know. It’s all under control. I’m not here to boss anybody around. That’s Janice’s job. Maggie, I’m glad you’re staying. Grant, help your mother-in-law with that laundry. Janice, I think you should make Nora something to eat. Sammy, don’t jump on your mother.”

“Come here, Sammy. Marty, I’m not hungry.”

“You look thin.”

“She’s not hungry, Marty.”

“She looks thin.”

“You do look thin. Doesn’t she look a little thin, Maggie?”

“Don’t worry, either of you. I’m feeding her.”

“I’ll make some eggs.”

There Janice goes. To the kitchen. Remember, to the Stones, food is love. And advice. Advice is love. Food is love.

“You do look thin though, Nora honey. But wonderful. Oh, good, there’s the frying pan. You look wonderful! Oh, it’s so good to see you home. In your own home, with your babies around you!”

“Janice, don’t cry. Everything’s fine. I’m fine. And I’m not hungry. Mom made me eggs earlier.”

“I’m hungry, Bubbie. Can we have pancakes?”

“Janice, make them pancakes. Maggie, sit down. Grant, take that laundry upstairs for your mother-in-law. And grab the kids’ suitcase too.”

“Dad, just sit down! I’ll get them later, okay? Let’s just have a nice visit.”

Oh boy, Mom’s starting to giggle, Grant’s getting mad at Marty, Janice is cooking, Sammy has got the TV going and Viv’s playing computer games, probably getting apple juice on the basement carpet. Things are getting back to normal, in a completely changed, odd, different kind of way.

Why is this different? Mom is digging out the syrup, chatting with Janice. Oh, good, Janice stopped crying. Marty’s pointing to the yard, asking Grant about the lawn, tell him tomorrow he should cut it and...wait. Wait a minute. That’s it. Tomorrow. That’s what is different. It’s because we are all on the other side of this thing. The surgery is behind. Yesterday. Past. Gone. It is just another part of the family story now. We got to today and I’m not dead. Right now, this instant, I’m not dead. I’m not dying. I could die. I could be a cancer sometime-soon person. But not today. Today, the cancer was yesterday. And tomorrow is not another test. Not a bad new diagnosis. Tomorrow, we know isn’t guaranteed “bad.” It’s just guaranteed “unknown.”

And I can live with that.

So, somehow, Grant getting testy with his dad about fertilizer now holds an odd sort of charm.

“Hey, Marty.”

“What? What do you need, Nora? Janice, she needs something!”

“Yeah. I need you to lay off my husband.”

“I’m not saying anything! But, have you seen the lawn? It’s too long. I’m just saying it’s going to be harder to cut...”

“Dad! It’s will be fine.”

“Grant, what? I’m just saying...”

Bossy, talkative, testy, messy, laughing, helpful, intrusive love.

Yup, I can live with this.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The First Visitor

The first time you introduce your fixer-upper to an outsider is thrilling experience. But just be sure that the lucky visitor, by nature, has a positive attitude! Call on a visionary, not a doomsayer. You will be seeing your baby through the eyes of another and you definitely want those eyes to be loving and optimistic, NOT critical and negative.

* * *

Shit, I do not want to go back to that place! And the seat belt is rubbing. I feel raw and my stomach aches. Just look outside. It's a pretty day. Clear and cool. I'm getting out of the house for the first time. I should be happy. Just focus on the scenery.

"All right, Nora, we're getting close. Hey, so we're about ten minutes away from finally getting the drains out! Pretty cool, eh?"

I don't want to go to that place. I feel stiff and sweaty and nervous. Oh, let's just keep the shitty, plastic hoses and drains in for a while. They're not so bad.

"Yeah. Cool. I'm not looking forward to...um...another procedure...but, yeah, cool."

"You'll be fine. You're an old pro at stuff like this by now. Betcha you'll be happy, right? No more bulbs, no more fluid to measure."

Tell him. Look at him. He's strong. He can hear anything. Do anything. He's proven that.

"I'm sort of scared of going back there. I want the drains out. I mean, honestly, this morning the hoses got tangled up in my pubic hair. Not especially an experience I ever needed to have but I'm still...I'm just sort of nervous."

"Makes sense. Post traumatic stress."

"Really? No."

"Yes. Clearly. You gotta drive to the same hospital, see the same doctor, all this will trigger all the emotions and memories from the surgery...from everything. It's textbook. Are you a little sweaty? Hands clammy. Nervous?"

“I’ve got Post Traumatic Stress now too? Well, this sucks. What’s next? Scurvy?”

“Sorry, honey. Well, you look great if that helps. How was the second post getting-home shower?”

Rotten. I cried again. I did manage to cram the drains into that metal bar thingy and shave my right armpit. Red-letter day there. But will I ever enjoy a shower again? Will I ever feel the sensation of water against my torso? It was like driving my body under an overpass during a downpour. The pleasant beating of warm water against my body just stops as I move my body around under the showerhead. It just stops. I was there, I could see the water, see my skin, but no sensation. I could see that stupid, soaking sports bra, see that plastic sticking out, allegedly keeping my dressing dry, see the soap in my hands but I just couldn’t feel it on my body. So, I wept again. I hate crying. I’m tired of the dry, hacking, fearful ache of sad. And now I’ve also got fucking Post Traumatic Stress. Super.

“The shower was good. It’s weird though, not feeling the water.”

“Dr. Gray said some sensation will come back but it may...okay, there’s the exit. How you doing?”

“Fine.”

Open the window. Better. The closer we get, the sooner we’re back. If I can get through a mastectomy, hell, I can get through them yanking these silly drains and hoses out!

“I mean, Nora, honey, if you can get through a mastectomy, I know you can get through this little thing.”

“That’s just what I was thinking!”

“That is one good thing about this. The bar for stinking, horrible experiences has certainly been raised, at least for me. When my dad was getting on my nerves the other day...”

“Marty? Getting on your nerves. Tell me it ‘aint so.”

“Smart ass. I just told myself, ‘Grant...it’s not your wife in ICU. So, chill out.’”

“Did it work? Telling yourself that?”

“For about seven minutes. Then he told me how to try my next case...but, I managed seven minutes. That was pretty good, I thought.”

“Impressive.”

There it is. The hospital. Last time I was here...no, don’t think about that. Think about a nice thing. No hoses. No drains. Ummm...being alive. The kids. Finding a parking spot in the lot. Hey, maybe I’ll see that nasty nurse or Dr. Cami the Nazi in the hallway and I could kick their ass. No. Not yet. I’m still pretty hunched over. I’d glare at them. Yeah. With disdain. Next time I’ll kick their ass.

Here we are. Plastics. Nurses. Smiles. Waiting. More waiting. Back to the exam room. Oh, room number 4. I haven’t been in this one yet. And here he comes. On time, in fact.

“Hey, Nora! Feeling good? Good, you’re already ready to go. Let’s get these hoses out. Okay, Nora, just lay back and I’ll take a look. Wow. Great. Everything looks great by the way. Just great! And you are certainly looking better. Bet a shower really helped. Nice to get rid of the bed-head! Okay, now, Sarah, help her there. Look, Dr. Simon, she was so tiny, but we had just enough here in her abdomen to build with.”

Tiny. Man, Dr. Gray knows exactly what to say. And he is just so...enthusiastic about his work. He looks at me like I'm the Mona Lisa. Three people are gazing at my hacked up body and I feel like I'm a movie star.

"All right, Nora, here comes the first hose."

Oh my god! How far in was that thing? It looked like almost four inches of hose was inside of me. Geez! And I didn't even feel it. Bizarre.

"Now, number two. The one up here, by your breast."

You say "breast," I say "mound." I just can't quite call it a breast yet.

"Okay, Nora, it's out! Feel better?"

Grant is smiling, Dr. Gray is smiling, everybody is smiling.

"Yeah, Nora honey, how do you feel?"

"I feel like a Borg that's been disconnected from the Mother Ship, ready to reassert my individuality."

I love making Dr. Gray laugh. It's fun, being the hip, funny, well-adjusted patient with him.

"Does that make me Captain Kirk?"

"Actually, you would be Picard. Oh, wow! I didn't know that dressing was coming off too."

Oh boy. No nipple. I've got no nipple. Just a flat plane of flesh. He looks just pleased as punch. Shit, Nora, look happy for him. He thinks it's good. They're cooing over it. Okay, just go with the vibe. I'll act excited and pleased even though I think it looks like an aberration of nature. Hell, who am I anyway? I've never seen this kind of thing before. Maybe I should be thrilled too. Maybe everybody else who gets this looks like...well, I

don't really want to think of something looking worse than this. Smile. Smile at Grant. Look happy.

"Now, Nora, this looks terrific! A few months from now, we can build you a nipple but the tissue right now, how everything's healing...well, I couldn't be more pleased. Now, you can start showering now in your usual fashion, since these dressings are off. But, wow, everything looks great. Next appointment, we'll get the rest of these stitches out."

Next appointment. Nora, check in with your Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome Meter: How does the thought of coming back make me feel?

Actually, not too bad. This is nice! I didn't freak out, I didn't end up in ICU, retching, no one is giving horrible news about my possible imminent mortality and doctors and nurses are taking things out of me instead of sticking needles and surgical instruments into me. So, this means two things.

1. I'm actually on the road back, traveling away from this entire event and moving forward to the destination of the rest of my, hopefully long, life.
2. My standard for "nice" certainly has changed.

* * *

Grant leaned back and whispered loudly, "Hey Connie, you okay back there?"

The minivan was crammed to the brim, with every available area of possible space occupied with Grant and Nora in front, Viv and Sammy in the middle and Connie and her two-year-old Jack in the back.

In the far back, behind Connie and Jack's seats, were shoved two large bins from Target, packed with clothes, linens and various other necessities. On top of the bins were wedged Connie and Jack's suitcase, a large cooler, boots, coats, the video camera and a Port-A-Crib. Under the children's dangling feet were backpacks filled with toys and also under Jack's legs, rested a large package of diapers, and a smaller cooler which Viv was using as an ad hoc foot stool. Empty sandwich bags, juice boxes, used Huggie Wipes and candy wrappers were scattered everywhere.

Favorite pillows, jackets and books were sort of floating from one person to another, jackets being used as blankets ("Dad! It's cold! Close the window!" "It's fresh air! Put on a jacket!"), pillows being used for comfort or ammunition ("Don't grab that! Your mother's using it. She's sleeping. Yes, take the Oreos. Share with your sister and Jack." And "Stop it, all of you! Your father's trying to drive and he can't see with a pillow fight going on."), and the books being used as entertainment (Mother! I've read this book a hundred times AND it's a baby book anyway." "Good. Then read it out loud to Sammy and your cousin Jack.")

The minivan smelled of peanut butter, baby ointment, Oreos, Goldfish crackers and coffee ("Honey, I've got to get some coffee at the next gas station or else I'll fall asleep, leading to us all dying in a violent crash." "Impossible, Grant. We are all too wedged in. Look at us. You're the only one buying the farm in this car." "Thanks, Nora. You always know how to make me feel better. Look. There, a Citgo station. We're stopping." "Caffeine? This late? If you're up until 3:00 in the morning, don't you dare wake me up for any 'attention,' if you know what I mean." "Hey! Sis, Grant-Man. What you talking about?")

It was Thursday and the events of the day had officially begun hours ago, when Greg, Connie's husband, had dropped off Connie and Jack at the house. Greg was going to join them Saturday morning, driving their minivan up after finishing the workweek and a late Friday meeting. The next hour had involved a frenzy of packing, feeding of children and diaper changes, culminating with Grant arriving home from work, swiftly changing his clothes, repacking the minivan that Nora and Connie had already packed, grabbing a quick snack and shepherding everyone into the minivan.

The following three-hour drive had resulted in three stops, one at McDonalds, Nora and Connie changing places twice, and six arguments, only one major.

Grant turned the car on to the gravel road and opened his window. The fragrance of pine and rich, moist earth mingled together was carried in on the cool air flooding the car. It was 8:50 in the evening. The sun had set almost an hour before. Outside of Wautoma, it didn't seem like it could get any darker, but black enveloped the car the moment Grant had turned off the main road. Viv, Sammy and Jack had all fallen asleep long ago, their slack, soft faces barely visible, just illuminated by the faint glow of the dashboard's lights. The car bumped along the dark road and the sound of crunching gravel, rustling trees and a multitude of insects whirling and cheeping filled the quiet car. Unbeknownst to each other, all three adults simultaneously shivered with excitement. Nora took a deep breath. "It smells like night. Night in the country."

Connie leaned forward and whispered, "This is neat! It's so dark. Are we almost there?"

Grant ignored the question as he cautiously steered the car down the narrow road, eventually taking it over the crest that topped the drive to their cabin. They bumped down

the hill and Grant expertly, and with more than a little relief, swung the minivan around and threw it into park.

“We are here,” he announced as he reached over and fumbled with the glove compartment, flipping it open over Nora’s knees and grabbing a flashlight. In seconds, he was out of the car and down the stairs to the cabin, flashlight beam bobbing ahead of him.

Stiffly stumbling out of the passenger seat, Nora called after him. “Hey, don’t bother to wait for us or anything. We’re fine, here in the black hole.”

Grant’s voice, faint, floated up to her. “I’m going to turn on the power and floodlight.”

Connie was making her way out of the back of the van. Hunched, she had to maneuver between sleeping bodies and paraphernalia but eventually reached the sliding door. Nora helped her out as though she was an old woman but once Connie’s feet hit ground, she straightened up.

“It’s just so dark!” Connie said as she gently closed the sliding door. “Just like the old cottage. Remember Dad making us pee in the woods because he had to get the pump thing working? You’ve got water, right?”

Nora giggled. “Water and power. Grant’s getting it. Isn’t this neat?” she said, gesturing to the woods and sky.

In unison, the two sisters both craned their heads up, taking in the starry night. The chill of the moist air crept into their clothes but they were both oblivious, brought to silence by the sweep of sky above them. Hundreds of stars, receiving no competition from the moon, completely dominated the view, dwarfing all below.

“My god,” Connie gasped. “Stars like this always makes me feel really big and really, really tiny, all at the same time.”

Nora nodded. “Sort of like you’re immortal but also completely insignificant.”

The words cancer, death and mortality flitted through Nora’s mind but they didn’t cause the familiar ripple of dread. Taking in the night sky, the words suddenly diminished in size to just being a few more expressions in the snap of the fingers that was a lifetime. She felt Connie’s arm around her shoulders and heard Connie whisper in her ear. “You’re not insignificant to me, Shorty.”

A floodlight suddenly popped on, lighting the stairway towards the cabin. Grant appeared, taking the steps two at a time.

“Okay, power’s on. Kids still asleep?” he said, arriving at the top step. Unlatching the rear gate of the minivan he continued. “Let’s get unpacked.”

The interior light popping on awakened Viv and Sammy, both who started muttering. Stars, mortality and eternity forgotten, the next twenty minutes were a blur of guiding stumbling kids, lugging suitcases, making up beds and emptying coolers.

Connie, tactfully ignoring the exposed ceiling and disintegrating brown carpet, cooed in appreciation at the cabin, flattering Grant with comments like, “This was an absolute steal. What an incredible investment!” and thrilling Nora with, “it has so much incredible decorating potential! Have you started antiquing?”

Connie was a kind soul. The eldest of the girls, she was almost always successful at striking a balance between loving acceptance and wise guidance. When vexed she would, and did, veer into perturbed bossiness but for the most part; she was the most laid back of the three sisters. Having given birth to Jack later than Nora, the middle born, had her kids had brought an even greater closeness and equality into the relationship between the two.

The three children tucked into bed, bed for Jack being the large Port-A-Crib that he was really too large for, and Connie and Nora were now sprawled in the living room.

Nora slammed her hands down on the arms of the chair she was planted in. “I mean, really, Con, have you ever seen so much brown in your entire life? I mean, there’s even a brown oven, for god’s sake! I’m shocked there isn’t a brown toilet.”

Grant, who was poking at a shred of insulation hanging from the ceiling, piped up. “Actually, of everything in the world, the toilet is probably the one thing that should be brown, if you get my drift.” He grinned broadly, awaiting a reaction. Receiving the desired groans, he continued. “See, Connie, after the electrical is upgrade next weekend, we can finish the ceiling. I’m thinking tongue-in-groove paneling. Did you notice the ceilings in the bedrooms upstairs?”

Lying, Connie nodded.

“Well, I like that look,” Grant said. “So Greg and I might measure this weekend and then...” Grant rambled on, unaware that both women had tuned him out at the mention of “tongue-in-groove.” As he happily peered at the ceiling, peppering his conversation with “dimensions” “power tools, maybe rent a nail gun” and “support beams” he then crawled into the utility corner, in search of a tape measure. Both women grinned at each other.

Connie whispered, “He’s so happy!”

“I know,” Nora replied, also whispering. “This place is so good for him. It’s completely not intellectual. Everything is concrete here. Got a problem? Get a screwdriver. So unlike the law.”

“You know, Nora, the next few months may be hard for you.”

“Why?”

Connie cast her eyes around the large room and a feeling of protective defensiveness reared up in Nora's chest. She was suddenly seeing the cabin through her sister's eyes and it didn't look too good.

Connie, sister antenna receiving the mood shift, spoke up. "No, Nora, it's great. Really," she said, reassuring her. "But the ceiling and, from what Grant says, the electrical and some plumbing stuff...well, that's all...like, professional, guy stuff, you know? It's just gotta happen before anything fun, like painting or new carpet or just...um..."

"Fluffing," Nora finished for her. "Grant calls it 'fluffing'."

"Exactly," Grant declared, reappearing, tape measure in hand. "No decorating, woman! Not until we've gotten this electrical, hose, plumbing, ceiling stuff done. Just lie back and let the professionals do their work."

Nora arched an eyebrow at him. "Are you including yourself in that category?"

"Well, the electrical, no," he said, snapping the tape measure in and out of its metal case. "But with Greg, and maybe Sid, we are doing the ceiling together. Mark my words. I will astonish you and all who come after you. Prepare to be amazed."

Connie threw a pillow at Grant, which he deflected with the raising of his knee. She turned to Nora. "Don't worry, Greg will help. You remember, his dad and both uncles are builder, construction, new-house guys. He's got all the tools and know-how...not that he ever uses it at our house!"

"Can't we just job out the ceiling along with the electrical?" Nora asked.

An expression of hurt crept into Grant's face. "What? Why? I mean I can do this. With Greg's help, I know I can."

Grant, the articulate, funny and wise professional man, oozing gravitas and authority, suddenly slipped away and was replaced by a hesitant boy, whose dream was just casually and brutally dismissed as folly.

“Oh gosh, no,” Nora cried. “I meant...um...I mean, I know you can do it! I just thought, the time and effort involved, you’re so busy. That’s all I meant,” she stated, with what she hoped was a casual and confident toss of her head.

Connie nodded in agreement. “You guys will be able to slap this thing up in no time. Don’t worry, Nora.”

“Oh, I’m not worried,” Nora said, with a convincing air of confidence that she did not in anyway feel. She looked over to Grant and saw his chin lowered and head slowly cock to the side.

That was Grant’s “tell.” When she saw that chin go down and head lean to the side, she knew that nothing would sway him from his path. Had she ever been required to produce a definitive picture of determination, this image of Grant would be the one and only possible choice. And it was true. Had she known, the first time Grant had laid eyes on Nora, his body had unconsciously assumed this stance. Nineteen months later they had been married, Nora thinking the whole time that the entire courtship had been her idea.

But now, the stance was about this ceiling Nora knew with the certainty of a sage that her future now held three to four weekends alone with the kids, an absent and possibly frustrated husband and a potentially troublesome and expensive project.

Connie patted Nora’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, Nora. Just lay back and let the guys do the things that guys do.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Help

There are going to be people that are going to offer their help. Casually, over their third cocktail on a Saturday night, or perhaps over coffee at work, a suggestion of a painting party and they'll bring the food. It will be your job to sort out these offers, deciding which ones to accept and which ones to let lie dormant, granting them a quiet, peaceful death.

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Your first reaction will most likely be, "Why I don't need any help! I'm going to do it all myself." Okay, bravo to you, so noted, now let's all return to earth.

You will need help. I repeat, you will need help.

So, step one is to sort out and discard the offers made by: People made under the influence of anything.

People you barely know who made the offer as a conversational knee jerk reaction.

People who are unable to identify a screwdriver from a pair of pliers.

People with a copious volume of emotional baggage that will make you regret ever asking (read: your family).

Next step is to decide which project you will need the help on. Anything that requires professional inspection or major permits should probably only be left to professionals. The rest is up for grabs. Try to fit the task to the person. An old football buddy might not want to wallpaper but would love to cut down some trees. Your mother's best friend who has offered four or five times to help with any sewing work could be requested to hem some curtains but don't ask her to help clear a shoreline of dead fish and seaweed.

Remember that others also enjoy participating in the transformation of a wreck into a wonder. Graciously accept the serious offers of help, make it fun and extend profuse thanks when the job is complete.

One of the many adventures of a fixer-upper is discovering the fixer-upper itch in others as well.

* * *

Grant tossed his overnight bag on the chair and began rummaging through the pile of shoes by the back door. “Nora, have you seen my work boots?” he asked.

Nora grunted, “No.” Eyes on the oven timer, hands flying over three separate dishes cooking on the stovetop, she continued. “Why the hell do I end up making twelve different dinners every night? Viv wants spaghetti but Sammy won’t eat the spaghetti so I have to make him eggs and you aren’t doing carbs so I’ve got to make a meat thing. This is stupid!”

Close to freedom, Grant was too excited to care and too wise to engage in Nora’s mini-rant. He grabbed his bag and strode out to his car parked in the driveway. Hurling his overnight bag into the back he spied his work boots, still caked with mud from their previous cabin visit.

So now I’m completely packed and ready to go, he thought as he latched the trunk of the car and turned his eyes to the end of their block.

He was waiting for Sidney. Together, they were going up to the cabin for the weekend to install the new ceiling.

Grant had many old friends, some from the neighborhood where he grew up, some acquired along the way. He wasn't one of those men that depended only on their wives to satisfy their emotional needs, his open and amiable nature drawing people to him, and his loyal and honorable side keeping them there. Sid was law school buddy. Sharing similar political and social beliefs, they began as study partners and still served as each other's verbal sparring partner over especially complex cases.

An all-around smart and funny guy, Sid loved the act of seeking solutions. Sidney's wife, Annie, called him a problem archeologist. If there wasn't something to figure out, Sid would dig and dig until he found something to solve. Trials, litigating and researching cases took up just a fraction of his mental energy. Littering Sid and Annie's house were crossword puzzles, mathematical equations on scraps of paper, dismantled and re-assembled clocks and appliances, scattered across the countertops of their rebuilt kitchen and spewing into their screened-in sun porch and back patio, all designed and built by Sid, with the help and advice of Sid's father, who was an architect, contractor, bricklayer, tuck pointer, furniture refinisher and carpenter. The problem-solving gene clearly ran in the family.

Grant and Sid had both carved a weekend out, shoving aside or delegating weekend chores, juggling multiple soccer games, gymnastics, Sunday school classes and birthday parties. They were going up to spend the next two days getting sweaty, dirty and tired, heaving a power nail gun (borrowed from Sid's father) as they strained and grunted and swore and, plank by plank, installed the new ceiling. No kids, no wives, no phone, just one big physical problem to solve. Grant could hardly wait.

A battered Chrysler LeBaron turned the corner, Sid's signature car. Sid's cars always seemed to become signature cars, somehow absorbing a measure of personality from him. Each car, from the original Beetle to the Impala, to the Honda Civic to the Cadillac bought at the Police Impounded Auction, now to the LeBaron; all became part of the Sid Mystic.

The LeBaron swung into the driveway and Sid jumped out. Short, not even five foot seven; his hair was gathered in a long graying ponytail that fell down his back. A compact build seemed to contain his energy but a faint belly was appearing, belying his love of rich food and good drink.

"Hey man," Sid said, grabbing Grant's hand and shaking it firmly. Barely taking breath, he continued, "Okay, the tongue-in-groove will work but I think we should do the other molding, the wider one. I brought the miter box and Dad gave me a few ideas on working around those kitchen cabinets. And I gotta grab something on the road. Let's hit a burger place. Is that joint with those buffalo burgers we got last Fourth of July on the way? Those rocked."

By now, Sid had tossed his overnight stuff (contained in an old Boy Scout backpack and a PowerPuff Girls carryall, which he somehow managed to pull off) into Grant's car.

"Um, Nora thought we would eat here first," said Grant. "She made some pork chops. She said she had to use them, they had, defrosted already, whatever."

The two friends looked at each other.

"Exactly," Grant replied to Sid's unspoken comment. "I'll just tell her to wrap 'em up. They'll be a good snack tomorrow."

Sid bobbed his head and made his way into the house, yelling, “Hey, Nora. Annie said ‘hey’ and thanks for all the girl clothes.” Grant let Sid lead the way in, knowing that Sid could get them out of staying for dinner much more easily than he could.

Sid was already high-fiving Sammy and Viv and chatting with Nora.

“Nope, Nora,” said Sid. “We gotta get moving. But they look great. You used garlic, right? Annie, I love her, but she makes a rotten pork chop. I call ‘em her hockey puck entrée. These will be perfect cold, for lunch.”

Already Nora was reaching for the tin foil to wrap them up, smiling as Sid gave Sammy a noogie and pulled a quarter out of Viv’s nose.

Nora asked, “How are Annie and the girls?”

Sid and Annie had five girls, ranging in age from eight to one. Most people thought that they were trying for a boy but, in fact, Sid just loved kids and Annie was both a practicing Catholic and could never say “no” to Sid. Although after this last one (Clara Rose) both Nora and Grant suspected Sid might be hearing “no” on a more regular basis.

“The girls are perfection,” Sid said. “Well, no, I’m exaggerating. I found a yellow Polly Pocket sundress, you know, one of those miniature rubber things, in my coffee this morning but aside from that anomaly, all is good.”

“Was it the off-the-shoulder one or the one with stripes and the red bow?” Viv asked.

Sid seriously considered her question (one of the reason children loved him. Sid never humored or condescended to anyone). He finally responded, “Blue, polka dots.” Viv nodded and turned her attention back to her spaghetti.

The combination of both kids finally eating at the table and the sight of Sid had eased Nora’s bad mood considerably. While she was dreading the thought of an entire weekend

without any back up, having to be the point man on every argument, activity and decision, she was eager for the chronic eyesore of a ceiling to get done. It almost caused her physical pain every time they opened the door to the cabin. Plus Grant and Sid would have a blast.

Nora had always liked Sid but he attained god-like status when she found out he had come and sat with Grant and her mother during her ten-hour surgery. Not the whole time, but around 11:00, he arrived with another close friend of Grant's, Percy, and they had taken Grant and her mom to lunch, distracting them with talk of politics, work, cooking and the latest family escapades. And now again, he was arriving to help out his friend.

Snapping a dishtowel at the two men, Nora yelled, "Oh, get out of here, you two." Grant hurriedly kissed Viv and Sammy and went towards the door, Nora pushing him and Sid out as she shoved a bottle of wine to go with the pork chops into Sid's hand. She noted that she didn't have to push very hard as Grant swiftly kissed her, calling out, "I'll miss you guys."

He and Sid jumped into Grant's car and roared off.

Nora turned and looked at the kids.

Viv had spaghetti sauce all over her face and hands, having not yet mastered the fork spinning technique. Tomorrow, Nora had to take her to her last ballet class before recital, get her new tights from Target since her last pair had holes in them, make sure she showered because she was still sporting the "Way To Go!!!" stamps on her feet that she had gotten four days ago in gymnastics, plus make a quick trip to the supermarket.

Sammy had deposited most of his eggs on the table and floor and was beginning to look flushed, with a nose that had been running a little too much today. She had to load

his new computer game (I Spy Treasure Hunt), get him to sign his name to eight thank you cards for gifts he had gotten at his birthday party last month, plus drag him along to Target, ballet class and the supermarket.

Sammy barked out a raspy cough and snot began to run down his upper lip. “Mom, I feel hotish and my throat hurts.”

The weekend just got a whole lot longer.

Oh well, Nora thought. No pain, no gain.

In the car, now seven and a half miles away, Grant and Sid had rolled down the windows, cranked the CD player (currently blasting Pink Floyd) and were speeding along the interstate.

“Man, this sucks,” Grant shouted, grinning. “Sorry I have to ask this of you, my friend.”

Sid shrugged and moaned elaborately. “Well, my friend,” he replied, “You know what they say. No pain, no gain.”

* * *

Someone’s at the door. Should I get up and peek? See whose car it is? No, just let it go. Just listen. Good, Grant’s getting it. It sounds like...Chrissy. Oh, it’s the food! The food deliveries start tonight. Excellent! Theresa was a genius, setting this up. Home-cooked meals, every other night for 2 weeks as soon as soon as Mom left. I wonder what Chrissy brought? Maybe it’s that cheesy casserole thing with the tomatoes.

I hope she comes up. I think I hope she comes up. It could feel odd though. That feeling of owing somebody something. I'm always afraid that later on, they'll call in the favor and I'll fail them somehow. Someday, they'll get sick and need me and I'll utterly fail them, or make them bad food, or just be unable to be there for them and they'll say to everyone, "Remember how I took her dinner after she had her surgery? And now, she's failed me. She's such a bad friend."

God, I'm pathetic. Just accept the fucking help, Nora! Don't be such a twisted, analytical jerk. You always want to help other people, listen, be considered a good friend. Well, so does everybody else. So, give them a goddamn chance to help. Be a little generous yourself. Accept the help. Give the gift of letting them know that they are a good friend, a friend that comes to other's aid when the chips are down. Now, Theresa, Chrissy, Vicki, Sandy, all of them, can say to themselves, "Man, I'm a good friend! I know it. I actually got to prove it. I was called on to help, which means the world knows that I am one of the good, helping, great and loyal friend type of people." Don't be a selfish jerk, Nora.

"Hey, Nora honey, Chrissy's downstairs. Are you up? Do you want to..."

"Yes! Send her up. I want to see her. Where are the kids?"

"At Connie's. Actually, Rosa, the girl, the au pair...is it? Au pair?"

"No, Rosa's a nanny. The au pair went back to wherever."

"Well, whatever...she's doing the watching, I think."

"Good. Yes, send Chrissy up."

"She made the cheesy casserole thing. And brought desert too. Can you get a mastectomy next month too?!"

“Get out of my life, scoundrel.”

God, how do I look? How’s my breath? At least it’s easier to scoot up with the damn drains and hoses gone. Here she comes.

“Oh my god, Nora! You look great! Hi! Hi! Oh man, I’m so glad to see you! Hi. Can I hug you? Will it hurt?”

“Get your bony ass over here, Chrissy, and give me a hug!”

Girlfriend hug. The shoulders touch and the arms are warm and firm in the embrace. She smells of perfume, fabric softener and leather jacket.

“I’m only staying for a minute. I told Grant put the thing in for fifteen minutes at 350. There are instructions and I don’t need the pan back but remind him. I was so glad when Theresa called me. I mean, you just want to do SOMETHING, you know? And she’s so smart, saying all Tupperware. Remember, I don’t need the pan back. How are you? Was it awful? You look wonderful. My church has you on their prayer list.”

Chrissy. Tall, lean, ball of fire. “Thanks. Being on prayer lists, you know, having people tell you that they are praying for you has been a really big thing. I didn’t know that it would be, but it’s made me feel really good. How are Daniel and the kids?”

“Awful. Heather threw a major temper tantrum in the middle of the mall because I wouldn’t buy her frickin’ make-up. I mean, please. She’s six. And besides the fact she’s six, I can’t afford make-up for me! I’m scrapping the bottom of my foundation for the last tiny drops. She’s in serious brat phase.”

“And Dan and Eric?”

“Oh, you know. Eric wants a Play Station. No way. Well, maybe no way. I don’t know. Dan’s up to his neck in work and making me nuts with...usual stuff. He sends

hugs and love. Oh! And the kids made you cards. They're in the bag with the salad stuff.
So, how are you?"

"I'm okay. Getting better."

"So? Tell me. I mean, really tell me."

"It was the most miserable, awful, painful, rotten thing in my entire life but I'm getting...okay. More okay. Even better. But Chrissy, it hurt, oh my god! Take active labor pain, before epidural, and multiply by about twelve and it was that bad. Don't ever get breast cancer, please."

"Are you kidding? If been checking every tiny thing close to my breasts since I heard. Then I realized that the tiny bumps were my breasts. If I ever got a tumor, it would quickly out-distance my poor little 32 Double AA cups in about three days. Daniel made me go in for my check-up, which...confession....I had been putting off...."

"All clear?"

"All clear. I need to take more calcium because of Mom's bone thing, history.
Anyway, what else? What else can I do? Take the kids? Pick up groceries?"

"We're good. God, it's good to see you. It feels like I'm coming back to normal.
Pretty soon, it'll be margaritas on your back porch."

"How are Viv and Sammy? Has it been hard? I just can't imagine."

"They're doing pretty well. Sammy's...well, we just called it 'Mommy's big bruise.'
Didn't want him to get the idea that if a part of you gets sick, doctors whack it off."

"True."

"Viv got more detail but not much. But, Chrissy, let me tell you...if you ever get the flu or a bad cold...don't just keep going. Go to bed, so your kids know mommies get sick

but then mommies get better. That's what Viv said. Remember that stomach flu last winter? She said 'is this like that time you were in bed for the week after Hanukkah?'

And I said, "And then I got better, remember?"

"Was it a week?"

"No! It was two days...anyway...I think she was less freaked out this time because I didn't act all Super-Mommy then. I think. I hope. Hell, I don't know. They seem okay. We've done the best we can."

"I do the Super-Mommy thing."

"Yeah. But you are the Super-Mommy. You shame us all, Chrissy!"

"Speaking of Super-Mommy, I'm working Market Days at the elementary so I gotta run. You have my cell, right? God, I love you so much. You are the Super-Mommy! Tell Grant, 350. And I don't need the pan back."

"Thanks for coming, Chrissy. Thanks for help

"Thanks for letting me help."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Up And Running

So, you've got your fixer-upper sort of...fixed up!
Things aren't looking so bad. Hopefully, you've recovered

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from the bone-tiring weekends of hauling wood and garbage, struggling with power tools and cutting through overgrown brush. Perhaps you've even gotten some painting done and add a couple of pieces of necessary furniture.

Just remember to pace yourself. Don't recklessly race to completely finish your renovation now that the end is somewhat tangible, visible in the hazy distance.

This isn't a race. It's journey, each step to be savored. Now begins that delicious portion when you get to refine and develop your home to reflect your personal look and personality, specific to your tastes, needs and peccadilloes.

And take a look at yourself. Your cabin is probably not the only thing that has changed.

* * *

"So, Nora baby, you sure you up to this?"

Flying solo again after a major plane crash. Am I up for this?

"Grant, you've got to go back to work some time. All I've got to do is make a lunch, get Viv to the bus stop and drive Sammy to Rainbows and Dewdrops. Connie's coming by in the afternoon. So, now get your ass to work and make oodles of money. I'm an extravagant woman whom must be kept in a certain style."

"Kids. Kids, I'm going to work. I want hugs."

God, this feels almost normal. Me, standing in the kitchen, sucking down a cup of coffee, Grant all suited up, kids destroying their minds with cartoons before school. Normal feels closer, almost there. My stomach still feels taut and achy, like a drum skin that got wet and was then left out in the sun but this ritual feels good, like déjà vu.

“Bye Dad.”

“Bye Daddy. Viv! Wait for me! Mommy, can I have more Trix and take them downstairs? We’re watching A Pup Named Scooby and he’s in lots of trouble!”

“Really! How much?”

“Lots and lots!”

“Nora, I’m off. Don’t let him have milk if he’s going downstairs with that.”

“You think I just started this mothering thing today? I’m some newbie?”

“Mom! Can I?”

“Yes. No milk.”

“Bye honey. Call me if there’s a problem.”

Funny. We’re all relieved he’s gone, even Grant. Wow, my fingers just brushed normal there for a moment. Just for a moment. Lovely. Shit, I gotta get more Trix. Am I up for a trip to the Jewel? Stop it, Nora. Just think about right now. Don’t mentally worry about a trip to the Jewel. Get this morning done with first. Prioritize. Let tomorrow just be tomorrow.

“Here, Sammy. Don’t spill it. Hey, say ‘thank you’!”

“Thanks, Mommy.”

Now, lunch. Viv lunch. How many times have I done this? And I’m back again, doing it, but cancer free now. No lymph node spread. They said, “no invasion. Clean lymph

nodes.” But what if they were wrong? What if one tiny little cell got by all their detections? What if it escaped and is now brewing some where in my spine, my colon, my brain, my blood? Peanut butter and jelly with the bread in the yellow package. Cut in four triangles. How can I triangulate this all in my head? Cancer. Peanut butter and jelly. Viv. Sammy. Me in my kitchen, going through the actions that make up a life. Living with the idea of a cancer cell floating around, making evil friends. Good, Grant got the good apples. I’ll cut up one of those instead of Doritos. I guess I’ll just have to live with it. With that cell of an idea floating around in my head, the idea...no, not the idea, the knowledge that an unfelt, unseen, undetectable cancer might be making merry somewhere in my body as I raise my kids and love my husband.

But there is that word, might. Might. A lovely word. Why did I never notice that before? “Might” can always be “might not.” Because, everybody lives with the word “might,” but to most, it’s just a silly, improbable idea to be dismissed along with the thought of being abducted by a serial killer or caught in a terrorist attack. But I will now always have the knowledge, deep in my body and my thoughts that the improbable happens.

Shit, now I’m gonna have to live with that idea along with a numb, scarred up torso and mammograms from here to eternity. Hell.

Oh well. I’m here. Right now, today, I’m here. Alive. So, I’ll give her a couple of Oreos and I’ll give her a few Doritos too. She likes those even though they always turn her fingers orange. Who knows, she might eat both the apple and the Doritos.

Or, might not.

* * *

Nora swung the minivan in close to the house, the wheels kicking up a small cloud of dust as they crunched on the gravel and hard, packed dirt. Throwing the car into park and turning off the engine, she peered at the side of the small house that had been her goal for weeks.

The small farmhouse was of indeterminate age, its style being popular from the turn of the century until the 1960s. Square, with a front porch and large, symmetrically placed windows flanking either side of the front door, it had a fairly steep sloping red roof and a garage had been erected on the back of the house at some point. Tall reeds of grass and weeds shot up along the sides of the house, clearly unreachable by a lawn mower. Leaning against the wood siding of the house were a few old window frames and an ancient farm implement, its use unknown to Nora. The front porch was cluttered with an old porcelain wash sink, a faded metal advertisement that said “Marlboro,” two high chairs, a rocker, and a few wooden shelves and end tables.

A “Red Rock Antiques” sign was planted on two large fence posts in the front yard, perpendicular to the road so passing motorists could read it and an “Open” sign was propped against the inside of the dusty front window.

Nora climbed out of the car and approached slowly, luxuriating in the adventure.

Every summer growing up, Maggie had brought the three girls up to the family cottage for the summer while their father George, would stay behind in the city, coming up each and every weekend to join in the fun. Nora’s happiest memories of growing up were placed firmly at that cottage, where the awkward, confusing moments that pepper

every childhood never once seemed to intrude, somehow waiting and holding all their ammunition for the school year, where playgrounds, friend's houses, the bus and suburban backyards provided the backdrop for the inevitable teasings, cliques, disappointments and insecurities that eventually drag everyone from youth into maturity.

But the cottage was pure, unadulterated joy. Swimming every day, picnics, bacon and eggs in the morning and ice cream as a midday meal, the steamy hot days would crinkle and warm the skin while the tall grass would whip against strong, brown legs as they ran through fields, heading for an apple tree or in a race for the best tree swing.

Their father had probably loved the place more than any of them. A taciturn, dignified man, he would emerge from his protective shell more and more as the summer progressed, each weekend growing tanner and trimmer as he worked the large vegetable garden, completed various ongoing repairs which were part and parcel of owning a cottage, and generally keeping the "Loy Family Estate," as he put it, in good working order.

His garden had taken up much of his time, where he grew towering, thirsty tomato plants, beans, lettuce, peas, corn, zucchini and watermelon. The girls had often been recruited to help weed, water, or kill tomato worms. The last task produced so much flack and so many screams that George finally had to resort to financial incentives. Every tomato worm, dead, was worth a quarter. He could always tell when the coloring book supply was running low because his daughters would suddenly turn bloodthirsty, tentatively flicking the worm off the leaf and then hacking away at it with a hoe, eyes closed, head averted. The fact that the garden produced riches of succulent flavor and nuanced fragrance was lost on the three young sisters, whose idea of culinary triumph

was a package of Ho-Hos and favorite “healthy vegetable thing” was corn-on-the-cob slathered in butter and salt, plastic holders imbedded by Mom.

But another favorite summer activity, Nora’s favorite, was the country auction. Maggie would locate an auction in the paper or, more often, spot a handmade sign posted at the entrance to the grocery store, announcing the time, location and a brief listing of some of the items. This was years ago, before “Antiques Roadshow”, before savvy antiques dealers discovered the farmhouse estate sale, before collecting became chic, when the auction was still a community event, complete with cotton candy machine parked under the tallest tree, women sitting on picnic blankets feeding babies and neighbors chatted as they wandered the house, searching for a few extra skillet or another quilt for their son’s or daughter’s bed. As Nora remembered it, the sun was always hot, the women all looked like moms and she always found a small treasure to bid on. Maybe it was a piece of costume jewelry, perhaps a doll or a miniature tea set with the creamer missing, but she always found something. Maggie gave each girl some money but she would make them bid on the item themselves. Prilly and Connie occasionally would bid but more often than not they came because they liked the other kids, the sweets and hot dogs and the change of scene from the cottage.

But Nora liked the hunt. She grew to know which auctioneer she liked best (Ben) and also learned how to bid. Tentatively at first, and then growing bolder, she would raise her hand. Oftentimes since others, namely grownups, didn’t understand her desired item’s value she would triumph. The joy of the hunt, discovery and acquisition was forever embedded in her bones when she bought a chair, an actual chair with a matching footstool, for her bedroom and a man came up to her and offered her ten times what she

had paid for it! Since she had paid a dollar and he offered her ten, in retrospect, the possible profit margin wasn't so impressive, but at the time? Amazing! With Maggie at her side smiling down at her, she thought about the offer as the man, kind face covered with wrinkles, explained his wife might like the chair. Nora wrinkled her brow and then declined the money. The old man seemed to take it very well, considering the treasure he had come within inches of attaining. Nora kept that chair and stool, faded upholstery worn to the nub, a cross between gray and green, until it literally fell apart her senior year before college.

Thus the passion had been born and nudged along. Maggie and Nora had eventually expanded their explorations to shops and fairs, Nora leaning how to haggle with grace, set a price in her mind and not waver, scan a field for the best tables and spot a fake.

When Nora was thirteen, George had died, one of the ubiquitous casualties of the common "heart attack while sitting at his desk on a Monday morning."

And so the cottage was sold and life had changed. Suburban life combined with adolescence seemed to have no room for farmhouse auctions or antique fairs. In fact, that part of her life grew to be a memory as dusty as the items she used to bid on.

Nora's foot hit the porch of the farmhouse and her eyes shifted into "scan" mode. First sweeping the area, she spied mostly larger items, no mirrors (which she collected) and two footlockers, which looked promising as potential toy boxes. She zeroed in on a few prices. The first good sign: Handwritten prices on white stickers. Nora had learned long ago that printed prices on fancy stickers meant that first, the dealer was probably pompous, second, since the pompous dealer took himself and his merchandise very

seriously, things would be overpriced, and third, because of one and two, the dealer would not haggle.

The second good sign was the actual prices. Ten dollars for a pair of matching end tables. Twenty dollars for the wash sink. Five dollars for a basket. Two dollars for a large wooden frame with a nail working out of the edges. Whoever this dealer was, she knew she was going to like him.

A “Good morning” drifted over to her as she was squatting over a rocker with a slightly cracked seat and remnants of blue paint clinging to the wood (fifteen dollars). Nora looked up to see a man, early forties, baseball cap firmly in place. Smiling, he seemed to have a slightly southern twang to his voice and an easy disposition to match. Nora liked him instantly.

He continued. “You looking for anything in particular?” The slight lilt to his voice caused him to hit the words “in particular” with a little extra emphasis as he leaned against the doorjamb. He was clearly the owner.

Nora smiled back, straightening up. “Well, we just bought a place, a cabin, over in Wautoma. And, well, I’m looking to decorate.” She wanted him to get the message that she was not a one-visit customer, that she would be back again, buying, so giving her encouragement would not be unwise.

The man nodded slowly, smile growing ever so slightly. Message received.

“Well, that there is a really nice rocker,” he said. “The seat there is a little cracked but you can still use it.”

“I like the cracks. Gives it character. Can I come in? Look around?”

The man bobbed his head as he stepped back, gesturing for her to follow, saying, “Of course. Look around. There’s an upstairs there, behind that there cabinet. There’s more furniture up there. Well, there’s stuff everywhere,” he finished as he settled himself back behind a glass cases filled with pocket watches, old pipes, keys and pen knives.

And he was right. There was stuff everywhere. As she made her way through the crammed shop, she isolated general areas, including kitchen, tools, toys, memorabilia, machine parts, books and albums and mid-size lamps, vases and knick-knacks. Within the first five minutes, she spotted a small bookcase for the kid’s room, two mirrors, a standing shaving mirror and a decorative hand mirror, probably from the fifties, a framed original watercolor of a pickup bouncing along a dirt road and an old fashioned ice cream scooper. On her second trip to the counter, to deposit the watercolor and the shaving mirror, she introduced herself. “I’m Nora.”

“Nice to meet you Nora. John. I’m John.”

As they shook hands, the sound of a chain rattled against the floor and Nora felt a bump against her leg. “Oh, and this is Dolly.” Nora looked into the eyes of a docile chocolate brown Labrador. Nora pet the warm solid body and Dolly momentarily leaned against her, then returned to her spot at John’s feet.

“Dolly’s real friendly,” John said. “Aren’t you, Dolly-girl?” The dog, already curled up again at John’s feet, thumped her tail against the floor in response and then roused herself again for another series of strokes, this time from John. “She’s old, like most of the stuff around here, but good. Aren’t you, Dolly? Yup, you’re a good dog. Okay, now Nora, is this everything?”

“Gosh, no! I haven’t even been upstairs!” Nora mounted the step, narrow staircase and arrived on the second floor, really just a glorified loft. Gabled ceilings leaned in and a few decorative glass shelves lined the walls. China, stemware and ceramic tchotchkes were arranged in methodical fashion on the glass shelves and some smaller pieces of furniture, a few more rockers, a pair of upholstered orange chairs obviously from the fifties, and some more highly finished items stood as sentries along the opposite wall. Nora liked the first floor better, with its dust and chipped paint and piles of unearthed treasures but she still found three dinner plates with a scattered wildflower design, and a pair of Mexican tin candle holders.

I haven’t been this content in months, Nora realized. Why is this place producing such a feeling of peace? Is it the act of buying something? Nora quickly dismissed that notion. Never a big shopper, she even grew resentful when other women would yammer on about shopping, sales, the mall, this or that new fashion or piece of jewelry, ranting about how their husbands didn’t understand the value of a pair of sling backs in the newest shade of aqua. She always found herself siding with the absent husband during these conversations, embarrassed for her gender.

Perhaps it was the hunt itself, the finding of a gem, something special that everyone else missed? That was part of it but not all. It was closer to an act of self-expression, creating a home out of fragments of the past, interpreting the old in a new, fresh way, mixing and juggling the components, painting an old cabinet bright white, throwing an African printed bedspread over an old, symmetrical sixties sofa, reframing a cracked and chipping mirror in a shiny new frame.

So it called on her creativity but she also knew it tickled something else in her too, a connection to the past, and not just the past of the furniture around her but her own past. Her mother and father, growing women out of girls by dragging them away from the television, from the politics of the playground and making them kill tomato worms, turn coloring books into high art, spend an entire day on the beach swimming, reading books, playing dolls and castle under a pine tree and discovering wild strawberries along a dirt road. Nora had memories of her father, dozens of them, as a happy, relaxed man. Not just the suited, distracted and slightly distant man walking through the door at dinnertime with the foreign air of city clinging to him, but George, laughing in the garden as he watched three girls trying to catch fireflies at dusk or praising Maggie on her recent auction purchases or helped Nora turn the cold metal crank on the ice cream making machine.

Antiquing connected the threads. The strands of every life were made up from the cracked, chipped and slightly faded memories of the people that came before. One thread led her back to her mother, as she and Maggie stood side by side, waiting for Nora's treasure to come to the "up for bid" table. Another led to George, the now forever-distant father, who had participated in such tactile, fragrant memories that mere death could not root them out. And another was her sisters, the only people on this earth who got the exact same image in their minds when she said, "cottage." Now, thirty years later, Nora was grasping the threads of all three, a young Maggie and living George and summer after summer spent together with her sisters and she was braiding them together, weaving in Sammy and Viv and infusing herself, Nora, into their memories.

She knew right now a few tiny cells in some random part of her body could be misbehaving, kicking up trouble that she might never feel until it was too late. She also knew that Grant, strong, funny, wise Grant could keel over dead of a heart attack on a sunny Monday morning. She had always known in her head that tomorrow was promised to no one, and after George died and again after her diagnosis, she understood it with the same shudder of fear.

But today, browsing through the household relics of people long gone, the knowledge remained but the fear was gone. All that was left was the peaceful awareness that someday, her treasures would pass on to Viv and Sammy and then on to their children and eventually many, if not most, would end up in a garbage dump or an antique shop.

Nora hoped when that happened it would be an antique shop like this one.

“That all?” asked John as Nora placed her last item on the counter and pulled out her wallet.

Nora, big grin on her face, nodded, saying, “I think I left one or two things for the next guy.”

“Well, let’s see here. I already took the bookcase, rocker and trunk out by your car there.” John started adding the purchases, methodically noting each tag. Nora waited patiently, not even asking for a break yet. She knew her total would be ninety-eight dollars. If he said ninety-eight dollars, then she would ask for a discount. But she waited.

John looked her in the eye. “Oh well, let’s just call it seventy-five. How’s that sound to you?”

Nora aimed for, and hopefully hit, the just right note of effusing. “You are a prince among men, John! Thank you so much. I appreciate it.” As she took out the money and handed it to him, she added, “Now remember, I’m Nora and I’ll be back.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Nora, I think I’ll remember you.”

Friends and Family

Your new country cabin will bring your loved ones into your life with a closeness that may be surprising. Unless you've designated your retreat "off limits", expect to have visitors. Handled properly, this can add a richness and depth to your relationships but it is not without its risks.

Removing the distractions of everyday life and the familiarity of establish routines can reveal unexplored sides to people that you thought you knew well. Conversations happen and secrets can be revealed when the normal parameters of the known are changed. Watching a sunset or walking in the woods can open up the most hardened of souls. Those with whom you have had difficulties may suddenly become the most helpful of guests and the best of friends can turn into a thorn in your side.

Most importantly, be aware that you also have expectations of others, some reasonable and some not, and allow the change in routine, scene and environment to work its magic.

* * *

“Prilly’s here.”

“Already?”

“Yeah, I’ll go out and help her with the inevitable presents. Man! Look at the car she rented! Man, oh, man!”

Only Prilly would rent a red Mustang for a three-day visit. It is nice though. And she looks...great! Wow, maybe I should try some of that Botox.

“Hey Prilly, you look great. Got any extra Botox?”

“Mom told me she told you. And you look marvelously, fabulously terrific and if you don’t milk this breast cancer thing for the next thirty years, you’re crazy! Hah, get it? Milk the breast cancer thing? Grant, careful with that one. Can American Girl dolls break? Wow, look at you! Can I hug you?”

“Absolutely.” Tiny, warm, wiggly Prilly. “Hey, munchkin, I feel a wrinkle on your back. I know this great plastic surgeon.”

“Screw you. I was completely and totally scared for you, Nora.”

“Me too.”

“I mean, so scared. I would have come but everyone told me, ‘don’t come.’ Connie was so bossy...”

“Which meant she was scared too, you know.”

“I know. That’s why I didn’t tell her off.”

“Hey, womenfolk, get the hell out of the doorway. I’ve got packages. Go hug and bond and do that sister thing inside.”

“So Mom and Connie said it totally and absolutely sucked. You sounded like shit on the phone. But you look fabulous.”

“So do you. And don’t flash that fancy hair cut at me, Prilly. How much did that cost you?”

“Oh, stop it. Some of us don’t have perfect thick gorgeous hair like you. Some of us have to pay for it. Look. You just got a tit-whacking done and your hair still looks better. My life sucks.”

“Still, you look great, munchkin.”

“Oh, hell, Lemonhead, I’ve got to. I work in LA. It’s a job requirement. Oh, and I want to see the rebuild on the breast. Can I?”

“You want to?”

“Of course! I want to make sure they did it right. Please! I live in the Plastic Surgery capitol of the world. I know what I’m talking about.”

No one else has asked to see it. They’re all too freaked out. Well, men can’t ask, of course, but no women friends. Nobody. It’s like no one wants to intrude but also, it’s almost as though they are afraid I’m too gruesome to look at. I scare them. I get it, I understand. But, how do I explain it when...

“Oh, Nora, god! Stop thinking so much. Where are my niece and nephew?”

“My in-laws, Marty and Janice, took them swimming. They’ve got an indoor pool at the condo.”

“Excellent. So we can talk and both recover. You from major surgery...”

“You from Connie...”

“Don’t get me started. She just makes me crazy with her fake laid back stuff but she’s only like that if you’re living your life the way she thinks you should live it.”

Here she goes. Will these two ever get along?

“Hell, maybe someday we’ll get along...but probably not! I just can’t let her get under my skin so much. She’s never going to change.”

“Why Prilly, that sounds amazingly grown-up.”

“Well, I don’t exacting stay frozen in hydraspace when I’m not around, you know.”

“I know.” I should let her grow up. She does seem calmer, more centered. Or maybe it’s just me?

“So, Nora, can I see? Let me see. If it’s okay, I mean. Is it okay?”

“You mean...really?”

“Yeah. Is that too weird for you?”

“No! Yes, of course you can see! No one else wants to...you know.”

“People are so fucking cautious and stupid.”

“Never your problem, Prill.”

“Thank you, sis.”

“Hey girls, anybody want a drink? Nora, you can’t. You’re on Codeine. How about you, Prilly? It’s cocktail hour.”

“We’ll BOTH have a screwdriver.”

“Prill, I can’t. The medication...”

“Oh, come on. Who do you think you are? River Phoenix? If breast cancer and a mastectomy didn’t kill you, you think a shot of vodka’s going to do you in? Pour ‘em, barkeep.”

“Done.”

“So, Nora, tell me everything.”

“No, you tell me. I’m sick of me. I’m sick of cancer and yucky stuff. And if I tell it, I have to...I don’t know...”

“Relive it. Got it. It’s a balance between balancing processing your emotions and starting to try to get back to normal.”

“Shit Prill, how did you get so smart all of a sudden?”

“My god! Nora, I sell real estate in LA. It’s like performing therapy on commission. I swear to god, I saved a marriage last weekend and got this guy into rehab after the holidays. And he was so cute too. Why the hell do people do coke? Anyway, you, the Nora. Let me see.”

“We’ll be right back, Grant.”

“Hey, no playing doctor without me.”

“Oh, shut up, brother-outlaw. This is a sister bonding thing.”

I wonder if she’s nervous? I’d be worried about saying the right thing after seeing the scars and everything. Worried that I was going to be freaked out and react the wrong way. Prilly is probably preparing for...

“Nora! Stop worrying!”

“What?”

“I can feel your mind whirling. You’re wondering what I’m thinking, whether I’m nervous, all that stuff. God, you are so transparent sometimes.”

“Clearly, only to you, Prilly.”

“Hah! Good one!”

“What?”

“Clearly, only to you. Transparent...Clear. Get it?”

“Oh, god, Prilly...”

“Okay, I don’t know the verbal shirt equivalent of ‘drop trou’ but do it. Let’s see the new titty.”

I wish I had that screwdriver right now. But I do want her to see it. See me. I want somebody besides Grant and doctors to see me. Tell me, really, how it looks. How I look. “Now, it’s all still all kind of whacked up and...”

“Shut up, Nora.”

Here goes nothing. “Okay. What do you think? See. There is...” She’s smiling. And nodding.

“Thank god! He did great. It’s terrific, Nora. Stop sweating it so much! Man, I’ve seen some BAD tit jobs and this is great. Building the nipple will be no problem for this guy. And he’s going to boost up the other one when he does that, right? A full boob job, you said on the phone ‘cuz insurance covers symmetry, right? Well, he’s an artist, obviously. Dr. Gray, you said? God, he’d make a fortune in LA. Wow, it really is healing smooth. Look! Shit, not a ripple in the skin.”

“It just looks like a lumpy mound to me.”

“What the hell do you think tits are, Nora? Take the nipple off any breast and they’re all gonna look like lumpy mounds. Christ, you can see the potential in a fucking wreck of a piece of junk table or chair but you can’t give your poor little tit the benefit of the doubt? Maybe use your fabulous powers of visualization and imagery to see the potential eleven inches from your nose? Let me see the tummy tuck.”

“It’s called a tram flap.” Oh happy day! She’s appraising me like an ocean view in Malibu and she’s ready to make an offer...at list price.

“Tram flap, tummy tuck, whatever. Yup, this guy did a fabulous job. Make sure when you’re completely healed that you moisturize and massage. I’ll send you this great serum. Sharon Stone uses it and she looks fabulous.”

She’s done looking and moved on already. She’s not traumatized. Not freaked out. I look normal to her. “So I look normal to you?”

“Well, Nora, considering I live and work in LA, looking ‘normal’ is completely relative...but yeah! Come on. You look fucking great. You could use some highlights and you’re in serious need of a pedicure but...”

“I hate pedicures.”

“Obviously.”

“You are such a big, short brat!” I love Practical Prilly. Love her! “I love you, munchkin.”

“As you should. Now let’s go drink and we’ll take turns bitching, you about that cunt, whore bitch nurse and me about...well, my life.”

I love my sister. And my new tit.

* * *

The sippy cup bounced across the deck, skittering to a stop under a large, prickly pine bush.

“I want more juice NOW!” Jack demanded, brows furrowed and scrunched face a combination of red, white and a few faint tints of orange.

It was the post-lunch lull. The morning had been a full one. Swimming, a trip to town, including the ice cream stand and McDonalds, had been finished off with a side trip to a park and a final feeding of the local ducks. For lunch, Grant had pulled out all the stops, grilling hamburgers with cheese and hot dogs. They had finished off with ice cream cones and now the three grown ups were all lounging about the deck, watching the puffy clouds float by in an achingly blue sky while inside Viv and Sammy played a game of checkers. Jack stood center stage on the deck and glared at Connie.

Nora and Grant simultaneous drew deep silent breaths and looked at Connie.

Jack, just three years old, had been, as Grant had diplomatically put it, “a goddamn pill” all morning. Petulant begging combined with constant dissatisfaction had frayed everyone’s nerves to the point of bleeding. Connie had spent the time vacillating between casual reprimands and groans of pleading, usually followed by acquiescing to the current demand.

Nora was astonished. Everyone had always assumed that Connie, with her easygoing manner and caring nature, would be a wonderful parent. Pregnancy, followed by an easy labor and delivery had seemingly set the stage for her to continue, unflustered, in her calm, big sister, got-it-all-under-control mode. Nora had always felt just slightly watched and rated by Connie as she had raised Viv, and then Sammy, under Connie’s smiling eyes, Nora deep down knowing that Connie was probably going to do it better, not losing her temper or getting weary of her kids. While Jack had proven to be a more high-strung

child, Connie was still able to juggle going back to work by hiring an au pair (and a weekly maid, Grant had wryly noted).

But now, Nora and Grant watched Connie slowly rise with a groan and a giggle and crawl under the bush, arm extended. Nora and Grant slowly looked at each other, Grant's eyes wide and Nora's jaw dropped.

Jack continued. "Hurry, Mom! Now. And I want chocolate milk. No juice. No juice. No juice."

Standing with sippy cup in hand and a leaf stuck to her hair, Connie replied, "Now Jack. Come on. Please. You've had ice cream twice this morning. Come on. No chocolate milk."

"No juice. No juice. No juice," Jack continued to chant, face flushed and fists clenched.

Connie groaned and after an elaborate sigh and shrug in Nora and Grant's direction, she nodded and said, "Okay. Okay," and added for the twelfth time that day, "but just this once," as she headed into the house.

Grant was secretly thrilled. While a deep love ran between all three sisters, Nora had always held Connie up as the most centered and complete of the three sisters. Prilly was the wild, flighty one, Connie was the wise sage and Nora was the funny, organized good girl. But in the last few years, unbeknownst to Nora and Connie, the old labels and assumptions had begun to fray around the edges. In Grant's opinion Prilly, with both distance and a strong bullshit meter working in her favor, had ripped the emperor's clothes off a long time ago. She and Grant had enjoyed a few discrete conversations about the whys and whens that had led to the present sibling dynamic. When Prilly had

heard that Connie was pregnant, she had called Grant at work and, whooping with laughter, declared, “I love Connie to pieces...but, man, I cannot wait for her ass to be fried for a couple of years. Miss Calm-And-Centered-And-Oh-So-Actualized is going to have to sweat out her own advice now. Grant, you have got to break out that camcorder. I want documentation. There’s nothing good on TV anyway.”

Smiling weakly at Jack, Nora leaned over to Grant. “I’m in shock,” she whispered. “She’s completely caved to him all morning. I’ve been thinking that Jack’s just been going through the terrible twos.”

“But his terrible twos have lasted for a really, really long time,” Grant muttered back. “Any thoughts?” he added as they both watched Jack march into the cabin and grab the sippy cup, now filled with chocolate milk, from Connie’s hand.

“Well, um, yeah. Connie. She’s just...um...I don’t know.”

Grant nudged Nora. “Come on honey, say it.”

Nora burst out, “She’s being a total idiot! Oh my god! She’s either way too laid back or does this fake mean thing. She’s completely inconsistent.” A new thought dawned on Nora. “Oh my god! You know, Prilly was right!”

“About what?” Grant said.

“Well, they got into this fight recently,” said Nora, watching Connie out of the corner of her eye moving about the kitchen as she whispered. “Prilly said that Jack was just being terrible and that Connie should get some advice, or something like that. Connie was, of course, completely offended, Prilly, you know, not even having kids, plus she sort of did insult Connie’s son. But Prill was right!”

Grant looked at Nora levelly. “And you find it surprising that Prilly was right? Or surprising that Connie is struggling at something?”

Nora paused. “Well, both, I guess,” she finally said, then adding, “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Nothing.”

“No! Not ‘nothing.’ What?”

Grant said quietly, “Well, it is sort of a paradigm shift for you, Connie being the flake and Prilly being the wise one. And, might I add, you are smiling.”

Nora wiped the smile off her face and sat bolt upright. “I am not. I’m upset. And bothered.”

“And pleased,” Grant stated. “It’s okay. Admit it. Jack’s being an ass; your kids are being great and Connie’s tumbling from her pedestal.”

A wail from the kitchen floated out to them, followed by Viv and Sammy tearing out the door, shouting, “Hey Mom, we’re going to race cars down the hill,” as they took off as though their lives depended on it. Inside, Connie could be heard pleading, “Come on, please, Jack. It’s time for your nap. Come on. I’ll lay down with you? Please, baby.”

Nora nodded, her braids bobbing. “I confess, Mr. Stone. Yes, I am secretly a little pleased that I am...I don’t know...not better...what?”

“Maybe just as capable, maybe more, than your big sister,” Grant suggested. “You three have all grown up and maybe you have something you could actually teach her.”

“And Prilly?”

“Prilly too. She’s gotten pretty smart,” Grant said, slapping her leg and rising.

“She’s always been smart,” Nora called out to him as he strode down the hill to join the kids. Nora turned her head to the sound of the screen door cracking open. Connie leaned out and said, “I’m going to lie down with Jack for awhile. I can’t believe I have to do this. He goes right down for the au pair but when I’m around...oh well. Nora, I don’t remember you having to do this with Viv or Sammy. Did you have trouble with nap times and bed times?”

Nora stared at Connie, automatically saying, “Of course,” even though both Viv and Sammy had learned before the age of six months that naps and bedtime were completely non-negotiable. Grant had called Nora The Sleep General, telling the kids, “We are all just the privates in this army, my children. Go to bed or face the consequences.”

Connie groaned and, leaf still sticking out of her hair and Jack pulling at her shirt, she disappeared back into the house.

Nora sat with her newly acquired knowledge. Connie was fallible, even struggling. Nora had known this intellectually but intellectually knowing something was like the difference between reading about a hurricane and being in one. How does this make me feel, she wondered. Unsettled, definitely, but also something else. She cast about in her mind for the right word, discarding superior, cocky, disappointed and surprised. She was even surprised to realize that she wasn’t surprised. I’ve known this for a while, she thought. I just didn’t let myself think about it. I saw the signs before and I thought I dismissed them but I really didn’t. I tucked this thought away in a corner. It’s been there all the time, biding its time. Connie is not good at this and I am...relieved! That’s it! That’s the word. It’s a relief. I can back off of myself for not being...better, not being

more like her. And I can let her be more...of whatever she is right now. This is new stuff to mull.”

Nora looked down the hill. Viv and Sammy were standing at the front end of an overturned aluminum flat bottom boat that was resting on the lawn, each with a toy car in their hand. Grant was holding an imaginary starting pistol in his hand and counting, “One. Two. Three!” He made the sound of a shot and Viv and Sammy released their cars and all three began cheering and jumping, shrieking at the excitement of the race. Viv’s car tumbled off the boat first, the clear winner. Sammy’s, now running somewhat lopsided, ambled to the finish line.

Nora rose, stretching her arms to the sky. Viv yelled out to her, “Come on down, Mom! I won!” Viv and Sammy began to joyfully bicker as Nora raced down the hill, half skipping, to join in the fun. “Hey guys,” she shouted. “Good race. Can I play?”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Speed Bump

Things will be going along swimmingly, all projects budgeted and factored in, and you may even have allowed for the unexpected job that always crops up.

Then it will hit you. The huge, unforeseen, totally-out-of-the-blue problem. Now this problem will probably come in the form of either water, earth, electrical, wood or concrete...but not always. Perhaps a crazy neighbor could suddenly appear, waving some sort of legal looking paper. Whatever. It's going to happen.

The first order of business is not to panic. That being said, you're going to panic anyway, but at least try to keep the panic down to a couple of hours and make sure not to make any plans, sign any papers or make any phone calls to anyone who isn't an understanding friend.

Restoring Nora/Sergel

Then, proceed ahead as you did when you first decided to get your fixer-upper.

Gather information.

Look at your variables and options.

Call your Indian Guide.

Talk to experts.

Look at your budget.

Then make your plan and proceed. You will probably have to put off other projects and you will certainly curse the day you first bought the place. No matter. You've got to get the leaking water heater, bug infestation, cracking foundation, leaning tree or malfunctioning furnace addressed. Suck it up, curse a blue streak and thank god that you are leading an interesting life.

* * *

I can't feel my calf.

"Grant."

"Nora, how does this tie look with this shirt?"

"Good. Um...Grant..."

"Remember, I'm going to be late tonight. That dinner. Does Sammy have that thing this weekend?"

"No. Yes. I forgot. I'll check the calendar."

I'm scared. Shit. Shit! A weird body thing. How long has my calf been like this? I don't want to feel it again. Maybe it's just a thing that I've never noticed. Maybe my calf has always been numb. No, it's definitely numb. What causes something to be numb? Pressure. Pressure on the nerve. Pressure on the spine. A tumor. A tumor on the spine. Cancer. Cancer of the spine. Brain cancer that's already worked its way down to the spine. I can feel my heart beating. Is it going faster than usual or am I just suddenly aware of it? I'm sweating, I've got palpitations and my stomach feels like...death. Am I dying? Is this the real beginning of the real end? What do I do? Can I ignore this? If I tell Grant, it becomes real.

"Nora. Viv wants to know if she can watch TV."

"Grant. There's this weird thing. I can't feel my calf."

"What calf?"

"Mine. This one. I noticed in the shower when I was shaving my legs. This back part...it's numb. Right here."

"Can you feel that?"

"Yes and no. I feel the pressure of your fingers but, no, it's like...Novocained or something. What do you think it is?"

He looks scared. I wanted him to know what it was. Stupid. If I don't know, he's not going to know. Last time, when I first felt...the lump...we both said, "It's probably nothing."

"Nora, it's probably nothing."

"Yeah. But we said that last time."

“I know. I think...um...wow, okay, you should call, maybe Dr. S.? Or maybe Dr. Gray?” They said to e-mail them with anything. Is anything else numb?”

“Besides the entire front of my torso and new left breast? Um...no. But I don’t really make it a practice to check myself for numb places. Lumps, yeah, I’m hip to that action. I’m Miss Lump Patrol. But I didn’t get the ‘check for numb spots’ bulletin.”

“Okay. Okay...um...I guess we should e-mail. No, we have to e-mail them! Okay, do it this morning. Do it right now!”

Wait. Breathe. Gather thoughts. Fight the panic flooding up.

“Why don’t I call Dr. Mezebish? She’s a regular...not a cancer...I mean, I’ll email Dr. Gray and Dr. L but I’ll call Dr. Mezebish. She’s close, she’s my regular guy.”

Good. This is a good plan. It feels sane. Pragmatic and fast. Mezebish is close and if she can’t see me, I’ll storm Dr. S’s office. Fuck ‘em if I don’t have an appointment. I’ll just camp out there.

Is every slightly little bizarre body thing going to send me into a panic the rest of my life?

* * *

“What’s that?”

Grant was peering up the hill behind the cabin. Sun poured down on his head as he stood in the hot, humid summer air, drops splattering off the soaked trees.

It had just stopped raining. Twenty minutes ago as they sat on the deck staring at the pristine blue sky, distant thunder had announced itself. Within ten minutes, the sky turned

gray and dark; a huge armada of clouds advanced in, taking over the clean, peaceful sky with military authority.

Viv and Sammy had run into the house excitedly shrieking about lightening and tornados and Nora had followed them, feeding them cookies and watching the sky though the window.

But Grant had stood on the deck, feeling as though he was the captain of a ship at sea. Hot, steady wind blew against his body, rattling his sweaty t-shirt, lifting it up and away from his torso. His family safely incased within the concrete walls of the cabin, he felt brushed with danger, excitement and power rolling in with the clouds.

I love this place, he had thought as the first raindrops began hitting his face. Lightening flared and cracked, snapping itself down to the distant woods and then recoiling back to seek the next random target. Grant heard Nora calling him in. "Grant. Come on. Sammy's afraid you're going to be hit by lightening. Me too, for that matter."

Grant had reluctantly retreated into the house, leaving behind the cool, wet excitement for the stuffy, safe heat of the cabin.

But now the storm had passed and surveying the results of the deluge, he spotted something.

A long, new river of small peddles and sandy mud were cutting down the hill, etching a new seam in the midst of the thick growth of bushes and foliage that clung to the hillside. The rainwater had clearly brought part of the gravel road down onto the embankment, the earth and stones cutting a path about halfway down the hill to the cabin.

"Nora," Grant called. "Nora, come look at this!"

A few crayons in hand, Nora shouted behind her as she came to him. “Yes, come out. It’s safe, it’s over. Viv, put on your sandals.” Nora stopped at Grant’s side. “What? What’s up?”

Grant pointed to the hillside.

Nora looked, seeing only bushes and green. “What?” she repeated.

“What?!” Grant cried. “Nora! Look at that mud and stuff. It’s the road starting to wash down the hill. This could be a really big problem. Really big. Like, erosion could sweep the house away.”

“But there have been storms here for decades. Why did this just start? Maybe it’s just how the place works.”

Grant shook his head, frustrated and irritated with her calm demeanor.

“No, honey. Look at it. Look! It’s new. This is all new. This has never happened before. That mud and rock and pebble is the road starting to wash down the hill, coming directly towards our cabin.” By now, Grant was striding up the incline, tearing his way through vines and thicket. He arrived at the road’s edge and scanned the land. His eyes finally came to rest on his neighbor’s new garage.

Grant and Nora’s cabin was one of seven that lay along a small gravel road that had been cut into the side of the shallow valley which cupped the lake in its bottom. Theirs was the fourth in the series of structures, three others resting higher up the road, Roland and Shari’s below them farther down the curved road. The entire circumference of the lake was dotted with either small summer homes or more elaborate year-round residences, totally about forty structures in all. Since all the homes shared the lake, the homeowners were all linked, connected to each other by a shared investment in the

environmental microcosm that they depended upon as their neighborhood. The homeowners meetings were well attended and people were helpful but not too friendly, waving from their boats, nodding as they passed each other on back roads, occasionally chatting over property lines, coffee cups in hand, but never imposing themselves too much on anyone else. Most understood. If people valued a quiet, serene lake, they valued quietness and serenity. Let the noisy, partying jet skiers go to Silver Lake.

Of the three cabins going up the hill from Next to Nora and Grant's cabin, first was an unoccupied summer home, currently listed for far too much. Next was a small wood and cinderblock fishing cabin owned by a man named Ed, who came five weekends a summer, fished his heart out with his son Henry, and then closed it up until next year.

At the top of the rise was Randy's cabin. A stocky, somewhat brusque business owner (a chain of food service supply houses) he had bought a large, A-frame style cottage and had spent the past two years adding on to it. Elaborate turrets and balconies had been slowly sprouting up, most out of large, beautifully cut whole logs. Randy had been doing all the work himself, drilling, sawing and pounding away virtually every weekend, breaking away only to fish at dusk. Everyone around the lake had been watching the improvements with casual interest. Randy wasn't the first to find salvation in a table saw and a fishing pole.

The past month, Randy had taken a break from the main structure and been focusing on the area behind his cabin, on the other side of the road. Needing a place for his pick up truck and personal tractor, he had constructed a three-car garage, adding a gravel side road leading up to it. Considering its size, it was amazingly discreet, tucked up amid the thick trees of the valley wall.

It was at this structure that Grant was now glaring.

He stared at the garage and then he stared at the new road leading to it, the recently dumped and smooth gravel jutting out in a perpendicular angle to the small main road they all shared as the common access road to their homes.

Randy's new garage roof, large and wide enough to accommodate three cars, repelled the rainwater, sending it gushing down the side road, onto the main road to pour and tumble and, due to the nature of the curvature to the incline, eventually deposit all the muck, dirt, twigs and rock onto Grant's and Nora's property.

Grant was livid. "What's this guy thinking? Did he get permits to do this? Look! Look! The garage doesn't even have gutters on it!"

Grant was ashen, striding up and down the road as he examined the damage the storm had caused.

"Grant, shhh," said Nora. "Not so loud. He probably didn't realize. I mean he just finished. Maybe he's going to add gutters. Will that help?" Nora tried to calm Grant, although she knew the look in his eye. This wasn't going to be let go anytime soon.

Grant didn't even bother to look at Nora. "No, Nora. It probably won't help! Look at all this water. Everyone has to take on their own share of water! See all that mud and muck down there? It could wash our place away in two months! Gone. He's changed the complete nature of the valley, sending all his water that used to organically work its way down, evenly balanced between all the properties, all that's going directly to us now!"

Grant barely heard Nora as he struggled back down his own incline, examining the damage. He saw that due to a curve in the road, his property seemed to be the only one

affected. What if this was a stormy summer? What if they got rain every day for the next two weeks?

As his brain concocted scenarios, each more terrible than the last, he continued to stride up and down between the two properties, poking and examining.

This could be a disaster.

* * *

“Nora, can you feel this?”

I used to be happy when doctors could see me right away. Now, I know it means that they’re scared too. Well, maybe not scared. And I did use the “cancer, mastectomy” words when I called for the appointment. Magic, those words are.

“Hi, I just had a mastectomy and now I have this funny thing going on.”

Suddenly, everybody has time for you. Especially if you are chirper. Brave and relaxed in the face of pain and death. I’ve gotta remember that. One benefit of this whole crappy thing. Social leverage with physicians’ receptionists.

“No, Dr. Mezebish. Well, I mean, yes, I feel pressure but no real sensation of skin to skin contact, you know?”

“Hummm. Okay. How’s everything else?”

Hah. Loaded question. I’m coming to accept my lumpy mound. I’m not rigid with fear anymore, except until yesterday. I’m not dead. My tummy still feels like tight girdle pulling an odd, twisted way. I don’t feel sexy yet but I don’t feel not sexy anymore.

“Fine. Everything else is fine.”

“Good. Well Nora, it’s probably a compressed nerve in your back of some sort but considering your recent history; let’s get a MRI. Just to be safe. It’s probably nothing.”

Probably nothing.

I remember the last time a doctor said that to me.

* * *

“Grant, is he home?”

Nora stood at the bottom of the hill watching Grant as he cautiously piled rocks along the edge of the road, attempting to create a small block to redirect the water. Sweating, he merely shook his head.

Nora stared at him for a moment and added, “Can I help?”

Grant shook his head again. “Roland isn’t home either and we’re leaving today. This completely sucks, Nora. I don’t know what we’re gonna do.”

Fear and rage swept up into his chest again, almost strangling his words. He had come to love this place. Already it had crept into his body, giving him a destination, a purpose beyond his work and his family. He had taken the lesson from Nora’s cancer scare, decided to put the importance of today in front of the importance of protecting against tomorrow, and now that was being threatened. Had he made a mistake? What if this place was destroyed? What if his family’s entire fiscal safety net was demolished in a month by nature and his poor planning? I’m over my head, he thought. I can’t do this. What if I can’t fix this? What if I fail at fixing this? He wanted to hurt Randy, tear down that

garage and pour gallons and gallons of water into his fancy new house and see how he liked it.

Nora was standing next to him. “Honey, it’s going to be alright. I know it doesn’t feel that way but it will. We’ll call Roland from home tonight. We’ll get Randy’s number. We will fix this. We will.”

Grant didn’t answer. He just kept constructing his makeshift wall.

* * *

“Miss Stone?”

“Yes? I mean, that’s me. Are you ready for me?”

“Come on in. Have you ever had an MRI before?”

“Oh yes. A few.”

How much do I tell people? I’m still figuring that out. Do I tell the breast cancer thing now? Does she need to know? Probably not.

“Okay, just step up on the stool and then...oh no, Miss Stone. You lie on your back.”

“Oh! Sorry. The other ones, the other MRIs I got, I laid on my stomach. It was for...um...they were for breast cancer. Mammograms of...I mean, those MRIs were of my breast.”

“Oh. Okay, for this one, I’m getting imagery of your back, you’ll be lying on your back. Here, just turn around and step up again. Now, lie back and I’ll adjust things for you.”

At least I know how to put these crappy gowns on so I'm not flashing the world anymore. Shit, she didn't warm the blankets. I love when they warm the blankets. Okay, deep breathe. Look at this like a tiny vacation. I get to lie back and do nothing. What could be better? I'll show them what a sophisticated patient I am. How worldly and easy-going I am, especially for one so young and hip and pretty. It adds an aura of cool. I'm living through all this with élan and even wit.

"Now, Miss Stone, this series will take about forty minutes."

"Not a problem. I'm used to these. Gives me a chance to nap, have a morning away from the kids, do some Vin Diesel imagery."

"Oh, I like him! Usually I suggest Brad Pitt if somebody's nervous."

"Brad's too pretty."

Hip patient banter. I'm cool. I'm relaxed. Just don't think about having to pee.

"Okay, get that picture of Vin in your head. Is that pillow under your knees all right? Here's the button if you need to call me. You want it in your left hand? Okay, I'm going to slide you in. I'll have to set a few things up and then we'll get started. Remember, once we start..."

"I know. 'Don't move.'"

"Exactly. I guess I don't have to tell you that! Ready? Here we go. Same old routine."

This is completely different. This is awful. I'm in a tomb. A narrow, long, medical, solid tomb, slid in all the way past my toes. Why? Why is this so suddenly bad? It wasn't bad like this the other times I...I was on my stomach. That was the variable. I lay, peaceful, resting my head on its side, my arms above my head. I was staring at the inside of my elbow the whole time, just like in bed at home. I didn't really see this...tunnel. I'm

trapped here. Encased. Could I touch the tomb with my tongue? Almost. It's inches away. All the way down past my toes. I'm going to freak. Panic. Head is woozy. Throat is tight and my mouth...that dry, weird thing. I can't breath. There's plenty of air. I can breath. Just breath. Don't gasp. If I gasp, I'll never find my way back to calm. My fingers are getting cold and my body is flying out of control. What if I have to get out? I can't ever do this. Ever. Ever again. Close your eyes, Nora! Fight the panic. Hang on to something. Crawl into your head, in memory. Find a safe scrap.

Connie. Lunch with Connie.

"Nora, try a bite. I'm beefing you up for the MRI thingy tomorrow. BLTs are good for magnetic imagery stuff. The nitrates in the bacon helps light you up for the photo session. And all the chemicals on the lettuce help kill brain cells so you'll just lie there like a mountain, not thinking. And all the mayonnaise gives you practice on denial and not thinking about fat grams. Be a big, solid mountain of denial, fat, mayonnaise and inert body mass. This is guaranteed to eliminate all thought from your head. Wouldn't that be nice? To just shut down the brain for a while, like shutting down a computer."

"What do the tomatoes do?"

"Create the illusion of health. And they help keep the sandwich moist so when you get back from the hospital tomorrow afternoon, you can gorge down the leftovers and they'll still be good. That's why I made you get the Grande size."

Connie. Easy Connie. Sandwich in the fridge. After this. Later. By two o'clock, I'll be eating my sandwich, in my kitchen. This will be over.

"Okay, Miss Stone. Can you hear me?"

"Um...yes."

“You all right?”

“Yes. Are we starting?”

“Yes. In just a few minutes. Remember to lie very still.”

“I know.”

Get going, you slow, incompetent, loser bitch. I could make dinner, three phone calls and switch two loads of laundry in the time it’s taking you to flip a couple of lousy switches.

I am a mountain. I am a solid, inert mass of being. I am a BLT. I am mayonnaise.

“Here we go, Miss Stone. Don’t move.”

If you tell me that again, I’m going to come out and whack you. What do you think I am? Addled? Deaf? Stupid? Stupid like you?

“Not a problem. I’m not moving.”

I am a mountain of mayonnaise. I am in my kitchen. I am a BLT. I am safe.

Click. Click. Click.

The MRI clicking sound. It sounds like something. That click. Like the sound a solid old suitcase makes when it latches. A big suitcase. With those big, old metal latches that snap hard when you push down. Or maybe those latches that you have to flip up and then down on a toolbox? No, the suitcase latch. But the suitcase is the size of a refrigerator and the latch is right next to your ear. Metal latches. Metal handles. Remember when little kids used to get trapped and die in those old style refrigerators...the ones with the old metal handles. Suffocated. No! Stop. Stop that thought. Don’t think about suffocating.

I am a BLT. I am with Connie. Connie. Prilly. Grant.

Grant. Grant is going gray. Dr. Gray. Cancer. Is this cancer? No. Stop the cancer thought.

I am a mountain. I am a solid, calm, unshakable mountain. I am a mountain of Nora. I am a mountain of Mommy for Viv and Sammy. I am calm and safe and when I am not, Grant is.

Click. Click. Click.

More pictures. Pictures of me. Don't move. Moving. Moving pictures. Movies. Vin Diesel. Brad Pitt. No...Vin Diesel.

"Now, don't move for this next series, Miss Stone."

How can I not move even more?

"Okay."

"You're doing great."

"How much longer?"

"About...um...twenties minutes."

I am a mountain. Vin Diesel. BLT. Connie. My kitchen. Viv and Sammy. Grant. Mayonnaise. I am mayonnaise.

* * *

Phone crammed against his ear, Grant leaned against the kitchen counter staring at the refrigerator, unseeing, as he listened to Roland.

“Well, Grant,” Roland said. “I talked to Randy after I looked at the road. You’re right. You’re getting a lot of the wash off. His garage is clearly causing it. Well, the side road leading to the garage. I’m getting some to, but certainly not as much as your place...”

I am trapped in a tunnel and I can’t turn back. What if I can’t fix this?

“...Randy’s not too concerned. He thinks it won’t cause much damage.”

“Well, it’s not happening to his place.”

“Exactly. His take seems to be if you chose to live downhill, you gotta take your lumps.”

“Randy’s going to learn rather quickly that the law isn’t exactly on his side.”

And it wasn’t. Grant had spent the last day and a half researching the property law of Wisconsin. In detail.

“Grant, I think if we just re-grade the road, it’s been needing it for a while anyway, we can...all of us...resolve this,” Roland continued. “Wally and Gert used to chip in and every few years we would have the road graveled and graded. That will probably be all it takes this time. Since it is a common access road for all of us anyway.”

“I’m in. I don’t care. Anything to fix this. So you think that would work? Did you suggest this to Randy?”

“Well, Randy’s content. He’s not taking on any water.”

“But...”

“But Grant, I think if you call him, you can talk him around. All of us chip in. Ed too. I’ve got his number. He won’t be a problem. I’m not too sure about the folks selling.”

“I’ll talk Randy around. He’ll take his fair share of water. Trust me. I’ll talk him around.”

After a few more minutes of chat about the road, the possible cost of re-grading, the weather, fishing and general news, Grant hung up and stared at the white refrigerator, not seeing the school calendars, the note in Nora's scrawl to "Return library books," the family photos held up by magnets in the shape of Hello Kitty, a typewriter and two topped with felt and glitter in the shape of ladybugs (the result of the spring craft assignment in Sammy's class). Thoughts raced through his mind, jumping from the current balance in the checkbook to savings, to gravel, to mud slides, to the cabin, to Nora, to medical insurance, to Viv's growing indication of a need for braces, to work, back to the cabin and then his mind stopped, eyes coming to rest on a photo of Nora, Sammy and Viv, laughing and hugging each other on the couch in his parent's living room.

It's going to be okay, he thought. Nora is alive, the kids are okay and it's going to be okay. I have to tell myself that.

Recently at a dinner party, someone had asked Grant if he had any hobbies, and Nora (two glasses of wine in) had interjecting, "Grant worries. He's so good at it. Been practicing for years. He considered joining the local team but he didn't worry enough about it so it seemed kinda pointless." At the time Grant had laughed along with everyone else, enjoying the gentle jab that made him sound like a responsible man, shouldering the burdens of his family.

But he knew he got stuck in it, the scenarios of possible loss or destruction swirling around in his head and images of all of it descending in a heap upon the innocent, fragile bodies of Viv, Sammy and Nora as he stood helplessly by, failing.

Grant walked over to the photo of the three. It had been taken early last year, before Nora's diagnosis. What holiday was it? Passover maybe?

Grant's body was suddenly pushed away from the photo as Sammy plowed into him.

"Daddy. Mommy said I could have a pudding if I took her one too." Sammy, a faint green marker streak extending from his ear to mid-cheek left over from yesterday, looked up at Grant expectantly.

"I thought you already had desert. Two, if I remember correctly," Grant said, both wanting to envelope Sammy in a cocoon of warmth and protection and also to be left alone so he could snatch the checkbook and savings book from their niche and crunch the numbers again.

Sammy merely looked up at Grant, letting his soft, easy brown eyes and smattering of freckles do their work.

Grant yanked the refrigerator door open and grabbed two chocolate puddings out, handing them to Sammy, said, "It's going to cost you, young man. Cost you big!"

Sammy jumped up and down on tiptoe, suddenly on alert for fun. "What?! What's it gonna cost me, Daddy? What!?"

Grant scooped Sammy up and began tickling him and hugging him at the same time as he wondered, can I be happy and worry simultaneously? Can I do both? Be present here, for my son and for my family and still worry?

The answer eluded him as he hugged Sammy, who continued laughing, shouting with whoops of joy.

* * *

“Mom, it’s just a herniated disc.”

“What? A herniated disc? What’s that? That doesn’t sound good. Oh honey...”

I can’t believe she didn’t understand either! First Connie and now Mom. What the hell? It’s a fabulous, delicious, delectable, a not-cancer herniated disc! I’m alive. I’m not riddled with cancer today. This is a fucking fabulous thing. I love herniated discs! I’m going to throw a herniated disc party. A disc party. We’ll play CDs. It’ll be great!

“Mom, but...um...it’s just a back thing. You see, I was worried that it might be something weird.”

“What else did the doctor say?”

Why does she sound worried? Doesn’t she get it? This is a good thing!

“Mom, this isn’t a bad thing. This is good.”

“Oh, Nora, no! After all your body has been through...what can they do? Could this cause problems?”

“Dr. Mezebish said that we’ll keep an eye on it. I could do physical therapy or go to a chiropractor. Or, if it’s not bothering me, just leave it along and, you know, make sure nothing changes. She said it’s completely okay for me even to go ahead with that reconstruction I’ve got next week. You know. The nipple thing.”

And be happy, Mom! Shit. I thought I was calling you with good news. Party pooper. After all that worry, panic, fretting, two nights of rocking, rolling, disturbed sleep, I’m okay. I’ll call Prilly next. She’ll get it.

* * *

“Roland called,” Nora announced as Grant entered the house, briefcase in hand.

Grant’s heart dropped to his lower sternum and he stood stock still, preparing himself.

“What?”

“It’s fine,” Nora said, pulling a package of hot dogs out of the refrigerator and yelling over her shoulder, “Dinner! Turn off the computer!” She continued to move around the kitchen, rattling off the details. “He said the guys came yesterday and did everything. Did you know Shari fractured her wrist? Anyway, they were at the doctor, getting it checked up on or else he would have called you then. But, anyway, it rained this morning and he said all the water went...”

Grant waited, suspended.

“...where it was supposed to go,” she finished, facing him, with mustard and two hot dog buns in hand. Then she shrugged, muttered a “whew!” and continued on with her preparations.

Just a “whew”? Is she nuts? Does she not understand that this was a disaster of potentially epic proportions just barely diverted?

Grant released from suspension, drilled her with questions. “Where exactly is ‘where’ it went? Did Randy take any water? Was there any more run off on our property? How much rain? How does the gravel lie? Did they grade the road all the way up the hill?”

Grant dropped his briefcase and pulled off his tie, distractedly kissing Viv and Sammy as they settled in at the table.

Nora shrugged. “He said the water went where it was supposed to go. That everybody took some, I guess. It worked. He said it would be a few hundred dollars. He’ll call when the bill comes.”

After all that worry, anxiety and dread, not to mention three nights of absolutely rotten sleep, it’s okay. The cabin is okay. Thank you, God.

I’ll call Roland after dinner. He understands the importance of proper drainage.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Feathering Your Nest

Now that your big projects are firmly under your belt (for the time being) you can begin indulging yourself a little bit. Painting, furnishing, gardening and attending to some of the cosmetic aspects of your retreat will bring satisfaction both visually and emotionally. Also, putting your own personal stamp on the place arranged for your

hobbies and according to your tastes will be a constant source of delight every time you open the door.

* * *

“Here, drink this.”

How do I feel? I don’t feel bad. I think. Wait. Check. Sip the water.

“Good. Nora, here, everything went fine. I’m putting another blanket over you. How do you feel? Do you need anything?”

“Fine. I feel good.”

I’m back in the recovery, pre-op, outpatient room place. No ICU. I’m sitting up. No vomiting. No dark gray place. No waves of retching, blinding pain. And I guess I have a brand spankin’ new nipple. I can sleep again. I’m not in pain.

I came back to this hospital, they put me under, they cut me and I survived. It’s behind me.

I survived.

* * *

Nora made her way down the darkening steps, lugging her purse and a bag of groceries. The late evening light was almost gone and she could see bright, white light spilling from the windows of the cabin as the radio blasted, currently playing “Bad To The Bone.” When she got to the deck she peeked in the side window. Grant stood, t-shirt and jeans splattered with white paint and a professional paint sprayer at his feet, the room

barren except for the couch encased in a cocoon of plastic sheeting and a few lamps scattered around the floor.

All the walls and the now-finished ceiling were white. Clean, bright new white.

Nora kept going, wanting to experience the “reveal” again and pushed in the door, announcing herself with a loud, “Oh my god!”

Grant smiled and threw his arms up. “What do you think? Huh? Amazing!”

Nora echoed, “Amazing!”

And it was. Weeks ago, they both decided that trying to paint with the kids was tempting the fates beyond all reason so Grant wrangled two days off of work and, renting a paint sprayer and leaving Nora and the kids behind, he had tackled the cabin.

Ripping out moldy carpet, taping up light fixtures and moving furniture, he immersed himself in the task. All thoughts of work, money, sickness and the future evaporated. It was just him and the job. It was thrilling. Every coat was satisfying beyond any trial, verdict or savings account balance. Grant as Grant melted away. His existence was pure, eyes and mind tuned to the prize at the end of the job. He was eradicating the brown, taking over the paneling inch by inch, claiming the cabin as their own. He was crazy, stupid happy.

Before he left, he and Nora had also purchased carpet from an end-of-runs warehouse. The rolls of carpet rested upstairs waiting for paint to dry and Nora to arrive. They were going to polish off the carpet laying this weekend, Viv and Sammy ensconced at Maggie’s for the duration.

Nora plopped the groceries and her purse on the plastic covered couch and wandered the room, tentatively touching the walls where it was clearly dry, Grant trailing behind

her pointing things out. “See, that was where the trim doesn’t meet the ceiling but you can hardly tell,” or “Don’t the cabinets look great? You were right about removing the doors and just leaving them open.”

As Nora praised Grant, sharing in the excitement of the transformation, she noticed that a part of her was just a little bit sad. Amidst the rejoicing, she realized that a piece of her was feeling the slightest tug of remorse. In the faintest of ways, Nora regretted losing the brown carcass that had come before because the contrast would never again be this great. Forever on, the cabin would be not a damaged, wounded place in need of healing, but a bright, clean canvas for them to project their lives on to. It was no longer an entity to be wrestled with but was now a space to hold them, providing comfort, fun and safety, but the cabin as a project itself was now gone.

And with it, gone was that lovely solitary focus, that sweet clarity that comes with a massive project that absolutely must be accomplished. The gaping, ugly ceiling and dank heavy paneling were already receding into her mind to become merely another story to be told, one story of dozens about the family, work, school, told during all the springs, summers, autumns and winters to follow.

Chapter Thirty

The End

Owning a fixer-upper will present ongoing challenges, both to your ingenuity and your checkbook. In a way, your work will never be done with it. Truth be told, that's part of the fun! But there will come a point when your major restoration work will be done, all infrastructure repairs complete, walls painted, furniture placed and perhaps even a garden planted. Make a point to celebrate. Buy a bottle of champagne, throw a party or just wander through each

room, not seeing projects to be done but congratulating yourself on what you have accomplished. You have climbed the mountain, crossed the ocean, ridden the rocket ship that is a fixer-upper.

* * *

“So, here’s the deal, Nora. Everything looks great. Now we knew, since we did the mastectomy instead of the lumpectomy, that you wouldn’t have to do radiation. I mean we removed all effected tissue so there would be nothing to radiate. No tissue to aim at, so to speak. Your lymph nodes, the sentinel and all the others we took were completely clean. So no chemotherapy...”

No radiation. No chemotherapy. Okay. This is weird. But everybody takes Tamoxifen.

“...and, as we know, your cancer fell into the twenty percent that are estrogen negative. That kind doesn’t respond to Tamoxifen. Remember how we discussed the option when we got the ER negative and PR negative tests back. You and Grant decided no Tamoxifen.”

Oh yeah. Wait. No. What?

“So, outside of seeing me every three months for a few years and regular, very regular, mammograms on the remaining breast, you’re done.”

Wait. Stop. There has to be more. This isn’t enough. There has to be more. More big, bad stuff. This is it?

“This is it, Dr. S.? That’s all?”

“It’s hard, I know. I’ve had patients do radiation, chemo, lots of it, surgery, everything, and feel the same way you are feeling. Like it’s not enough. Like there’s more to do.”

“Yeah!”

“But Nora, you’re done. This part is finished. The hard part, well, the obvious hard part, is over. There are some great cancer survivor groups all over that can help with this part.”

She’s done. She’s already on to the next patient in the next room. The next 39 year-old with two kids, rigid with fear as she walks them to school pretending to listen to them as she plows through tidal waves of dread.

But now she’s saying I’m past the tidal wave, on dry shore. She’s handing me the piece of paper. Breast Cancer Survivor’s Groups. On pink paper, of course. All too far away anyway. Who would watch the kids?

“Thanks. Thank you for everything, Dr. S. Everything. Now, go do what you do. Go save some lives.”

“Nora, you’ve been such a great patient. Really. Now, make an appointment for your next check-up on your way out. I’ll see you in three months!”

She’s out the door. On to the next room. Behind every door is cancer. Except mine. We think.

But you never know. It could be there, growing, in me. In anybody. And you’ll never feel it, never suspect a thing. Until you feel it. And now I know that. That it could be growing. And I know there’s really nothing to be done. I should have done chemo anyway. And radiation. Should they have taken the other breast too? To be safe?

How do I live with this thought, this knowledge?

I guess...I put on my coat.

Make the appointment.

Get the yellow parking validation sticker.

Walk to my car.

Reverse. Back out. Drive. Pay for parking.

I guess this is how I live with it. I just keep driving.

Why does one of the best hospitals in the entire Midwest have to be in one of the most rotten neighborhoods? I hate coming down here. It always rattles me a little. Shit, I should thank my lucky stars I don't have to live here.

But people do live here. There are people going to work, waiting for the bus. Laughing. Talking. Nobody's shooting anybody. No blood running in the streets. And it's a sunny day.

Maybe this is the right neighborhood for a great hospital to be in. I've got a car so I can drive here but all these people can just walk. Take the bus.

And nobody's safe anyway. I wasn't safe in my clean, pristine subdivision house. I thought I was but I wasn't. I just didn't know it. So now I do. I know. I'm not safe. I could do chemo and radiation and they could take every goddamn tit, organ and scrap of skin they could get their hands on and I still wouldn't be safe, guaranteed: "You are cancer-free, Nora Loy Stone."

Nobody is. Not one of us, not anybody, we're all out here, living in a dicey neighborhood, just trying to raise our kids and live our lives.

So, I'm lucky enough to be able to turn onto this concrete Interstate that will lead me back to...what?

Me. Me, today. Today, my doctor said, "You're fine." But even she doesn't know for sure.

So I guess I just live with it. Look at the sunny sky, raise my kids, love my husband, poke around dusty junk shops, eat good food and...get regular mammograms and check for lumps and be aware and know that I'll never be completely unaware again.

So I've moved, never to go back to the old house. I may revisit the old Nora neighborhood but I've moved permanently into this new one.

It feels odd to feel good about that but I do. I feel happy. Lighter. Let's roll down the window and crank some tunes. What's Grant got in the CD player? Running On Empty. Ha! Hardly...

Yup. This is the perfect neighborhood for a great hospital to be in.

* * *

Nora lay sprawled, face down, on the floor.

"How does it feel?" Grant asked.

They had spent the entire morning and most of the afternoon laying down the rolls of new carpet scraps, first uncoiling and placing the padding and then moving on to cutting and fitting the blue carpet over it. They had sweated, discussed, flirted with the edges of an argument but then danced away, finally arriving at completion around 3:30 in the afternoon. Not wanting to lose steam, they had pressed onwards, moving furniture back,

re-hanging curtains and gently peeled painter's tape off outlets, light fixtures and wall plates, around 5:45 pausing for a brief, hurried snack of luncheon meat, cheese and slightly stale trail mix.

It was now almost 7:20. The last of the furniture had been moved. The final book had been placed on the bookshelf. Even Viv's collection of Barbie dolls had been lined up in a row in the now-officially-christened "Toy Corner."

They were done. Nora declared, "Finis! Basta! Comprenez..um...I'm pooped," and collapsed face down onto the carpet.

"So, how does it feel?" Grant repeated, working his fingers into the bottom of the plastic bag for the final remnants of trail mix. He was reclined on the brown couch, now artfully draped with a large bedspread with an African inspired kuba cloth graphic on it.

She pressed her forehead into the blue pile. "Good. Soft. I'm so glad we got the padding. It feels so good, in fact, that I might never get up."

Grant tipped his head back and poured the final dried banana and broken pecan pieces into his mouth, simultaneously mumbling, "Well, then, dinner? I could hook you up to an IV but I'm hungry for real food. Let's order a Christiano's pizza. They said they deliver. Even to cabins. Thank god."

"Done. You call," Nora muttered into the rug.

Grant nudged her prone body with his toe. "Oh no, my dear, you're not getting off that easy. I'll call but I only get reception down on the pier. You gotta come with me. Moral support."

With the slightly stiff-legged walk of the soon-to-be-aching, they wandered down the hill towards the lake, casually bickering about toppings. Standing on the pier, tiny insects

hovering just above the water's surface, Grant dialed, squinting to make out the numbers in the fading light as Nora looked up at the cloudless sky. The flat purple promised a starry night.

Grant snapped the phone closed. "Done. Forty-five minutes. It's amazing. You just give your fire number, they grunt and go, 'Yeah. Know it.' If I didn't love this place yet, that would have sold me."

Nora was staring up the hill at the cabin. The light shining out the windows seemed to be growing stronger and warmer as the walls of the valley blocked the last of the sun's rays.

"Grant?"

"Huh?" He was watching a bat shoot across the sky, barreling around in preparation for the nighttime buffet of bugs.

"We did it. Look. We did it." She pointed up the hill.

The cabin stood, squat, dark and low to the ground, concrete deck jutting out from it like a symmetrical yet organic edifice. The old-growth trees towered over it like protective parents, hovering, just barely not touching, like a mother taking a first born two-year-old to the park. The incline leading up to the house was already beginning to show a path worn into the grass by repeated trips down and back to the water.

Nora nudged Grant. "It looks happy."

"The cabin? How can a cabin look happy?"

"I don't know. But it just does, doesn't it?"

Grant nodded. She was right. “Yeah. All right,” Grant said. “Yes, it does look happy. I have a crazy hunch it will be even happier once it gets some onion, garlic, tomato, extra cheese pizza into it.”

“You got my favorite? No green peppers?”

“No green peppers.”

“You are...the Stone of Gibraltar. It’s a celebration. The cabin is beyond happy. It’s ecstatic. Good, thin crust pizza, no green peppers, great owners and a new life.”

“I must admit, I had my doubts at times but yeah, honey, it fixed up real good.”

And the first stars of the night began to peek out as they made their way back up the hill.

Chapter Thirty-One

The Beginning

While things may look different than you perhaps first envisioned, the words "pristine" and "perfect" belonging to the young, newly constructed and tastefully boring, your strength of character, elbow grease, blood, sweat, toil, tears and hard cash have built the edifice that stands before you. Since fixing up your fixer-upper has probably changed you as much as you have changed it, you may want to

consider that perhaps this place may be more “you”, more real and true than any other that you would have designed from scratch. Because, regardless what we all have heard, no one starts with a clean slate. So all the scars, nicks, slightly crooked corners and missing fragments, let them not stand as an example of failure or weakness, but as a statement of your unique, quirky, totally individual personality. Open the door and walk in. Enjoy. Party. Live.

After all, it’s your house.

* * *

“Hey Nora, what are you looking at?”

“Me.”

“And...”

“Well, while I still look a little like the centerfold for Frankenstein girlie magazine, I’d say I’m definitely a contender for the Playmonster of the Year.”

“You look great, Nora.”

I do look...good. I look like me. A version of me. Since the other...survivor breast...got boosted, I look all...symmetrical and lifted up a little. The nipple is almost...like a nipple. Even I can see that it is pretty darn good. So this is me now. Me with scars but the silhouette is definitely Nora. Dr. Gray said the scarring will fade someday. Someday is a nice word. I may be alive to see the scars fade. Maybe not. But

maybe yes. I've improved my chances. I have to live with the scars but the bargain part of the deal is that I get to live.

"Nora, the sight of my wife, standing here all naked and all, is giving me ideas."

Sex. He wants me. He wants both of these breasts in his hands. It's the middle of the day but that's sort of romantic. Fun even. I'm awake, which is always good when it comes to sex.

"Where are the kids?"

"Watching Scooby Doo Meets...somebody bad."

"Grant, it would be taking quite a chance."

"It's a new episode."

"You're a big, fat liar."

"But they're really, really, really into it."

"No. You're really, really, really into it."

"Is that wrong?"

"No. Okay. Let's be reckless, wild chance-takers. But lock the bedroom door."

* * *

The early morning sun was just reaching the surface of the lake. Shafts of light broken by the clusters of trees on the eastern bank glanced across the water at random points and penetrated the morning mist rising off the water. One fisherman alone in a canoe sat silent and motionless along the far southern shore.

"Daddy, what are you doing?"

Grant turned around and looked at Sammy, still in pajamas, cream cheese smeared around his mouth from his favorite breakfast, a bagel with cream cheese with a chocolate milk chaser.

Grant had woken up early, which didn't surprise him. Last night after they had put the kids to bed, he and Nora had watched the stars emerge one by one in the nighttime sky. Just barely a sliver, the new moon had danced behind the trees, peeking through the darkening branches. It was then, after the obligatory half hour of waiting to insure that both Viv and Sammy were actually, truly asleep, that Nora proposed that she and Grant retire to their own bed for "activities" as she put it.

They had crept up the stairs and into their bedroom where, after wedging a chair under the door (the lock having been broken long ago) Grant had been treated to a striptease performed in the semi-darkness, complete with getting to catch both grass-stained cargo pants and a faded gray sports bra.

So Grant, usually the one to stay up late, had fallen asleep an hour earlier than usual. Waking up before five-thirty, he had laid in bed for a time, staring out the glass doors and listening to the heavy, rhythmic breathing of Nora. Sleep not returning, he had finally crawled from bed and ventured downstairs to make coffee and not long afterwards been joined by Sammy.

After toasting and preparing Sammy's bagel, and munching on a handful of grapes grabbed from the refrigerator, Grant had wandered out to the deck to watch the day arrive.

And now Sammy stood in the doorway, watching Grant.

Cup of coffee in his hand hot against his fingertips, Grant gestured with the other hand for Sammy to come over to him. Sammy's warm body snuggled up against him and Grant's eyes returned to the lake. Physical satisfactions penetrated into Grant, from the rich coffee in his mouth, the contact of Sammy's body against his and the vision of one sunrise, one moment in time truly seen, not slept through or skipped over. He felt a rush of easy relaxation that was almost painful in its pleasure.

"Daddy, what are you doing?" Sammy repeated, after wiping the cream cheese on his face off onto Grant's jeans.

Grant looked down at his son. Grant's eyes stared back up at him. Sammy had Nora's freckles, haphazard hair and easy persistence that wore down all barriers, great and small, that stood in the way of happiness.

But he had Grant's eyes.

For a moment, Grant felt he was in one of those strange, sci-fi films that Nora loved. A surrealist time-travel fantasy where he got to meet his own future. Or was he meeting his past? Sammy was part Grant but mostly not. Part of me will be walking forward with Sammy, Grant thought. He will be here someday, at this place, watching another sunrise, while his wife sleeps upstairs. Eventually both Nora and I will be gone but Viv and Sammy will remain. My eyes and Sammy's thoughts. Images of Poppie, Marty, Nora and his own face danced across the smiling face looking up at him as Grant wondered, will Sammy be looking down at his own son, as he thinks of me, Nora and Marty?

"Daddy?" Sammy repeated again, beginning to grow vexed.

"We are going to survey the Stone estate," Grant declared. "Get your shoes on. And maybe some clothes too. The men of the Stone family are going to examine all that is

ours, the hill, the woods, the roads and the castle that belong in our realm. Interlopers beware! Watch out world! The Stone men are coming!”

Sammy bounced and ran into the house, screen door banging loudly behind him. Grant could hear shoes being hurled and Sammy grunting as he put on yesterday’s clothes, left on the floor during last night’s bedtime preparations. Grant drained the final sip from his coffee cup as Sammy reappeared, disheveled and ready to go.

“Come on, Daddy,” Sammy said. “Show me the world.”

Hand in hand, they started off. Grant began with the obvious landmarks of boundaries of cabin, lake and woods but, invigorated by Sammy’s close attention, he continued on, detailing how to how to watch for erosion, the hows and whys of grading a road and pointing out the importance of shoreline maintenance. The inspection culminated at the point of the cabin where foundation met earth, where father and son intently examined the outer concrete walls for cracks or shifting.

Sammy listened hard, Grant’s steady demeanor communicating that this was a lesson to be learned. Still not quite sure exactly what the lesson was, Sammy walked in the footsteps Grant left behind him in the wet morning grass. His sneakers drenched in dew, he reveled in the complete joy of having Daddy all to himself.

Knowing Mommy and Viv lay safe just yards away; Sammy practiced manhood as he learned the joys of septic tank fields.

* * *

The crack of the screen door slapping shut broke through the last wisps of sleep that Nora had been clinging to. She had been first awakened by the shifting of the bed as Grant had rolled off but had managed to work her way back to sleep.

But now she was awake. She listened to the murmur of voices as she rolled onto her back, noting that since her mouth was dry, pungent and acrid she most likely had been snoring. Clamping her lips together, moistening her mouth, she snuggled back into the nest of blankets, curious as to whether she could tempt sleep back a second time. After a few moments, she took physical and mental inventory, noting that she was both keenly aware of the birds chattering and that her body was yearning to stretch. She also noted a tiny but steady desire for both coffee and food growing somewhere in her lower torso. She was clearly, definitely awake.

Damn.

But I don't have to get up, she thought. I even went to the bathroom around four o'clock so I don't even have to pee. I can just lie here. It sounds like Grant and Sammy are fine and Viv, well, she isn't here or there so she's still asleep. I can stall that little food craving. So I'll just enjoy not getting up. I won't even think about the day. No organizing yet. No planning.

* * *

So what should I think about? We could all do some swimming, then maybe I could do a little antiquing...maybe even roast marshmallows after dinner and then...

Wait. No. I'm not going to plan or organize the day. I'm going to enjoy my bed. Let my thoughts drift. Enjoy my cabin. Enjoy this easy, floaty, morning-after-making-love feeling. The striptease. I can't believe I did a striptease. Grant certainly was a receptive audience. It felt a little silly. But it felt a little fun too.

"Mom."

Viv. Warm. Crumpled. Rumped, sleepy Viv. Holding Sparkle, that faded beige stuffed kitten, crawling into my bed, snuggling into my body with the ease of water running downhill. She smells of pajamas, little girl hair, sweet child sweat and musty cabin sheets. God, I've got to wash Sparkle someday. What if she falls apart? Maybe I could just sponge her off. Or maybe the gentle cycle in the washer? Then let her air-dry.

Stop thinking about doing laundry!

Stretch. That will feel good.

Body, arching, aching, back crack, oozing back into curling with Viv as she rides the wave of me.

"Mom?"

"What?"

"What's your favorite thing about the cabin?"

This. Gentle. Big. Tiny. Rush of different. A big, good, dramatic, exciting, serene place that is beyond errands and suburbs. Beyond schedules and laundry. Not about paychecks and medical insurance. Medical. Doctors. Cancer. I haven't thought about cancer since I woke up. I stretched, felt the hitch and snag in my torso but I didn't think of cancer. Not cutting. Not death. Not dying. No fear or dread. I just stretched my body.

My scarred and healed body in this quirky, fixed-up cabin. How do I tell all this to Viv?

Cop out. Stall.

“I don’t know, Viv. You go first.”

She has Grant’s hair, Grant’s chin, that odd little tilt of the head but she has my eyes.
Nora eyes. Viv eyes.

“My favorite thing is...we all get to hang out. Dad takes us fishing. Going to that antique place with you. I like the ice cream place, the Blue Banana Café, a lot. Beating Sammy at checkers.”

“Hey, that’s more than one.”

“You can have a bunch too, Mom.”

“Well, thank you. I like...um...my favorite thing is...wow. Did you know that when I was growing up, me and Aunt Connie and Aunt Prilly, we had a family cabin too?”

She looks like Prilly right now, with that slightly wicked grin.

“Yeah, Mom, you told me a bunch of times. So did Aunt Prilly and Aunt Con.”

“Yeah? What did they say?”

“That it was really fun. Really great. That Grandma was there all the time and Grandpa, your dad that I never knew, he was there a lot and you all had fun. Aunt Prilly told one story about eating too many raspberries and vomiting on Aunt Connie’s feet at the beach and Aunt Con said how all you guys would listen to 55s on the patio thing. What are 55s again? She said they were sort of like CDs.”

“45s. They were...like a CD with one song. No, two songs. One on each side.”

“Did your dad, did Grandpa, die up there? While you were up there?”

Dad. Death. Is she worried about me dying? But she doesn't look worried. She just looks curious. Kids and fear. It dances in and out in the oddest places.

"Nope. He died in town. I mean..."

I don't want to say at the office. Then she'll worry when every time Grant goes to work. How do I do this? How do I protect my child from death? From fear?

"Viv, he had a heart attack and died. It was really, really sad but we got okay."

"Are you and Dad going to die?"

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. The goddamn "are you gonna die" question. I hate this.

"Well, yeah, eventually everybody dies. But not until Dad and I are really, really old are we going to kick the bucket. Way after you're grown up. Not for a long time, Viv honey."

"But your dad, Grandpa, he died when you weren't grown up. And you, you had that thing. You were sick. Sort of pretty sick."

"Yeah, I was sick but I'm better now. Don't I seem better?"

"Yeah."

How do I say this? What do I say? What do I believe? In all of this, from all of this, what do I believe? And how do I put it in a seven-year-old appropriate-sized package?

"Viv, sometimes, yeah, people die when they're younger but you just can't think about it all the time. You can't worry about it. Everybody thinks about it. Sometimes it's good to think about it, to make sure that you're living your life the way you really want too. Like my dad, he loved our family cabin. It was a really happy place for him. For all of us. I can think about my dad and Grandma and Connie and Prilly as having great times, together. And I think that that's my favorite thing about this cabin, our cabin

today. I get to have a happy time with you right now, I get to remember the happy times I had with my family when I was your age, and I get to give you happy times to remember when you get to be a grown up.”

Is this too much? Does she get it?

“I get it, Mom. Is that why no TV here? ‘Cuz Grandma and your dad...Grandpa...didn’t have one up there at your place?”

“Yup.”

“It’s still weird.”

“Bad weird?”

“No. It’s okay. Did you know Sammy beat me at checkers yesterday?”

“Nope. Sorry about that. The you-losing part.”

“Mom, it was kind of cool. It was even more fun, sort of. Are we doing any projects today?”

“I haven’t thought about it.”

And I haven’t! I did it. I didn’t plan.

“Maybe we could go to that antique place. Daddy says that you are the best fixer-upper around. The best decorator and antiquer. He said the only thing he is worried about is when you’re done with this place.”

“Oh, is that what he said?”

“Yup.”

She’s grinning. That sneaky, funny, wicked Prilly grin. Tattling on Dad. What fun.

“Well, he doesn’t have to worry. I’m toying with a few ideas. Besides just raising you guys and making sure Dad stays out of trouble, I was think of writing a book about fixing

up creaky, leaky, run-down old cabins. You think that would be a good idea? You want to help me?”

“A book? Like in the library? Cool. Yeah.”

“And I think Dad will like the idea too. Way cheaper than buying another cabin.”

“Can we go downstairs now? I’m hungry.”

Oh my god. She has my dad’s eyes. Why did I never see that before? When she squinted just then, she was looking out this window with Dad’s eyes. That must mean...I’ve got my dad’s eyes. Dad, me and Viv all in a row.

“Mom? Aren’t you hungry? And we can’t let the guys have all the fun.”

“Yes. You are right about that. I am hungry and we certainly cannot let the guys have all the fun. Let’s go.”

The End

Epilogue

Yes, I am a cancer survivor, so, nope; I didn't have to do much research for this book (Mostly it was along the lines of calling my husband at work and asking, "Honey, did I get the MRI before or after the plastic surgery appointment?")

One of the more unexpected results of being a relatively young cancer survivor is that I sort of became the go-to-gal for the friend-of-a-friend-with-cancer. Since coming out on the other end of the process, I now occasionally get calls along the lines of, "Hi,

Madelyn? Hey. Um...I just got this call from my friend and she's got...um...cancer. What should I do...or maybe she could call you? Can I give her your number?"

I kept promising myself to jot down a few notes to keep handy, suggestions of what helped me.

Well, long story short...me being a writer and all...when I finally got around to writing up those notes...they became a long story (See previous 275 pages)

But sometimes you just don't have the time to read a 275-page book. I fully expect you to eventually make time, mind you, but right now I'll kick out a few truncated thoughts on the entire cancer-diagnosis-experience-process thing that you are going through. I'll cover the basics for both the Friend-With-A-Friend and the Oh-Shit-I've-Got-Cancer gal.

Some Personal Notes and Observations

Part I

For the Friend-With-A-Friend-With-Cancer

Cancer is contagious.

It's true. When a woman gets breast cancer, everyone around her gets breast cancer too.

Eventually pretty much everybody is going to get the call. The shaky voice of your best friend on the other end of the line, a voice mail message left by your sister, the slightly breathless and quavering cell call as you drive to work.

Your friend/mother/sister/cousin has cancer.

You want to help. That's what you do for each other. You'll do anything. Your mind desperately casts about for the words to fix it. You're going to be the friend that sticks there, sensitive and understanding, always saying the right thing, always doing the right thing as your friend fights for her life.

But what the hell is "the right thing"?

We all know the platitudes. "Be there for her." "Be supportive." "Be understanding." But right now your friend has cancer and you want to do something! You want to say the right thing but you're scared of saying the wrong thing. You don't want to intrude but you want to be there for her.

If your chest feels locked with pain and fear, how must she feel? What about her husband? Her kids? Her job? You'd take it all on for her if it would help, but all you are left with is the hard plastic phone receiver in your hand or the slightly pale but strangely calm woman across the table from you.

I'm here to help. At forty-one years old, married with two young children, no known family history of breast cancer, and an all-clear mammogram from eleven months earlier, I was the best friend, the sister, daughter, wife, mother, who was diagnosed with breast cancer. After a few weeks packed with tests, scans, experts, consultations and second opinions, I got a mastectomy and also reconstruction of my left breast on my forty-second birthday.

But enough about me because this is about you. It is. When this happens to your friend, it also happens to you. Suddenly the world looks different. It is different. You could become one of those people who have a best friend that dies of cancer.

But she can't die. You won't let her. You have to do something. You'll do anything, if somebody would just tell you what the hell something or anything was!

Okay, to hell with "Be Supportive," and "Just Be There For Your Friend." Here are some things you actually can do. Because this is what you want. You want to know what to DO!

The How-to-Help-Your-Friend-with-Cancer List

1. Okay, you've gotta say something. What do you say? You've just heard and all these thoughts are buzzing in your head as you desperately cast about for the right thing to say. And you are going to say, "It's going to be fine." Don't. Don't say it. Because it's already not fine. Your friend has already been burned by a doctor telling her "It's going to be fine," or, "Statistically, the odds are minute." Well, statistics aren't being scheduled for surgery, she is. She's already lost the statistical battle. The closest, best response I come up with was, "I believe that you are strong enough to do this." Her vision of herself, her life, under her control, is gone. She is haphazardly creating a new picture of herself. Nothing is certain anymore but you can be certain in your belief in her. Resist telling her about another person you know who had this or that type of cancer and they are fine now. This conversation is a way of reassuring yourself, not her. You are telling yourself, "Hey, since other people survive cancer, she will too. It's not such a big deal." But the problem is, unless that other person is an

exact genetic replica of your friend, having lived side-by-side with her their entire lives, that other person's experience is meaningless. There are thousands of different variables when it comes to cancer. Your friend has lost one statistical battle and she now she knows it's possible. She may lose more. She may be in the-whatever percentage that dies. Hearing about another woman that beat the odds does nothing to make her feel better. She knows she might die. She left "fine" and "good odds" back in the doctor's office, perhaps never to be seen again.

2. Listen. And don't cry unless she does. Crying makes it about you and it's not. It's about her. You aren't the one facing death. She is. Just listen. Hear. Don't freak out on her. Freak out later at home.
3. Follow her lead. You may want to call, talk, make contact. Hear her voice. Because you love her and already a small part of you misses her. Another tiny part of you will want her to say something to make you feel better. Because this cancer has become a part of your day. You are visualizing how you would react at her funeral. Or maybe you are afraid to call, nervous about talking because you won't want to say the "wrong" thing. Follow her lead on this. For me, every phone call made me relive the trauma so David, my husband, did the "phone work" (He loves talking on the phone anyway. It was the perfect division of labor) I wanted e-mails. I loved e-mails. I could read them when I wanted, in whatever state I was. 4:00 am, when I couldn't sleep, I could open up loving, caring, supportive e-mails. If you can, find out your friend's preference and make contact

that way. So ask her. Should I call? Do you want e-mails? How can I be there for you?

4. She may have to talk about dying. You won't want her to say those words. The desire to wave them away will be powerful. But she has to talk. The power of positive thinking only works if you first kick the stuffing out of denial. She must face this. Every motion is imbued with this blanket of foreboding. In the car, in the shower, as she eats lunch and changes diapers, this haze of heavy knowledge follows her and this is her life right now. Thinking about death. The only way to shrink these thoughts down to manageable size is to walk through them with eyes wide open. And, since we are women, we talk about what we see.
5. Don't expect constant crisis. Some days, she will be fine. It is impossible to spend every day sobbing or screaming or weak with fear. Again, follow her lead. Every call cannot be a therapy session talking about the meaning of life and how much you love her. She may be sobbing one minute and then browsing a J. Jill catalogue the next. Both moments are honest. So, she may want to talk about chemotherapy or she may want to talk about sweater sets. Roll with it.
6. Every test will lead to another test. Results from one only seem to spawn further scans and scopes and biopsies. She will be getting used to this uncertainty. So must you.
7. Understand that sometimes you are going to say the "wrong" thing. Life is messy. Don't worry too much about it. The gal with the cancer probably

doesn't even know what the "wrong" thing is until she hears some innocuous comment that triggers rage, fear or grief. It's a messy time with no safe, comfortable rules to follow to guarantee that everybody does everything "right." Life is a contact sport and your friend is getting her clock cleaned. I tend to avoid sports analogies but this one works. She's the quarterback in her life and suddenly she's gotten sacked from behind by a 350-pound linebacker name Carcinoma.

8. You'll probably want to get names of good doctors or phone numbers of survivors she could call. They could help her, you think. You're thinking, I can't help her, but they could. This is fine but understand that she may or may not use the information. She and her husband or partner is negotiating a labyrinth of doctors, tests and life-altering choices. Getting names may help her but it is also something for you to do. Understand if she doesn't use them. Don't hound her, asking, "Did you call that guy my stylist told me about?"
9. Do get a list of names and phone numbers from her of people she loves and trusts. Armed with that and her post-surgical return home date, schedule meals. One dinner to be delivered every other night to the house. Everything must be in disposable, don't-need-to-be-returned Tupperware or containers. Do what you can to talk your friend into this. Because people want to help, this is something they can do and these meals will be a godsend. Trust me on this.

10. The first thing you will probably say or write will be, “If there is anything I can do to help, call me. Day or night.” This is a tricky one because you mean it but you’re not saying it right. Get specific. If she has children, pets or relatives she has to care for when she is well, don’t just say, “Let me know if you need help with Fido/ the kids/Grandma.” Don’t make her call you up and negotiate a time when you can come over, etc. It will make her feel like a burden. You call her or send her times and dates like, “I’m keeping from 5 to 9 pm open every night next week for any driving or babysitting you need. E-mail or call me by this Friday if you need any or all nights.” This way, she knows when and for how long you are available. Easy. If you don’t hear from her by Friday, your week is open. If you do, you’ve truly helped her in the easiest, most stress-free way you could. Well done.
11. Cards, letters and flowers are great! I loved them. A big, fat, scary thing is happening and this is a way of saying, “I know, I see it.”
12. Ask if it appropriate to put her and her family in your prayers or on a prayer list. It filled me with peace knowing that people were praying for my family and me. Faced with an overwhelming onslaught of decisions, information, doctors, and emotions leaves very little free time for prayer. Pray for her. She’s busy. Personally, knowing that others were sending me and my children waves of strength and love seemed to be making up for the strength and energy I was using just to find my way through the cancer maze.

13. Post-surgery, if you can afford to send a maid service to the house (perhaps a few friends chipping in), do it. Scrubbing the tub and cleaning the oven drop way down the priority list when one gets cancer but having a clean house can give a lovely sense of order to a life gone crazy.
14. Once or twice I had a friend call or drop by with a really great piece of gossip. Sometimes, you just want to not talk about cancer.
15. Finally, know that, yes, this is happening to you too. Breast cancer has found its way into your life, your thoughts and your heart. You are changed. Black and white statistics on the page of a newspaper have become your friend. The gal who held your head over the toilet as you regretted that last cocktail, held your hand through the divorce and kicked your ass at Scrabble is in the fight of her life. It will get bloody. She may win. She may lose. You can't throw the punches for her but at least she's got you in her corner.

A cancer diagnosis is a highly personal experience so all advice here was appropriate for me...but understand that it may be completely wrong for your friend. But it's a place to start. Cancer is a messy, unpredictable, soul-shaking ride and there are no rules. Follow your heart and listen to your friend. There's the breaks.

Part II.

For The-Gal-With Cancer

1. Okay, I'll say it for you because nobody else will. Yup, you might die. And, yes, it totally and completely sucks. Big time sucks. Nobody wants to talk about it or bring it up. So I will let it rip. Yes, this could kill you. This could be it for you. Dead. What does dead mean anyway? This may be a time to spend a little bit of time thinking about it. Or, maybe not. Your call. Whatever your preference, you've landed yourself one, big soul changing event. This will be a messy, uncomfortable, wild time and there is absolutely no way to do everything "right." You will inconvenience others. You will be emotionally unpredictable and perhaps unreliable and you and everybody else will have to get over it. The focus is to survive. Surviving while being pretty or strong or helpful or whatever your previous baggage is (and we've all got it) is secondary.
2. Nobody else will be comfortable saying the follow words either. Cancer. Death. Dying. Tumor. The best you'll probably get is "lump," "you getting sick," things possibly turning out "badly," things not going "your way," and my personal favorite, "your...um...thing." Try to be compassionate. People love you and do not want to upset you or make things any more difficult. You will find that when you get breast cancer, everyone around you gets it too. It feels like it is happening to them. They are no longer safe in their worlds because they've had a friend struck by life-lightening. They will also be processing this (If it grows really irritating, try this fun game. Talk about your breast cancer with a

guy...not your husband...referring to the misbehaving tit often and watch him figure out how not to look at your chest during the entire conversation. A perverse game, yes. But sometimes perverse humor's all a gal's got)

3. Accept help. I repeat, ACCEPT HELP. Don't turn it away. "Oh, we'll be fine," and "I'll call you if I need anything," is unrealistic, poor prioritizing and almost selfish (see: Chapter Twenty-Five). Don't let the crazy relative who always snoops and criticizes into your home but let those whom you trust carry a few burdens. The point is to live, not to show how strong, actualized and independent you are.
4. If you are responsible for the care of other, write a detailed, chronological list of everything you do, when and how you do it (this may take a few days to hammer out). Others will scoff... "I've been taking care of kids for thirty years and I haven't lost one yet!" or "Honey, how hard can it be to feed and walk a dog? Don't worry." Do it anyway.

These comments do not help because who the heck are they going to be calling when Tommy won't eat because his sandwich is cut the wrong way or they can't find Kitty? Make the damn list. Make copies. It will give you peace of mind (plus evidence if they screw stuff up!)

5. When you want to think about death, or can't stop the thoughts from coming, let 'em come. Think about dying. You know you want to. It

won't kill you to think about it. Then release the thoughts. You've got a lot to do. Don't worry. They'll come back.

6. If you've got kids, I found informing teachers helpful. I wanted an extra set of eyes gathering information on how my kids were handling everything. I told the teachers how we explained everything to each child, the language we used, plus important dates (surgeries, etc.).
7. Blame. Wow, toughie. Who to blame? Ancestors? God? Yourself? All of the above? I found that people want somebody or something to blame. I wasn't that interested personally. Big deal. It was done. If you have a desire yourself (or feel that others secretly blame you), be careful. You can do everything "right" and still get cancer. I was a forty-one year old who worked out, nursed my kids, ate right, had no known family history of breast cancer and got regular mammograms. I even had a mammogram eleven months before I got my cancer diagnosis. In eleven months my tumor went from undetectable to the size of a large gumball. Go figure. Even if you had a big fat cancerous lump for years and never did a damn thing about it until now, well, it's called denial, my girlfriend. Anyone who hasn't done the denial dance once or twice in their lives can step right up and say, "I blame you for having breast cancer." Then you can whack 'em with your test results. Should knock them out for a few days.
8. If you can, get a second opinion.

9. Don't get any lumps of unknown make-up cut out until you know definitively what they are made up of.
10. Oh yeah. Buy lots of thank you cards. People will be great and you're going to get a lot of flowers and gifts.

So, those are my thoughts and suggestions. Oh, plus, I wrote this book too. A great deal of my cancer experience went into this. I skipped one or two good stories but I had to save something for all those author-in-person bookstore appearances. Come. Stare at my left tit. I won't mind.