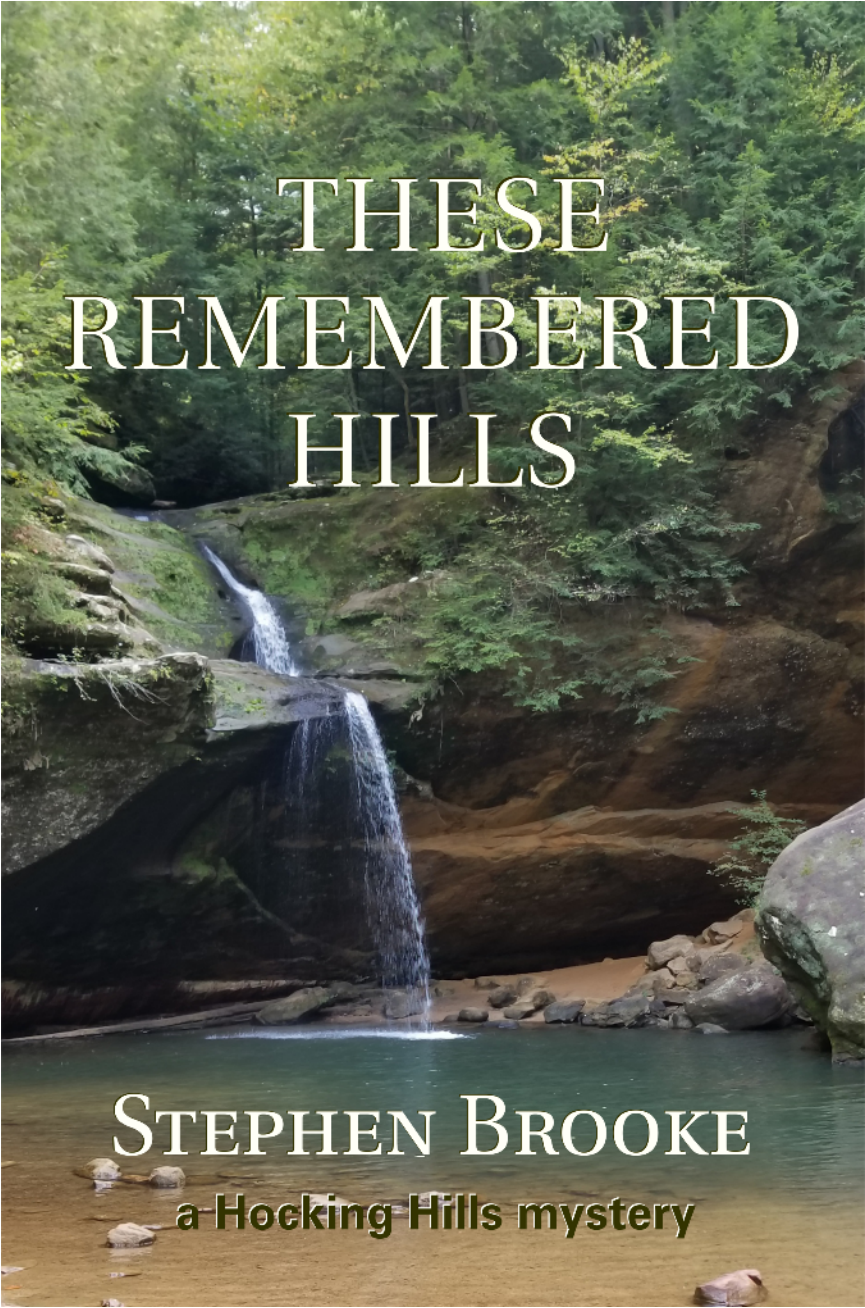




THESE REMEMBERED HILLS

STEPHEN BROOKE

a Hocking Hills mystery

THESE REMEMBERED HILLS



STEPHEN BROOKE

Arachis Press 2022

These Remembered Hills

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ISBN 978-1-937745-85-1

Arachis Press

4803 Peanut Road

Graceville, FL 32440

<http://arachispress.com>

These Hills

These hills are older than you and I.
They're older than our fathers and mothers
and their fathers and mothers and the tribes
that left their broken pots and arrowheads

in the caves and in the fields.
I've found them there in new-plowed soil
by the creek, like the grains of corn
left from long-ago failed harvests.

These hills were young when the world was young.
Their sandstone skeleton hardened an aeon
before the dinosaurs crossed over them.
They were mountains, then, sky-touched

heights, sheer cliffs of golden sunlight.
That sun's vigor we'll not know again.
These hills are old now, soft rounded remnants
crumbling into gentle oblivion.

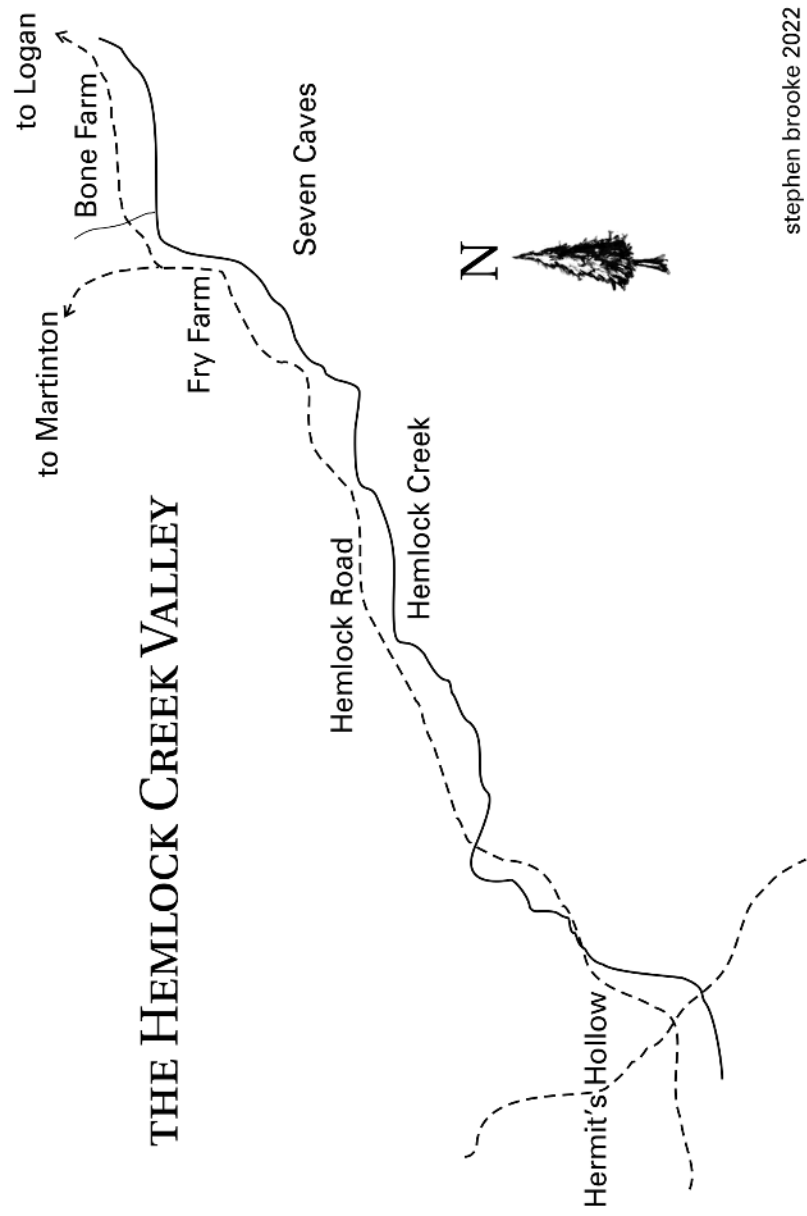
These forest-covered hills of home,
these hills of abandoned orchard and field,
of secluded hollow and cave,
dream the dreams of ages past

and you and I and our sons and daughters
will be as the arrowheads in the field.

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This poem appears in the collection *Fields of Summer*

THE HEMLOCK CREEK VALLEY



ONE

WHY DOES THE HOUSE LOOK so small? wondered Jim. No, wait, that's the neighbors' place. Jim remembered it could be seen from up here. He swept right with the binoculars, adjusted the focus. There. The field of vision was flattened so it seemed to stand right by the road, rather than being halfway up the hill.

Jim was all the way up the hill, or nearly, atop the low sandstone cliffs that rose just below the crest. He could have sidled out closer to the edge but felt comfortable where he sat. Vultures nested on those cliff faces, this time of year. They'd surely appreciate it if he fell over and broke his neck.

Beyond the house and the unpaved road lay the creek. That he couldn't see; both trees and cliffs hid its dark stream. Beyond rose other ridges, bounding the far side of the valley. Summer's verdure cloaked them, though the hemlocks would remain green year around. Somewhere up there, further to the right, lay the seven caves. Some counted them as six but not Jim. It didn't matter much to him, one way or the other.

Beyond the ridges, other valleys, other farms. The Pells' apple orchards lay somewhere over there. It was a long way around by road. Jim remembered the Pell boy coming over to visit his sister, when she was a teen. Ken Pell.

He lowered the binoculars and sat, legs crossed, looking out over the valley, the farm, the woods, for a couple minutes. Maybe he would cross over the ridge behind him and come back to the road through the narrow, tree-filled hollow there. He hadn't walked that way since he was a kid.

No, no—that would only be putting off too many things. Jim rose to his feet with care. He knew how slippery this litter of fallen leaves could be. Was that how Connie had died?

To his right, a steep dirt path, rarely used, barely visible, led back to the farmhouse. He could only glimpse it now and again through the trees. Some of the slate on the roof might need repair, he could see, though there had been no evidence of leakage inside.

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If he was to sell the place there would be fixing up to do. Emerging from the woods, he crossed the sloping, weed-filled garden plot behind the house. Too late to do anything with it? Too late to do anything with this place, maybe. Yes, he should just sell it and go back to Columbus. He could return to Ohio State, take up college where he left it four years ago.

Paint. At least he could paint the weathered board siding. That would do a lot for the appearance, help a sale. White, it should be. Jim went around the south side of the house, between the kitchen porch and the shed. It should be painted too or maybe torn down. And a new outhouse wouldn't be a bad idea.

But not indoor plumbing. He wasn't about to spend that much money, money he didn't have anyway. This simple two-story farm house was much older than Jim. It had been his grandfather's, built sometime in the last century. He passed on to the front of the place, where a steep hillside fell to the road. Tall, mature trees shaded either side of the entry porch, a maple, an apple. Someone was pulling in. They wouldn't attempt driving up, would they? No, the vehicle had stopped.

A two-colored sedan. Black and white? Or maybe dark green. It was hard to tell at this distance. Police of some sort, anyway, probably a deputy. The young man descended the series of sandstone slabs set into the hillside as a stairway of sorts. His visitor stepped out of his vehicle and checked the license plate on Jim's Jeep. Then he peered upward at him, shading his eyes with his left hand. He wore the gray uniform of the sheriff's office.

"Good morning, sir," spoke the deputy as soon as Jim was close enough, keeping his voice flat and businesslike. He would have no idea why a stranger was poking around this place.

"Good morning to you," Jim replied. He didn't extend a hand nor step too close; that might not be wise at the moment. "I'm Jim Fry."

The lawman noticeably relaxed. "Ah, Connie's brother. You were in the service, right?" He held out his own hand. "Will Dundee."

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They shook. "Navy," said Jim. "Just out two weeks ago."

"My condolences on the loss of your sister. Jim—" He frowned slightly. "I thought she said your name was Randy."

"James Randall Fry. Everyone called me Randy when I was a kid but I go by Jim now. You knew Connie." It was a statement, not a question.

The deputy might have tensed slightly. His voice again lost emotion. "I did. I patrol here. We have some of her belongings still at the station. You'll want to pick those up."

Jim might just as soon have left them there. "I'll do that. Her car is in storage in Logan, too."

"Yes. Do you, ah, need a ride into town?"

"Johnny Bone is going to drive me in to pick it up." He nodded somewhat in the direction of the neighbors' farm and smiled slightly. "When he can find the time."

"Johnny works hard," said the deputy. "Maybe I can find the time myself to stop by and talk some more in a day or two." The radio in his sedan crackled. "Sounds like I have to go right now though." With that he got behind the wheel, said something into the mike, and u-turned his way back onto the road. Dust rose behind him; he drove quickly but did not turn on his flashing light.

A traffic accident? A loose cow? Jim had no idea what sort of emergencies might require Deputy Dundee's attention. He looked up toward the house. Might as well get a room cleaned up and move his stuff in, he decided. He could stay through the summer. After that? Things would go as they would go.

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Johnny's Ford truck must be at least ten years old. Probably not as much as fifteen. Johnny Bone himself was only two years older than Jim but he looked as worn as his vehicle.

Jim had known the Bones since he was a kid. They were Catholics and attended Saint John's in Logan. German Catholics—the name had originally been spelled Bohn. There were many families of German Catholic origin in the area, families that had

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settled here straight from the old country. His own Catholic heritage came from elsewhere. German Swiss, and craftsmen, not farmers. His mother's people.

"Here comes Abby," said his friend. "We can go."

A light green sedan was pulling into the driveway. Jim was unsure of the make. "You don't need to talk to her?" asked Jim.

"She knows where we're going." He waved to his wife as she got out of her vehicle and the men climbed into his. The truck had been red, originally. It was faded now, brownish, as were the patches of rust.

"Just like to know she's here before taking off," Johnny continued. "'Cause of Mama."

Jim very much understood that. Bone must need to leave his mother alone in the house though when he worked around the farm. Hardship had kept Johnny out of the draft—his father dead, his mother an invalid with him as her sole support.

The truck pulled out onto the gravel, turning left toward Logan. "Can you get your mother to church?" asked Jim.

"Sometimes. It's not easy getting Mama in and out of the car." A pause. Jim wasn't sure the farmer was going to say anything more. "Father Ed comes out to give her the sacraments a couple times a month."

"Let me know if you need any help, okay? I'm going to be around for at least a couple months."

Johnny sent a quick glance his way. "Not gonna stay, then?"

"I should go back to college, come fall. In Columbus."

Johnny considered this for a while. his eyes on the road ahead. "Athens is closer," he said. "You could drive back and forth."

"Ohio University?" Jim hadn't really thought about it.

"Yep. One of your sister's friends teaches there. Used to come visit her." There was another fairly lengthy pause. "Name was, um, Rick. S'posed to be an artist but I never saw him paint nothing."

"Not Rick Myers?"

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"That's the one. He's, um, a pansy, isn't he?"

"I suppose so." It wasn't a word Jim would have used but he wasn't about to admonish his friend. At least not while he was doing him a favor. Of course, he knew about Rick's homosexuality. He'd know as a boy, when Myers was part of the crowd his sister had run with in Columbus. It wasn't a big deal to him, one way or the other.

It was maybe ten miles into Logan. There was more than one route one could take but they all came to about the same distance. Jim would have to re-familiarize himself with the roads here. If he stayed long enough for it to matter.

"You know where this place is?" he asked Johnny.

"Yep."

Jim only nodded. He'd talked to the manager or owner or whoever he was on the phone yesterday. The phone at the Bones' house. If he stayed, he should get one at his place. His place. It really was his place now. That was still sinking in. The man had promised to be open and have the car ready to roll when he arrived. Bone's truck turned right onto Highway Thirty-three and followed it into downtown Logan. It didn't look much different from how he remembered last seeing it, more than four years ago. Jim hadn't been into town since; his route from Norfolk to Columbus and then from Columbus to the farm had not passed through Logan.

"Over there," said Johnny. He pulled across the road and into a parking lot in front of a garage and filling station. The station was open. The garage was not. "I'll wait and see if it's running before taking off."

"Thanks." Johnny remained behind the wheel, lighting up a cigarette. Jim was glad he had waited till he got out. It was still plenty light out, though going on six. He went on into the station.

"Hi," he said to the man behind the counter, as soon as he finished ringing up a sale. "I'm Jim Fry. You should have a car for me here."

"The Plymouth wagon, right? Ted said someone would come

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by.” He pawed through some invoices on the desk behind him. “Hmm. Already paid. Okay, sir. Let’s go get it.” He took two sets of keys off a board and started out the door.

Jim’s lawyer had taken care of the storage fees. He’d taken care of everything after Connie’s death, with Jim overseas. He followed the station attendant to a fenced lot, the gate hanging open. There sat his late sister’s red and white Plymouth station wagon. None too new. A Fifty-eight? Maybe a Fifty-seven. He’d look at the papers sometime. Before trying to sell it, anyway.

“Ted had it running this afternoon,” the man told him, handing him the keys. He grinned. “It’s in better shape than when it arrived here.”

Jim could imagine. “Thank you,” he said, sliding behind the wheel. It started right up. A six? It sounded like a six. He’d have to look at that sometime too! Automatic transmission, with the controls on the dash. It went into drive with a bit of a jolt and he eased the big wagon out of the lot, giving Johnny a wave. They could both be home before dark. Johnny to his wife and mother. Jim to an empty house.

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Maybe he should have stopped somewhere in Logan for a meal. Jim did not feel ambitious to fix any supper for himself. The stove had no fuel nor was he about to chop wood for it. He did have a little kerosene burner if he wanted to heat something from a can.

And the power had been turned on. That had been arranged before he arrived. Most of the light bulbs worked. That was another item for his shopping list. He found a can of peaches and opened it, walking around the house eating the slices from the can. Most of Connie’s belongings had simply been left locked in the house. Her clothes were here. All the kitchen items, the linens. No one had broken in, though it had been some eight months. There were a couple beds but Jim intended to use his sleeping bag, as he had the previous night. Everything should be thoroughly cleaned inside before he truly moved in. Starting with the refrigerator.

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He drained the last of the juice from the can, standing on the front porch, peering out into the night. Thick. He needed some water to rinse it down. Instead, he sat down on the edge of the porch. A distant whip-poor-will called. A little late in the season for them to be very vocal, wasn't it? A mosquito buzzed near. Definitely not too late for them.

He might sleep out here anyway. It was stuffy in the old house and it was full of faint odd odors. A light breeze whispered through the maple leaves above him. Jim had climbed all the way to the top of that big tree when he was a kid. The view was no better than from an upstairs window and definitely not as good as from the cliffs.

Connie had lived here alone from the time of her divorce until she passed. Almost the entire time Jim had been in the service. He knew next to nothing of her life during that time. She was not a letter writer.

He rose. Best he sack out indoors. The parlor floor, like last night. Tomorrow, he would drive back into Logan, get whatever of Connie's valuables the sheriff's office still held, make a start on stocking up on food and other necessities. There would be a lot of work for him this summer.

TWO

"I'D HAVE THOUGHT YOU'D SENT all this along to my lawyer by now," Jim told the clerk.

"Mister Folkes said you were coming so there was no point," she replied. "He said to just hold onto it for you. Honestly, I think he just didn't want to be bothered." The stout middle-aged woman led him down the hallway. She wore something that resembled a uniform, or was meant to, a dark gray—some might have called it black—skirt paired with a white blouse and gray facings. "In here."

It was a small storage room, wooden shelves, a florescent fixture above. No carpet covered the plank floor. The clerk went right to the correct box and lifted it down. It was small to begin with and not even half-full. "There's not much to it. You can check it against the list we gave you and sign if everything is there."

He opened it up. Some jewelry and nick-knacks. A couple notebooks, a folder of papers, some more official-looking than others. "We'll send you a check for the cash that's listed there," she said. "To the attorney's office?"

"No, I'm moving into the place here, at least for a while. This address," Jim said, pointing to the one on the list she had given him. The box still stood out front, though all mail had been forwarded elsewhere for the better part of a year. That was something else he needed to change. He signed the list and handed it to her.

She was right about Daniel Folkes, of course. He was the family attorney and had taken on the arrangements for Connie mostly as a favor to the last member of the family. If Jim chose to live down here in Hocking County, he should find a local lawyer. He hoped there would be no need for one anytime soon.

Jim carried the box into the sunshine and closed it in a locker in the back of his Jeep. It wouldn't do to have those papers flying out of the open vehicle. He'd look them over when he got back to the farm. There was probably nothing of any importance. Folkes

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had taken care of the deeds and titles and wills and all those sorts of things. It had been surprising that his sister had made out a will.

Not that it made any difference when it came to the farm. They had co-owned it since their parents' death.

Now? There were plenty enough errands to run. Or why not drive down to Athens and check out the university? Jim still expected to return to OSU but it wouldn't hurt to look at the other school. He headed south on Thirty-three. It should take less than half an hour to get there on this beautiful June morning. A great day for a drive, no matter where he was going.

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The art department at Ohio University was founded in 1892, according to the material Jim was looking over. It was apparently well-regarded, especially as a design school. He hadn't thought that far ahead; he only knew he wanted to study art. He'd decided that while he was in the navy.

If he intended to enroll here—or anywhere—he should make a decision quickly. It was getting late to seek admission. In that respect, Ohio State might be better, as he already had two years there. You're just assuming that, Jim told himself. It's no guarantee of anything. He wandered down one of the halls in the art department, taking sidelong looks into the mostly empty studios. A barely perceptible scent of linseed oil and turpentine lingered. Classes were out for now but there was undoubtedly a summer semester coming. That didn't matter to him. He was looking to enter in the fall.

"Randy! Randy Fry!"

He knew who it was before turning around. "Rick. How are you?" The man had apparently stepped out of one of the classrooms he had passed.

"I'm fabulous! What in the world are you doing here?"

Richard Myers was tall and thin. Taller and thinner than Jim, anyway. He wore a rather disreputable looking mustache. That was something new to Jim but then he hadn't seen his sister's

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friend in over four years. He shook the offered hand. "I'm thinking of enrolling."

"As an art major?" Jim only nodded.

"Fabulous! Oh, I am overusing that word again." He sobered suddenly. "I'm sorry about Connie. I'd, ah, like to talk to you about it sometime. I *did* mean to look you up when you got back to the states."

"I've only been here two weeks. And only two days at the farm. How about we have lunch? It's time for it."

"Great idea, Randy. I know a fabu-um, excellent little diner in walking distance."

"Then let's walk. Need to get anything? Okay." They started back the direction from which he had come. "By the way, I go by Jim now. Have ever since I went into the service." He wondered how many others he would need to explain this to.

"Jim. Very well, you shall be Jim to me henceforth and Randy shall be dead and buried." The note of levity faded from his voice. Perhaps he remembered someone else dead and buried. Perhaps he just thought it a serious subject. "We should all be whoever we want to be. I sign my paintings 'Milton' these days. My own middle name."

"I don't think I ever heard it before," admitted Jim.

"Richard Milton Myers. Why my exceedingly Jewish parents chose to name me for a Puritan poet, I've never understood."

"Maybe they realized they'd just lost paradise."

This brought only a congenial *humph* from Rick.

The diner was indeed within easy walking distance, and not even half-full. Jim suspected it would be much more crowded when school was in session. The two took a booth where he could see out the tall front windows, though there was little to view other than passing traffic.

"So you're an instructor here?" asked Jim. He doubted his acquaintance had any form of the title 'professor' before his name.

"That I am. I enrolled here right out of high school and never

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left. The only difference is I have an MFA now. Is that what you're aiming for?"

Jim wondered briefly how Rick avoided the military. It was not important enough a thought to remain long with him. "I assumed I'd go for my bachelor's and take things from there. Haven't really thought it through yet." He looked at the sandwich on his plate for a moment but didn't pick it up. "I just know I want to study art. I wasn't ready to commit to that four years ago. To be honest, I didn't know what I wanted so I went and joined the navy instead."

Rick seemed to ponder that a moment. "I thought your parents' death was the reason for dropping out."

"It played a role," Jim admitted. Not just the impact of the sudden loss but also the financial situation. He took a bite of the grilled cheese, chewed and swallowed while coming to his decision. "Okay, I'm going to enroll here. I'll need to sign up right away, I know. Arrange the tuition too. The government will be paying for a lot of it."

"That's handy," observed Myers.

"It is. Being able to live at the farm will help my financial situation also."

Rick nodded slowly. "You mind if I come over and visit sometime? To paint. And I'd like to talk about Connie."

"Anytime. I suspect I'm going to be very busy the next couple weeks. Are you teaching this summer?"

"No. I have to spend part of the summer with the national guard." One corner of his mouth lifted slightly into a smile. "They made me into a pilot since I already knew how to fly."

It was likely his father's connections had something to do with it. "I'm hoping I'll never have to be in the air again," stated Jim. "I've flown, um, been flown, across the Atlantic too many times." Jim looked out the window for a while. Athens. He'd be seeing a lot more of it. He might well be sitting here looking at this view from time to time. "I'll have to buy some art supplies."

"I know a dealer," said Rick. He wrote an address on a page

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torn from his pocket notebook, and passed it over. "Tell him Milton sent you."

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It came to about the same distance whether he traveled Highway Thirty-three through Logan or drove the back way on Fifty-six. The latter took a little longer. It was also a more scenic drive. He hadn't seen any of this country in years. There were state parks he could visit if he had the time and inclination, not that they had anything on the place where he would be living.

Yes, he'd be living here. That was decided. He'd signed stuff at Ohio University and was assured he'd have no problem with admittance. He could thank Rick Myers for helping to shepherd him through it.

He'd had misgivings about inviting Rick. In truth, he didn't know him well. He'd been Connie's friend, and five or six years older than Jim. He pulled his Jeep up in front of the house, beside the station wagon. What was he going to do with it? It might be a better choice for commuting to Athens in winter weather. It would be cold in the open Jeep. The wagon would be better for transporting canvases and such, as well. He unlocked the box with Connie's belongings and walked up the hill with it under his arm. The grass needed mowing. Another chore. He remembered someone, when he was very young, mowing this yard with a scythe. Had it been his father?

It was unlikely he would try to do that himself. It was a skill he didn't have. To be sure, it could be learned like any other. He'd be learning lots of new skills, and leaving behind those that had served him in the navy. Most of them. They'd been worth learning. He had no regrets about his decision to join, four years ago, to leave college after his sophomore year.

It was true he had left OSU as much because he had no clear view of his future as anything else. He had considered art. All his life he had considered it but never committed. His mother had been an artist when she was young, working at *The Columbus*

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Dispatch. That was where she met his father. She'd left her art career behind when they married.

Knowing of that commercial art career had been more of a deterrent than anything else. Jim couldn't see doing that sort of thing with his life. He'd seen the newspaper's art department. His father had been an editor at the *Dispatch*.

Until that winter day, over four years ago now, when a tractor-trailer had plowed into their car. Everything changed.

But weren't things always changing? They had changed today. They would change tomorrow.

THREE

OLD RECEIPTS. PAY STUBS FROM where Connie had worked. For the school board, apparently. Jim hadn't known that. He knew very little of her life here. An unfilled prescription. He couldn't make out what it was for. He returned the manila folder to the box. Nothing that needed to be kept but he'd hang onto it for now.

The jewelry seemed largely without value. He wondered what had become of Connie's wedding and engagement rings. Maybe she had sold them. The notebooks he put aside. He could look at them later. A delivery truck had just pulled in down in front. It blew its horn once.

Jim rose from his seat on the edge of the front porch. He'd expected the truck. It was a day to stick around the place, as visitors came and went. One of them was inside right now, hooking up his phone. He descended to greet the new arrival.

Two men were gazing up the precipitous drive. "Do you want to try to drive it up the hill?" he asked.

"It looks mighty steep," one said. The other nodded his agreement with this judgment.

"I've seen a cement mixer climb it," Jim informed him. "If it could, anything should be able to."

The driver looked up the hill again. "It's only a couple crates. Not enough to make it worthwhile."

He was right, though it was three crates, not two. Jim hadn't sent much over from England. No need to bring any of the furniture; the navy would have sent it as far as Norfolk but then he would have had to get it here. More trouble than it was worth. He hadn't even been sure where he was going to end up when he returned to the States.

"That one I can open right here and now," Jim said, pointing toward a large flat box they were sliding out. "If I have the right tools around this place." He probably did. He hadn't had time to check.

"No problem," said one of the delivery men. "We can get it

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right open for you, sir.” He jumped up into the back of the van and jumped back down, a pry-bar in hand. A minute later the lid was off and Jim’s bicycle was revealed.

“Pashley?” asked the driver, who had let his assistant do the work. “Never heard of that kind of bike.”

“An English bike,” Jim said, lifting it out. “I had it sent over with my things when I left the navy.” He’d ridden it quite a bit while stationed across the ocean. He would miss the countryside there but he had new countryside now.

“Fine lookin’ machine,” opined the assistant. “Let me get the other boxes down.”

Neither was particularly large or heavy. Each man took one onto his shoulder. “Just leave them on the porch,” Jim told them. He was more interested in checking over his bicycle. For a moment, he didn’t notice the two-toned sedan that had pulled in beside the truck.

Deputy Dundee leaned out of its window. “Looks like you’re really moving in, Jim.”

“I am and I plan to stay,” he responded. “Say, do I need a license for this thing?” He was standing there holding the Pashley upright so the deputy knew what he meant.

“I reckon that depends on how far you plan to go with it. Not around here.”

“It was required when I was a kid in Columbus. Or Whitehall, actually. I don’t intend to ride that far.” Not that he couldn’t. Maybe not on this three-speed.

The pair of delivery men were descending the hill. “Riley and Jackson. I run into them occasionally,” said Dundee. “They’re good boys.”

Jim considered telling the deputy they didn’t like being called ‘boys’ but decided there would be no point. He did decide he should tip the duo and gave each a couple dollars, along with his thanks.

Dundee sat in his squad car and watched them drive off, in the direction of Logan. “I’d better be on my way too,” he said. “I

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do intend to stop by longer sometime, Jim.” He followed in the wake of the delivery van but turned left just a little down the road, between his place and the Bones’. It was a steep unpaved way that led through largely empty hill country till it met with a major road further up. Relatively major.

Jim didn’t think he’d want to tackle that hilly road on the bicycle. Nothing that steep lay on the route between the farm and Logan. It mostly followed valleys.

Moreover, it was paved further along. He climbed his own hill back to the house, pushing the bike, to find the man from the phone company packing up. “You’re all set, Mister Fry,” he said. “Here’s a copy of the order for you. Your number is on it. On the phone too.”

“Thanks.” Now if only he had someone to call.

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One crate had held mostly artwork. Some of it his own, most of it paintings and drawings he had bought overseas. Some not-particularly-important papers were in with them, a few books.

The other? His bicycle pump. That he needed right now. His radio. As Jim remembered it, reception was generally not that good here though on occasion they had picked up the Opry. Reception was even worse for television. He had no intention of investing in one. A desk lamp he was fond of, not that he couldn’t have picked up one just as good here.

The rest of his clothes. He had arrived with a suitcase and some camping equipment he had picked up in Columbus. It was time to begin washing stuff, his own, all the linens here. Well, those were his own too, now. A washing machine sat on the back porch, a tub-style unit, but the place had no running water. He would have to haul buckets from the spring. Apparently Connie had done just that. There was a well but no pump. Maybe she hadn’t been able to afford one.

Jim could afford one but perhaps he didn’t really need it. He would decide later. If he wanted a bath he could go jump in the creek. It was cold, even in midsummer; it would be impossible in

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winter, freezing over along much of its length. How long had it been since he plunged into the deep pool, right down in front of the house? He had some trunks in this box, didn't he? Not that he couldn't skinny-dip. It wouldn't be the first time he'd done that here.

He wouldn't have been at all surprised if Connie had. Not in the old days of course, not when the family came to stay for weekends or vacations. That was all they used it for. His parents made no serious attempt to farm the land that had been his grandfather's, only renting out a field occasionally and letting someone else cultivate a crop. Jim had always been intrigued by the tractors plowing and tilling. Maybe he'd see about planting something next year.

Not that he couldn't put in a garden still this year. He was unlikely to be ambitious enough, especially if he had to do it all with a shovel. Maybe he should look at a rototiller. Shoot, if he was serious about farming he could get a tractor of his own. No, it would be simpler to hire Johnny Bone to come over with his. He could probably use the money. Jim was unlikely to ever have much acreage under tillage. The big field south of the house and across the road, along the creek. That was decent bottom land. He remembered seeking arrowheads there among the freshly-plowed rows. Some always turned up.

Connie had kept a collection of them at one time. Was it somewhere around the house still? He'd walk down there and look over the field tomorrow, he decided. Yes, and cross over the creek--there was a good shallow place to do it--and go up into the woods, up to the caves. Up to where his sister had died. Jim knew he'd have to visit the spot sooner or later.

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Jim poured another bucket of water into the washer. It wasn't too far from the spring. Certainly better than hauling water all the way up from the creek! Though if the machine hadn't been here, he might have carried his laundry down to the stream and washed it there by hand.

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The machine sat on poured concrete. There had been a wooden floor out here once, rotted away and replaced. The clothesline looked a bit rotted too. Another thing to add to his shopping list.

On one side of the rear porch, stairs descended to a small cellar, walled with sandstone blocks. It was a mess down there and he felt no pressing need to change that. He had nothing to store in its damp depths. There was an entire empty house, after all. Connie had slept upstairs, in the northern bedroom, but he doubted he would move up there. The parlor would be cozier in winter. He might as well just stay there, bring one of the beds down.

He was still spending the nights in—or on—his sleeping bag for now. He picked up his two buckets after turning on the washer. It would be necessary to fill a rinse tub now. A small spring bubbled up a little to the northwest of the house, back where an orchard of sorts had once stood. A couple hoary, twisted apple trees remained. Jim had cleaned this spring out as one of his first chores on settling in and now clear water stood in a little basin, grass and briers overhanging it. There wasn't really enough outflow to serve the needs of more than one person.

Down the road, toward the Bone place and at the edge of his own property, was a better spring but it was much further to carry water back. It should be cleaned out too. Someday. And down by the barn—which was in none too good shape—was a cistern. Jim had decided to ignore it for now. It might have served a barn full of animals but he had no need for it. As far as the well went, he might or might not hook up a pump eventually. Its deep shaft had been sunk just to the north of the house. At this time, more buckets would be a better investment than a pump.

This was hot work. It would be better not to do it in the middle of the day. He poured two more bucketfuls into the tub. Enough. He switched off the machine. His laundry could sit and soak for awhile, and he'd get back to it later.

Jim had sometimes complained about the cool damp weather

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in Britain but he wouldn't mind some of it right now. And summer was just beginning! He slipped on his trunks and grabbed a towel before heading out the front door and down the hill, untied tennis shoes on his bare feet.

Directly across the road, past the mailbox—nothing had shown up in it yet—cliffs fell to gravel and sand, with the creek flowing beyond. As Hemlock Creek it appeared on maps but Jim had never heard anyone actually call it that. Those cliffs grew ever lower to the south, disappearing down by the untilled bottom land, where the valley broadened. Jim turned toward his left. The ground receded gently before him.

The cliffs lowered some and at one point a low slab of sandstone jutted out over the water. It was easy to climb down to it, either to jump into the creek or lower oneself to the gravel. Further down, the creek flowed through a series of gravel bars and shadowed shallows, beneath the overhanging branches of the hemlocks. This deep pool was sunny at this time of day; it had been dug out by the stream's flow where cliffs rose abruptly on either side, after a sharp bend in the creek's course. Jim knew of no deeper spot in the Hemlock's course, at least not on the farm.

The pool's greatest depth lay just below the bend, where the sudden shift in direction had scoured a deep hole. He could safely jump from the higher cliff there, had he an inclination, but that didn't appeal to Jim at the moment. He just wanted to get into the water and cool down. He should do this every day. Yes, he should, all summer.

After the last four years it was good to be on his own, to do what he wanted when he wanted. Let worries and duties come some other day. He dove into the dark water.

Damn, it was cold!

FOUR

JIM GLANCED AT THE NOTEBOOKS. He hadn't had a chance to look them over yet. This evening maybe. There were reminders of Connie all over this house. He hadn't minded her living here while he was in the service, though he was half-owner of the farm. Nor would he have thought of asking for any money from the place. He had expected to get some money out of it on his return. With his sister gone, selling the farm seemed the thing to do. No longer. At least not right away.

Out the back he went, through the kitchen and the south door. Lock it? Best, probably, and hide a key out here somewhere. He didn't want to carry one with him into the woods. Far above the house loomed the cliffs, shining golden and ruddy in the morning light. The sun had just come over the ridge opposite. Jim would be heading for that ridge today.

First the outhouse! It had not been used in some time so all that had been necessary was to broom a bit inside it. Get the spiders out. He wouldn't want a black widow nipping his butt. The pit below had lots of room yet. Eventually, it would have to be emptied or the house relocated. It would take a long time with only Jim using it. Toilet paper. Add toilet paper to the shopping list.

He might do just as well to use a bucket and dump it into a compost heap. He would start one of those. When he had time. Choose a spot, Jim told himself as he took a seat on the plywood bench. A couple minutes later he was outside again and headed down the hill.

The caves—they set this farm apart from all the other farms across the Hocking Hills. Valueless, in and of themselves. The land around them was too steep to grow anything but trees. Jim valued them, as had his father. As had the native Americans who used them over thousands of years. He strode southward along the unpaved county road. There were plenty of places he could cross Hemlock Creek but this would give him the most direct path upward. Folks had forded the stream here for centuries.

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An outcropping rose to his right, at the edge of the road. A man-made outcropping from when the road-builders had cut through here. How long ago? Jim was not at all sure. The way had surely run further east once, through the field, closer to the water. He should turn and cut across that field just beyond this point.

He had heard tales that a trading post once rose there, beside the creek. The debris that turned up in the field from time to time certainly gave some evidence of the story's truth. Jim was willing to accept it, though with a sprinkling of the proverbial salt. A lot of those bits of history, arrow heads, pipe stems, could have been deposited here by floodwater. He pushed through the field. The weeds were already rising high. Queen Anne's Lace. That he recognized. It would be some time before most of it bloomed. The Gill-over-the-ground that wound through the taller plants was in bloom, small purple flowers underfoot. Conifers had sprouted up too, here and there, most no more than ankle high or so. They should all be plowed under next year, before they got too big, or at least mowed.

Or just let this bottom land return to nature, as all the other fields on the property had. Here was the spot to cross. A log to walk over had been placed here once but that was long since gone. The floods of spring would have carried it away. Jim slipped off his boots and socks, and waded across the shallow gravelly bottom.

He sat on the other bank, drying his feet. Only the subdued sound of the flowing water intruded on the silence beneath the great hemlocks. Little else could grow in their dense shade. Here the hemlocks still thrived; in the previous century forests of them had been cut down for the tannin in their bark. To be sure, other trees grew on the hills, pines and oaks and maples. Here and there, one might find a beech or a walnut. Scrubby sumac grew in more open areas and there were thickets of hazelnut if one knew where to look. He'd have to do some of that looking, come fall. It was long since Jim had gathered nuts.

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Jim slid his boots on and began his ascent. There was something of a horseshoe valley or hollow ahead, with the seven—or six—caves arranged about it in three tiers, most on the south and east sides. He needed to bear a little to his left here, he remembered, as he tramped across the leaf litter. The conifers had largely given way to deciduous forest up here. A familiar cleft boulder ahead. He could squeeze through the narrow passage to approach the first cave. Instead he went to his right, up and around it. From up there he could survey the valley, though the caves themselves were not visible, for the most part.

A little stream bubbled across his path and over the cliff's edge. He knew the fall it made below, would have passed it if he continued along the lower route. There was a sheer drop here. Was this where Connie had fallen? He should know more about what had happened. Maybe Deputy Dundee could tell him something. He might be able to tell him where his sister's body was discovered.

Jim had to admit to himself that it would be easy enough to slip on this damp litter and go over a cliff. His own father had told him a story of nearly doing so as a boy, his bottom lodging in a depression at the very lip of the precipice, his legs dangling over. How much of that was exaggeration Jim was uncertain nor was he likely to judge it. It made a good story.

He could follow along this way and come back down elsewhere in the hollow, though none of those paths were as good or as safe. He could continue past the caves and over the ridge. Jim was not sure how far it was to someone else's land that direction nor how many ridges and valleys one would cross to reach the next country road. He had never made the attempt to find out. Maybe someday. He surveyed the scene below him for another minute and turned back.

Soon he was standing at the mouth of what he had always thought of as the 'first' cave. It was the deepest of them all and had two entrances, side by side, with yards of sandstone separating them. The other caves were more along the lines of

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depressions in the cliffs. Large and impressive depressions but not all that deep. Sand covered the floor but Jim knew rock lay beneath it. One could live in a cave like this. Maybe even live comfortably. He went in only a short way and came back out the other opening. He looked down the tree-covered hillside sloping sharply below. That was the shortest way to get up here but not necessarily the quickest. To his right lay a somewhat narrow ledge he could follow to the next cave, past the trickling water fall. Why not go look at it while he was here?

There was plenty of time.

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Jim had come back by another path, straight down the steep slope before the caves, and crossing the creek at the north end of the field. There was much poison ivy growing along the low cliffs there; he had to crouch as he followed a narrow route through the rocks, with the vines hanging close above him.

As he stepped out onto the road he spied an unfamiliar vehicle parked beside his own. A Volkswagen bus, in blue and white. Ohio plate, he could see, as he reached it. No one seemed to be around. Jim peered into one of the windows. Canvases? He suspected he knew who the owner was. He walked across the road. Yes, there was Rick at his easel. He was set up above Jim's swimming pool but was facing northeast, toward the Bone farm.

"That's not the sort of painting I remember from you," he remarked as he drew close.

Rick stepped back from the canvas. He wore jeans and a white tee-shirt. White where it wasn't stained and splattered from oil paints. "I went realist somewhere along the line," he stated.

"Sort of," allowed Jim.

Rick laughed. "Yeah, sort of. Representational, maybe I should say." He turned toward Jim. "I'll need to see what you've been up to. You should have a portfolio but that doesn't matter yet."

It might never if Jim didn't go for postgraduate studies. "I

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think I'll need to make a fresh start on that this summer." He looked out across the vista Rick was painting. "I was just up to the caves."

"Ah," said Rick, and no more.

Jim sat down and peeled off his boots and socks, and then his shirt. He had worn shorts on his hike up into the hills. Rick gave him a curious look. "Plan to be my artist's model?" He gave no answer but went over to rocks above the creek and dove in. He knew it was safe here, plenty of depth, but he might not have made the dive were he alone.

In fact, he didn't know why he had done it at all but he was glad he did. It felt like something inside of him, something he had held since climbing up to the caves, had been released. Jim pushed upward, broke from the water's surface, to see Rick staring down at him. What was it, maybe eight feet down to the water? It seemed less than he remembered. He had only gone off that cliff once before in his life, just to prove to himself he could, and he had jumped then, not dove. Jim swam toward the shallower water at the southern end of the pool and waded onto the gravel bar.

He climbed back up the lower rocks there. "I needed that," he told Rick, and gathered his clothes. "I'm going up to the house."

Rick nodded and looked at his canvas. "I'm ready to pack up for the day. Okay if I come up in a while?"

"Sure."

Rick had let himself into the house by the time Jim had dried and changed. He'd probably come and gone as he wished when Connie lived here but he wasn't sure he wanted the man to feel free to do so now. Locked doors might be a good idea until he got the message.

The artist was squatting, looking through the paintings Jim had left leaning against a wall in the living room. "You have decent taste," he said. "Reasonably decent. I'm not sure what to make of the ones with your name on them."

"Is that a polite way of saying you hate them?"

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Rick rose, seemingly ready to deny this until he saw Jim's grin. "Oh, yes. Dreadful stuff. You've managed to imitate all the worst artists of the past hundred years." He paused. "*Two* hundred years."

"Oh the Neoclassicists too. Now I do feel like a success. Want some lunch? I could find something though I'm not really cooking yet." Only on his little kerosene stove.

"You need to use that grill down by where I was painting. Connie did cook-outs there. Didn't your father build it?"

"Might have been my grandfather. I just know it's been there longer than I've been alive." Like much else around the place, it had been laid up from slabs of sandstone. "Did you spend much time with her?"

"When I could." Rick sighed. "I'd use painting as a reason to come up. Of course, one always thinks one should have spent more. She had other visitors, you know, and didn't always want the fairy around."

Jim had no ready reply for that. Best not to give one at all. "I'll be on my way," continued Rick.

"I'd like to know more about my sister's life here, when you have time."

"Sure, Jim. I wish—I wish I could have been around to prevent the accident. Or someone. It wasn't like her to roam the woods alone."

"I don't know the exact spot where it happened."

"Me neither. I only know she supposedly slipped and—" It sounded like Rick was trying to find a better way of saying what he wanted to say and couldn't find one. "And went over a cliff near those caves. It might have been because of drugs."

"Drugs?"

"You know she had a history. Never anything hard. Tranquilizers. Barbiturates, sometimes legally, sometimes not." Jim nodded. This had been going on years ago, while he was still a kid.

"Her doctor had put her on Miltown. I thought maybe that

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had finally got her, ah, evened out. She seemed happy. Or at least not unhappy.”

“You don’t think she jumped, do you?”

“No.” Rick sounded pretty adamant on that point. “There was no autopsy to determine whether there were drugs in her system. No one saw any point in it.”

“I suppose there wasn’t.” Accidental death was the official verdict. Why make anything more of it?

Rick seemed reluctant to say more. “She never went up there alone, at least that I knew of. But,” he went on, the words a bit more rushed now, “she would with other people. I’m not convinced she was by herself.”

“Do you have anyone in particular in mind?”

Rick shrugged. “That we should get into some other time.” He turned to the door. “Thanks for the lunch invite. We’ll talk again. And paint. You have to start painting.” With that he was gone.

Not alone? Jim needed to learn much more. He went into the kitchen. There should be something in the fridge. Beer, at least.

## FIVE

THE NOTEBOOKS PROVED TO BE Connie's journal, one completely filled, one about two-thirds. She had apparently started it around the time she moved into the house, while her divorce was being finalized. There was a lot to read. He had leafed through the pages of his sister's childlike printing. When he found the time and ambition he'd try to read them. Jim knew she'd been troubled. He'd known it pretty much all his life

He felt grateful to Rick for coming to check on her from time to time, whatever excuses he used to do it. The two had been friends for more than a decade, since their high school days.

The new phone hung on the wall in the kitchen. He'd gone with black. It rang for the first time that morning, as he was finishing breakfast. He almost identified himself as Chief Petty Officer Fry when he answered. It had become a habit. "James Fry," he said.

"Jim? This is Will Dundee. The deputy."

"Yes, Will. I know you're a deputy."

The man chuckled. "I reckon you do. I'd like to visit you, um, unofficially today, if you have the time."

Why not? He'd only planned to spend the day driving about on errands. They could always wait. At least wait until he ran out of food and had to keep himself from starving. "Sure. Drop by anytime."

He'd no sooner hung up than the phone rang again. It was more police, but official this time. They identified themselves as the Athens Police Department and asked for Constance Fry.

"Miss Fry passed away some months ago," he informed the Athens Police Department. "I'm her brother."

There was a moment of silence. "Ah, very well, sir. Do you know a Richard Myers?"

"Slightly." That was more or less true. "He was a friend of my sister."

"Yes, her name was in his address book. We, ah, regret to

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inform you that Mister Myers died last night. It looks like murder at this time. You say he was only an acquaintance?"

"To me, yes. A close friend of my late sister."

The police would have had to go to some trouble to find his number. Of course, the address would have been the same as the one they had for Connie. Maybe not really that much trouble for the police but not as easy as looking in a phone book.

"If you think you can contribute anything to our investigation we would invite you to come down. Or if you have any, um, questions or interest, we will be glad to speak with you about them."

"Okay. Thank you for letting me know." He hung up. How many others did they call with this news? Rick's parents. Damn. The whole thing began to become more real. To come into focus. He should have asked the officer's name. Or the officer should have told him. He hadn't, had he?

Jim suddenly wished he hadn't had that phone installed. That he hadn't even come here, maybe, looking for peace and solitude. He lit the little camp stove to heat water for another pot of tea.

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"I didn't hear anything about it but I can make inquiries, if you'd like," said Dundee. "I'd met Myers but didn't know him well."

"Neither did I, really. Rick was my sister's friend. Her age. He stopped by here just yesterday." Jim nodded toward the north. "He was standing right over there, painting."

Will Dundee glanced that direction though there was nothing to see now. Nothing but the landscape Rick had been capturing in oil paint. The stocky deputy was out of uniform today. He had driven up in an apparently well cared for older Mercury, black like Jim's Jeep. "That all he came for?"

For a moment, Jim thought he would only nod, say nothing more of the visit. No, there was not any reason for that. "We talked some about Connie. He had-uncertainties when it came to her accident."

"Hmm. We'll never know exactly what happened, I suppose.

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It did seem like a straightforward accidental death.” The broad forehead wrinkled into a momentary frown beneath Will’s sandy crew cut. “I was with the party that found her, after she had been reported missing at her job.”

“She had some sort of job at a school?”

“In the office at the school up in Martinton.”

“Oh.” Jim knew the school. It was small but served this rural area, offering all twelve grades. Someday, they would probably close the high school and bus the students to Logan but it hadn’t happened yet. “I would like to see where my sister fell. I was up to the caves yesterday but didn’t know the exact spot.”

“Today?”

“No, no. I’m not ready to climb up there again. Nor ask you to! Just a map would be good enough.”

“I’ll see about having a copy made of the report and bring it by,” the deputy promised. “But I can tell you she apparently fell from what you would call the third cave. I, um, went up there once with her. I’d never seen them before.”

“It’s good to have a knowledgeable guide.” Was Will Dundee one of the names Rick had intended to mention? “Connie kept journals about her time here. I haven’t had a chance to read through them yet.” Will’s name might be there, too, mightn’t it?

The deputy did not visibly react to the information. Perhaps his lack of reaction was a reaction. He said only, “They might be a better source of information than me. So, you’re going to stay beyond the summer.”

“That I am. Right through the cold. I spent one winter here when I was young.”

Dundee nodded. “Yes. That’s something your sister did tell me about.”

But she had spent, what, three winters here while Jim was in the service? That could have been hard, alone in this drafty old house. “So you knew my sister pretty well?”

“Well? I don’t know about that but we did get to know each other. And, um, to be honest, there was some concern in the

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department about narcotics. Connie's name came up and I was asked to keep an eye out." He shook his head. "If there was anything going on it wasn't big enough to warrant any sort of investigation. Formally, I mean."

"But you probably knew she used."

"I could see that. Two or three times, early on. But she seemed to be good the last year."

"I should thank you for keeping an eye on her." Jim suspected Deputy Dundee did more than that but wasn't about to call him on it.

"Not a good enough eye," was the response. "I better get along now. I'll get that report to you." Will Dundee got into his car and drove off, toward Logan.

Jim wondered briefly if he lived in town as the Mercury disappeared around the corner.

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It was a Saturday and still reasonably early. Jim had no intention of driving all the way to Athens to speak with the police. Monday would be soon enough.

Today he needed groceries. He needn't drive all the way to Logan, either; the knowledge that Connie had worked in Martinton made him curious to visit the little town. He remembered a small general store there, right next to the school. Kids would go over and buy candy at lunchtime.

Martinton was closer than Logan. Less than half the distance, up the road that branched off just north of his place. He'd like to try his Jeep on that steep hill. Jim had bought it surplus in England and had it painted black before the navy shipped it back to its country of origin for him. He drove it from Norfolk to Columbus and now to this farm in the hills.

He settled behind the wheel, looked at his reflection in the Jeep's rear view mirror. Jim's military haircut was already starting to grow out. He would let it for a while. Back in England, some of the boys were allowing themselves to get quite shaggy.

He couldn't see that catching on in the States. What if he grew

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a beard? Living by himself here, who would complain? And it would fit his new artist persona.

Maybe come winter. The hill didn't seem quite as steep as he remembered and the worst of it was the grade right off Hemlock Road. After that, it was up and down. Bigger turns than he remembered too.

Dundee had been briefer than he had expected. The man had expressed a desire to talk about Connie, before. Maybe he'd just wanted to say something about the drugs and get that out of the way. Maybe the news of Rick Myers's death had made him reticent. There could be all sorts of things involved. A cemetery to his left and beyond rose the school buildings.

Jim had attended here for one year when he was small. Third grade. His father had attempted to live at the farm and commute to Columbus each day. It turned out to be impractical, especially in the short days of winter when he both left and came home in darkness.

That was the winter Jim had spent here. School was closed right now, of course, it being a Saturday. Or maybe it was closed for the summer by now. If not, it soon should be. He turned left onto a paved road and drove into Martinton.

## SIX

HE HADN'T BEEN SURE WHETHER both Johnny and Abby would be at mass. It seemed the couple was willing to leave Sylvia Bone alone for a couple hours this Sunday morning.

Jim had undoubtedly been in Saint John's on other Pentecost Sundays—or at least one—but had no memory of it. Saint John the Evangelist was not a new church, built late in the last century. A brick-paved street rose rather precipitously beyond it, up to an equally old cemetery. It made Jim slightly nervous to park his Jeep along the sloping street. He was glad he'd come in it rather than the station wagon.

Very Gothic. Spires outside, vaulted arches within. Oh, and the steam-heating pipes running under the pews. He remembered those. He remembered tripping over them. An older priest said mass, one with an Irish accent. Latin always sounded odd when one had an Irish priest. When he spoke English during his sermon you hardly thought of it.

Jim decided he would introduce himself to the priest and parish at some other time. Maybe this was the priest who came out to visit the Bones. He should say hello to Johnny and his wife right now, unless they decided to hurry away. No, there they stood. Waiting for him, maybe. He could have dawdled inside, stayed on his knees a while—maybe actually praying—and avoided socializing.

Not that they had much to say to each other than a few pleasantries. Abigail Bone looked slender, skinny even, beside her husband. All the Bones tended to gain weight. She might be younger than Johnny too. Then Jim mentioned Dundee's visit of the previous day, just in passing, as they spoke of his settling in at the farm.

Johnny sort of hesitated, made uncertain noises. Hemmed and hawed, as they say. "He might have had, um, a thing for your sister."

"Nothing wrong with that," declared Abby, turning pale blue

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eyes toward Jim. He couldn't help thinking for a moment they were the same color as his mother's. "Will is single."

"Yeah. He helped her out. More than we were able to. Helped her get her job." Johnny seemed to ponder weighty subjects for a moment. "Can't say there was anything between them, really. Lots of people came and went over there, and some of them were men."

"Most of them were men," appended Abby.

"A whole bunch of painters showed up a couple of times."

"From the university, I would guess," said Jim. Neither had an opinion on that. "I'm going to run along now, but I need to make a real social call on you and your mother soon."

"Always welcome," said Johnny. He meant it, Jim was sure.

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Loads of traffic on this road. Jim regretted taking the back way, the 'scenic' way, home, past the state parks. It was too nice a day for people to stay home. Pretty much the beginning of summer vacation time, the first weekend of the season for some. They would come far, more than a few the sixty-odd miles from the Columbus area.

And they would trespass on the farm. This Jim knew well. Leave trash in the fields and along Hemlock Road. Go up to the caves without asking. If they did ask, he would be likely to give permission, as had his father. It rankled when they just went anyway, as if they were entitled to go where they wanted, even on private property, as long as no one was watching.

Oh, some probably thought it was owned by the state. Public property, part of one of the parks or, more likely, the state forest. Here was the road that would carry him back northwesterly. The state forest lay further down it, mostly past the Hemlock Road intersection. That was a few miles along here. Yes, Hermit's Hollow coming up on the right. He might go into that park some day if he had some leisure time. Not on a weekend.

If he continued the way he was going, Jim would end up in Circleville, eventually. Or Lancaster or even Chillicothe,

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depending on turns down the road. That was true of most roads, wasn't it? There were places to turn and go in some other direction. Across the little bridge spanning Hemlock Creek, still a modest stream here.

All its distance, in truth, before it joined another creek a bit south. That one flowed southwest, unlike the ones he had crossed just few miles back, which went southeast. They all ended up in the Ohio, sooner or later. And right onto Hemlock Road, paralleling the creek all the way to his home, closer here, further away there, even crossing it twice.

Maybe he would jump into it when he got back. It was certainly warming up enough. Was he past the southern border of the farm yet? The land extended quite some distance this direction, with the house at its further edge. Over two hundred acres total. That was what they used to call the hay field on his right, more tillable bottom land. When it had last grown hay, Jim didn't know, only that it was before his time.

Now the field had plenty of trees, junk trees he would call them. They could definitely be cut and sold and sent off to one of the pulp mills further south. He could use the cash. Best not to think of the stinking, milky-white creeks near those mills, polluted by year after year of effluent being dumped into them.

And now the big field just south of the house. No one pulled over and parking yet. Jim wondered if a few 'posted' signs would be a good idea. Probably a waste of effort and money. Home again, the old house rising on its hill, somewhat obscured by the trees and the large lilac bush over to the right, by the drive. Hey, he might as well take the Jeep up that drive today.

Maybe never Connie's Plymouth, though. Up. No problem. No need to switch to four wheel drive. He pulled in beside the back porch. There was room for a little garden here, wasn't there? Little enough he could do the job with a shovel. Right next to the unused well.

He could start later maybe. Later in the week. Now for that

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swim and some lunch and then he just might settle down and begin on his sister's journals.

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If Ricky liked girls I'd marry him in a heartbeat, it read. What was the date on this entry? October Eleven of Fifty-eight. Connie's birthday. Myers had come over and cheered her up, when she was all alone in this house and in the midst of her divorce.

That had come after he went into the service. Maybe it was his sister's own reaction to the same events that had led him to make changes in his life. Maybe it was something else entirely. She would have turned twenty-five that fall, right? A year older than Jim was now.

He had barely made a start on the journals. He left it open to the page he had reached and set it aside. Time for a better look at everything else Connie had left behind, both what had remained in the house and what the police had handed him. The sheriff's office, he should say. Logan had a police department too. How the deputies had decided what to take and what to leave, he had no idea.

Maybe they didn't either and went through the drawers of her desk and dresser, and simply picked up anything that looked important. Could Will Dundee have been the one to do that?

No, he hadn't seemed to know about the journals. He wondered if he knew about the guitar. It was a pretty nice guitar. Connie had bought it as a teen and played around with it. Jim didn't think she was very good at the time but she might have practiced more later. A Gibson. Smallish. Someone probably could tell him the model; Jim just knew it wasn't one of those big guitars he'd seen hanging on country musicians.

He picked it up and gave it a strum with his thumb. Discord. Maybe he should learn to play. That would be one way to entertain himself through the summer evenings to come. He would look for some sort of instruction book when he went to Athens tomorrow, along with the art supplies he intended to purchase.

A few letters were among her papers. Most from Jim himself.

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He had dropped her a note from time to time but she rarely wrote back. And he had never come home on leave, choosing to travel around in Europe instead. Maybe he regretted that.

Jewelry—what had become of his mother's jewelry and clothes? Or his father's, for that matter. Not that they were wealthy; no, not by any means. Daniel Folkes might be able to give him insight into all that. He'd go up to Columbus sometime soon and talk to the lawyer.

There would be a funeral for Rick Myers. He ought to go up for that too. Go up for a couple days and tend to everything he could at once.

But there was more to tend to right here.

SEVEN

HE DIDN'T THINK THIS WAS the officer he talked to on the phone. This young—maybe a couple years older than Jim—man was a detective. Athens wasn't that big a city. How many detectives could it have on its police force?

Two of them sat in this small office, at small desks. They didn't seem to take much interest in each other.

"It could have been a, ah, crime of passion," Detective Ames told him. "An affair gone bad or something of that sort." He didn't seem completely comfortable talking about it. "But we believe it was someone who simply set out to bash and rob a queer, as they might put it. May not even have intended to kill Mister Myers."

"Simply?" asked Jim.

"Oh. Oh, I'm sorry. We tend to get, um—"

"Callous? Nonchalant?" He probably shouldn't put him on the spot. Jim sensed the man meant well.

"I suppose so. Both." Ames sighed. "We get focused in our cases and forget there are people involved."

"Yeah. I understand that. Don't sweat it." He perused the report Ames had given him. Whether it was intended for civilian eyes, Jim didn't know, but he was grateful to the detective for allowing him to look it over.

The cause of death was straightforward enough. A blow to the back of the head. Maybe a pipe, maybe a baseball bat. It seemed likely no one was interested in figuring out which. Not a great deal of damage otherwise. He looked up at Detective Ames. "So you think he was hit first and anything else was after he was unconscious?" Or dead.

"We do. The attacker or attackers must have taken off when they realized they'd killed him."

"But did bother to lift his wallet." Jim wondered if that was ever their intention. It could have been an afterthought or even an attempt to mislead. The police would know that but might not care.

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"Which is why we don't suspect anyone Myers might have, um, known." In other words, his fellow queers, as another policeman might have more bluntly put it. "It did take place in a park near a known meeting place of homosexuals."

"Our guys patrol that area and run one or two of them in sometimes," said the older detective at the next desk. "Some of them would like to do more than that." Whether he felt the same way, it was impossible to say.

Jim suspected there would be little more investigation of Rick Myers's death than had already taken place. Homosexual robbed and murdered. More than one might say good riddance.

Wait. "So you knew Mister Myers was homosexual?" he asked.

The other detective jumped in again. "He had friends who identified him and let us know."

"We might have guessed though, from where he was found."

"Assuming he was actually murdered there." The man held up a hand. "Yeah, sure, he probably was. But those same friends claimed he never cruised. Quite the homebody, in fact."

Ames only shrugged at this. He surely thought the case was as 'simple' as he had laid it out.

"I didn't know Myers well enough to say," Jim told them. "He was my sister's friend, not mine. But the day before he died he told me he had information about her death I should know."

"That's interesting" The detective leaned back in his chair. "Was that in our jurisdiction?"

"No, Jack," Ames said. "Hocking County. Connie Fry. It was ruled accidental." Ames had probably looked the case up when Connie's name appeared among Rick's contacts.

"Ah. I might look it over. I'm Jack Hennings." He leaned over without rising to shake Jim's hand. "Don't expect much from me." He turned toward his fellow detective. "Has the coroner released the body, Wyatt?"

"On its way to Columbus."

"Then," said Jim, "I suppose I should talk to his parents next."

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This was the store Rick had recommended for buying art supplies. Jim didn't think he would say Milton sent him, now. What did he need? It was a big place and somewhat overwhelming.

The proprietor recognized he was at something of a loss. "I'm starting from scratch," Jim admitted. "Most of my stuff I left behind in England."

"Studying?" asked the short, dark-haired man.

"Nope. Stationed there. Navy. But now I am studying, or will be in the fall."

"Oh." The man's bright, convivial tone became at once more subdued. "You are Rick's friend. Connie's brother." He held out a square hand. "Paul Nossi."

"Jim Fry. Pleased to meet you."

"It was such a shock to hear of what happened. Here in this quiet college town! And to Rick of all people."

He gave Paul an understanding nod, while wondering why Rick would be more unlikely than anyone else.

"We all loved Rick. My wife, my daughters. They do not mind—did not mind that he was gay."

"Gay?" Jim surmised what he meant by the word but had never heard it used in that context before.

"It is what many call themselves now. It is better than most of the alternatives, don't you think?"

It probably was. "Did he have, um, someone here in Athens?" Jim wasn't quite sure what to name the relationship.

It presented no problem to Nossi. "No. His lover lives in Columbus. The art dealer Arnold Rozelle. You know him?" When Jim shook his head Paul went on. "He has a gallery there. Not in the best part of town but not in the worst."

Jim might look him up, too, if only to give his condolences. And then, it would be good to know people in the art business. There was no reason not to look at that practically.

"Oh, you must come to dinner this Sunday and we will

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remember Rick together. He ate dinner at our house more than once.”

“I’m likely to be in Columbus this coming weekend. Depending on when the funeral is held.”

“Of course, of course. The next then. Or anytime! Now, oil paints? Or are you the water color sort?”

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He had driven the station wagon to Athens, knowing he might have a lot to carry home. It had been the right decision. Paints, canvases, paper, pencils, and, of course, an easel, small and portable. There would be larger ones available to use at the college.

Not that Jim was likely to do much painting, right away, when he started classes. There were other courses he must take, some having nothing whatever to do with art. He told himself it was wise to be taking them, to be working toward a degree, though he wasn’t sure why he needed it. He could just paint and farm, couldn’t he?

The Plymouth had a radio, a luxury he did without in his Jeep. An occasional twist of the dial on his way home, trying to find something he liked, met with little success. Was that country music? It sort of sounded like it and sort of didn’t. I can’t stop loving you, someone was singing. And it faded out. He turned the dial again before giving up and switching it off. There was the Bone place coming up on the right. Almost home.

Johnny would be working somewhere around the farm. He should talk to him about maybe putting in a crop before it was too late. Though there were fall crops, weren’t there? Things one planted toward August. That wasn’t so far away, really.

There were all sorts of things he could plant, that he could do, if finances permitted. Fruit trees. He could give the Pells and their apple orchard some competition, though it would take a few years! He slowed down as he approached his own house. That was a crab apple growing right by the road, wasn’t it? A long grassy slope ran up on this side. Did its margin mark the edge of

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his property or was that a bit further north? And why hadn't someone put in the drive over here where it wouldn't be so steep?

It would be a good place for grapes. Another crop to consider. He pulled in on the large sandstone slab that lay at the base of the hill. It made a convenient parking spot. Carrying the stuff up was no problem. Tomorrow, maybe he'd go get more stuff. Things he needed to make this place more livable.

For now, have some supper and relax. Maybe see if he could figure out how to tune that guitar, too.

EIGHT

THE ATTENDANT HANDED JIM A yarmulke. All the men were wearing them. He had barely arrived in time for the burial.

Jim might not have arrived at all if he hadn't called last night and learned the funeral was this morning. It had seemed like too much trouble, finding the proper funeral home, learning the schedule. He almost hadn't bothered.

Jewish custom called for burial within twenty-four hours of death. That he should have remembered. Circumstances prevented it with Rick, to be sure. Learning the interment was in a few hours, he had thrown a suitcase into the back of the Jeep and headed for Columbus in the middle of the night. No shopping for stuff after all! He hadn't even told anyone he was taking off. Maybe he should call the Bones later and tell them he would be gone for a couple days.

Everything was to take place here at the cemetery. Not many in attendance, all somber in mien and attire. It was a good thing he'd packed a dark suit he could slip into, in a filling station restroom. A simple coffin, a few words. It was over quickly.

Jim looked over the handful of mourners. Family, he assumed. Mostly family. He recognized Rick's parents though he barely knew them. Was Rick's lover there? He wasn't sure he liked that term but it seemed better than boyfriend and he couldn't think of any other. Rick's mother was eyeing him. She might think he was one of her son's circle. One of his gay friends. He did think he would keep using that word.

Oh, she was coming over to him. Mister Myers, as well.

"I thank you for coming." The gray-haired man spoke this formally and did not extend a hand to shake. "I do not think I know your name."

"James Randall Fry. I didn't know your son well. He was a friend of my sister."

"Ah. Connie," said his wife. "I remember you, Randy."

No point in telling them to call him Jim. Rick's father did offer to shake now, solemnly but firmly. "I had reconnected with your

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son just recently, since moving to the family farm down near Logan."

"Yes," said the man. "Richard told us of the farm. So you are near Athens." He glanced at his wife but said nothing to her before seeming to come to a decision about something. "If it is not too much of an imposition, we would ask you to help us with his, ah, estate. All he had there needs to be looked over and sent-sent to us." His voice came near breaking, at the thought of dealing with Rick's belongings. All that was left of his son.

"Better you than Rozelle," whispered Mrs. Myers. Her eyes flicked just for a moment to a decidedly nondescript man in a well-cut suit. From her tone, Jim suspected she thought the man would steal her son's things. His paintings anyway.

An artist's death always increased the value of his work. "And better a friend than an employee," added her husband.

"I would be honored to help you," he replied. It would let him look things over, wouldn't it?

"You must have a legal document," Mister Myers said. "I will have my lawyer make something up at once. You will be in Columbus long?"

"No more than two days." A room this night, back at the farm by the next. That's what Jim intended, not that things always went as planned.

"Best to have it mailed to you, then. Benjamin." A plump young man hurried to his side. "Get Mister Fry's address and send it on to my attorney." He turned back to Jim. "I thank you again."

His wife murmured something similar and both walked slowly toward the cemetery entrance.

Jim returned the yarmulke and followed.

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Arnold Rozelle had left before he had a chance to speak with him. Jim wasn't sure there was any point in it. Maybe if he had time later.

He did not need to speak with Rick's parents again. Not at this

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time. Later on? Most likely, having taken on this responsibility for them. A favor but one as much for Rick as for his father and mother. Of course, Max Myers could have sent an employee down to Athens. He was a wealthy man, with real estate holdings all over the Columbus area.

So maybe it was not a bad idea to do favors for him. Where now? It was still morning and a very nice morning. Hot already. He should go by OSU and make sure his transcripts had been sent to Athens. And then, maybe just a couple hours to relax and meander through the cool halls and rooms of the museum there at the university. It had been a favorite place to visit when Jim was younger.

First, he should make an appointment to see his own attorney, to make sure he and Folkes were on the same page on everything, that there wasn't anything legal he needed to do still. And to talk about Connie. Maybe the man could fill him in on a few things there too.

There hadn't been time to talk about that sort of thing when he came through a few days ago. In fact, he'd hardly seen the lawyer then and had dealt mostly with an underling, a paralegal or secretary or some such. A call from a pay phone earned him an appointment with Dan Folkes the next morning.

It might not be worth the money he'd have to pay him.

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He had chosen to stay at a *Howard Johnson*, further out on the south side, rather than a downtown hotel. Jim was familiar with the chain and there was the added convenience of the restaurant next door. A shower refreshed him. He could probably sack out right now; there hadn't been a lot of sleep last night.

No, why not shop today for those necessities he had intended to buy? Here in the big city instead of Logan. Kitchen stuff, especially. Cooking on the kerosene stove had gotten old already. He had left his list on the kitchen table but could remember most of it.

What he couldn't remember was any good place to shop in

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Columbus. The only name that came to mind was the Lazarus department store, way downtown, and he knew that wasn't the place to go. There was undoubtedly a Sears or Penney's somewhere. He could look in a phone book.

Or ask at the office. The clerk directed him to a new discount 'warehouse store' quite close. Jim surely ended up buying a few things that had not been on that list. He hadn't known he needed them till he spied them on the shelves.

Then all his purchases into his room. It wouldn't do to leave them in the open Jeep. Jim flipped on the television as he changed before going to eat. It was time for the local news. None of that mattered much to him now. He wasn't sure any news mattered to him. Hey, wasn't that—?

The picture was black and white, but clear, and there reporting on something or another was Michael Gil. Connie's former husband. He'd been a radio announcer the last Jim had heard of him. Now he wasn't just hearing but seeing. Perhaps he should look him up, too. Nah, not enough time for that. But he might mention him to Folkes tomorrow.

He flipped off the set. Some of those famous clams were all he was interested in at the moment.

## NINE

“DOES MIKE GIL HAVE A claim on anything?” He wanted to be sure of this.

“Not the least. Their divorce was finalized well before your sister—um, before your sister’s passing.” Daniel Folkes was middle-aged and balding. He leaned back in his taupe leather chair. The room was not what Jim thought of as an attorney’s office, all very modern and light. There should be dark bookcases. Mahogany.

“Okay. I’d almost forgotten about him till I saw him on television last night.” He had liked Mike well enough. What he had seen of him. He was not Catholic nor had he and Connie married in the church.

“It was a clean break between the two, as I understand it,” said Folkes. “I didn’t handle the divorce. That’s not in our normal line here. Connie wanted out and he was willing to let her go. Um, you know she had problems.”

Drugs. “I know. You did handle her affairs after the divorce, right?”

“As much as I could, mostly for the sake of your parents.” The attorney allowed himself a bit of a smile for the first time. “I wasn’t going to make any money with your sister as a client.”

“She seemed nearly broke when she died.”

The lawyer nodded but his expression—or lack of one—revealed no thoughts. “I believe she would have sold the farm if it hadn’t been in both your names.”

He wasn’t getting much from this guy. Folkes probably didn’t think he’d make any money with Jim as a client either, and correctly so. He reminded himself to find that local attorney in Logan or Athens.

“But it is thoroughly mine now. All the estate, such as it is.”

“Absolutely. All attended to while you were still overseas. Um, if you would like to look over any figures, I can send copies of everything to you.”

Jim had seen all of it already. What he had been told was all of

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it. He had no way of knowing if it was ‘everything.’ “Maybe later on,” he said. When he did have an attorney. “I’ll take up no more of your time,” he said, rising from his uncomfortable chrome and leather chair. “Billable or otherwise.”

The attorney chuckled, they shook hands, and Jim was outside in a minute. Folkes’s offices were not downtown and parking the Jeep hadn’t been a concern. He motored back toward the motel. He’d pick up everything he’d left in his room and be on his way home.

Yes, home. The farm. Logan, maybe. Not this city where he’d largely grown up.

It was early yet, he told himself as he loaded up. Maybe home could wait an hour or two longer. Arnold Rozelle’s gallery was not that far away. He’d looked up the address. It might even be open. Places like that had their doors open by, what, Eleven? It was almost that now.

But first, a phone call.

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Jim drove slowly by *Rozelle’s*. That was the name on the discreet sign. The bottom floor of a brick building and, as he had been told, neither in the best nor worst location. It was impossible to tell whether it was open or not from the street. He decided not to park with his loaded Jeep. He might never have any reason to talk to the art dealer.

Or he could drop him a letter when he got back, explaining what Myers had requested of him. Yes, that would be best. He had called his former brother-in-law before heading over or, more accurately, had called his station. Jim hadn’t particularly expected to get Mike on the phone. He’d left his information, his phone number, with the woman on the other end of the line. He might hear from him. He might not.

Now, get over to Highway Thirty-three and head out of the city. No, he was closer to Twenty-three. He’d go down through Circleville and come in the back way. Jim hadn’t been through

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there in a long time. He'd never driven that way at all, only ridden with his family when he was a kid.

As far as scenery went, it didn't differ much from the other route through Lancaster. In Circleville he switched to Fifty-six and angled southeast. That road could carry him almost to the farm, but he might just cut away, take some of the less traveled country roads. He had time enough. There would still be daylight when he made it home.

He had time to think of things too.

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None of his thoughts seemed very important. He had them anyway, thoughts of his sister, thoughts of the past and the future. Thoughts of Daniel Folkes and of how little he had actually told him. Maybe there was nothing else to know.

Jim chose to come home through Martinton. The unpaved road down from the village was dark beneath the trees though sunset was yet an hour away. Here was the last steep descent to Hemlock Road. He could not see the creek though he knew it lay straight ahead. A marshy bit of bottom land stretched between road and water, bounded by a low rocky fence to his right, a wrapping around of the cliffs from which he dove. In the other direction it extended over to the fields Johnny Bone tilled. A small stream ran through, to flow into Hemlock Creek and mark the boundary between the two farms.

There was a spring in there too, a good spring he should clean out and use. It had much more outflow than the one behind his house. But awfully far to carry water! Over among those trees, just before the bridge. He turned the other way and was parking beside the house a minute later. Best to get all this stuff inside right now.

Jim was still busy with it when Bone's pickup pulled up out front. If it had been him, he would have walked the short distance, but Johnny had no doubt put in a hard day's work.

Or he would have ridden his bike. Jim needed to start using it, though the gravel—or dirt—roads were not the best for bicycles. He

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lifted a hand in greeting and went down the hill. No need to make Johnny climb up here.

"Saw you pull in," said Johnny, leaning against a fender. "We wondered what had become of you."

"Afraid I'd decided to give up country life already?" His neighbor didn't respond to the joke so he went on. "I was called away to Columbus unexpectedly. The last time that happens, I hope." That was the truth. "I would have let you know but it was the middle of the night."

"Oh." Johnny nodded but had no comment. He held out a large brown envelope. "Will Dundee stopped by looking for you. Asked me to give you this."

"The accident report on Connie," said Jim, taking it. "Okay. Thanks."

"Sure." He looked curiously at the papers he had just handed over. Apparently he hadn't peeked at them. Not that it would matter if he had, or Abby for that matter. "You think there's anything important in it?"

"No idea. Just wanted to see it." Mostly to know exactly where the accident happened. That probably wasn't important either. "Say, is it too late to put in any sort of crops? I have all this land and nothing but trees. Not that there's anything wrong with trees."

"It is late," felt Johnny. "Not too late, maybe. There are fall crops too, things you can put in a couple months from now."

"We should talk about it. If you'd be willing to work with me on something."

"I might." The farmer's eyes turned south toward the long-fallow bottom land, a part of it barely visible where the road curved and fell away beyond the barn. "I'll come by."

## TEN

THE KEROSENE STOVE HAD BEEN replaced by an electric hotplate. Jim didn't feel ready to tackle the big range yet, to clean it out, to try starting a fire in it. It would burn either wood or coal, as he remembered. Wood there was plenty enough and there was an ax in the tool shed. Cleaning the rust off it was another chore.

Some of the appliances already in the house he recognized from his mother's kitchen. Their mother's kitchen; Connie had brought them here and certainly used at least some of them. A bean pot. Mom would put the pot on to cook overnight on Saturdays and they would have boiled beans at a Sunday morning brunch when the family returned from church. He might try that himself this Sunday. There was a big electric roaster too, large enough for at least a chicken or roast. Maybe even a turkey.

He might not need to use the range for anything, though the idea of frying bacon and eggs over a flame did appeal to Jim. No such breakfast today; he'd fixed plenty of oatmeal and sat spooning it into himself as he looked over the report on his sister's death. Her accident.

As Dundee told him, she had fallen by the 'third cave,' as he knew it. And apparently as Dundee knew it. Connie might have called it that when the deputy was around. That lay at the upper end of the horseshoe valley. The body was discovered below it. It was not clear whether she fell from above the cave or from the rocky ledge that fronted it. Jim would guess the latter.

He would go up there. Not today. Jim wanted to get down to Athens, to look over whatever Rick had left behind, but he'd best have something in writing first, from Max Myers's attorney. That could come as early as today's mail.

Little else of consequence was in the report. Found by a search party after Connie had been reported missing. Estimated to be dead two days. More than one injury that could have caused death. That was almost certainly instantaneous. Jim was glad a photo was not included.

And no autopsy. Ruled accidental and Connie Fry was

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interred within the week, in Columbus. The same cemetery as their parents but the graves weren't close. He had visited all three when he first arrived from Norfolk. He set the report aside. Work on something? Plenty enough to do.

Or get out those art supplies. That had been postponed when he rushed off to Columbus. It was good that was all taken care of, though. Jim could have taken Paul Nossi up on his invitation after all. But this was Fathers' Day coming, wasn't it? Best not to intrude on his family then.

The parlor could make a decent studio. Or the living room. It was brighter. The two rooms stood side by side on the first floor, both opening onto the front porch, but the living room—what Jim had always thought of as the living room—connected to the big eat-in kitchen as well as the stairs to the second story. Why paint indoors at all at this time of year? The back porch was the place, and there were no tall trees there blocking the sunlight.

He spent most of the morning setting things up out there. It would work great, except when he had to do laundry.

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"I remember potatoes in this field."

Johnny Bone nodded. This was a subject he knew something about. "Good use for it. Too late this year." He thought on it some more. "Maybe not for corn, but not the best soil for it here. 'Cross the road is better." He pondered the field again, a sloping plot of modest extent just beyond the barn.

Indeed, the extensive field of bottom land on the other side of the road was better for corn. Jim had never seen anything else planted there.

"Fall crops. About the only thing I've heard of is turnips."

"Turnips will work if you can sell them." Johnny didn't sound overly hopeful of that. "I tried to convince Connie to let me plant something. I think the expense scared her."

Jim knew little had remained in Connie's bank account. Each had received half of the estate, savings, this place, property in

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Columbus, life insurance, but his remained untouched. He could afford to finance a crop, this year or next.

"If you kept any stock, I'd recommend using it for pasturage," Johnny continued.

"I'm not about to tackle getting the barn cleaned out," Jim informed him.

"It's still solid. Most of it. Wouldn't take much to fix it up." They both looked toward the old building, lying between this field and the house. It was set beside what amounted to a low cliff, the front opening onto the sandstone slab where Jim usually parked, this side supported on timbers to create another ground-level floor below. Jim was pretty sure there was rock below the muck and rotted wood down there.

It was close to this field though. He knew most of the slope between had been used for pasture. That above the house too. A lot of it was returning to trees.

"It's been a long time since this was any sort of a real farm," he said. "Before either of our times."

"True. I think it was just a hobby for your grandfather. That's what my dad said."

"Probably so." Jim looked across the road again. "I'd certainly be interested in planting over there in the spring. I don't think I'd take the chance now."

"Don't blame you none. Want to try some corn here?"

Why not? "We might as well. Land and seed from me. Fertilizer, too. We'll need some, right?" Johnny nodded. "Time and equipment from you, fifty-fifty. Oh, and you'd have to sell it. I don't know beans about that." Jim chuckled. "Or any other vegetable."

Another joke that flew right by Johnny Bone. "Good enough. And beans would be a good thing to put in here, come spring. Might help the soil."

Jim had no reason to doubt that.

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The document from Myers's attorney was in the mail, delivered

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late morning. The rural mailman beeped his horn for Jim to come down and sign for it. He could drive over to Athens tomorrow armed with the piece of paper and see what was to be done. What of Rick's Volkswagen? Did he have furniture? Best just to inventory now and ask what to do with it later.

Definitely gather up any and all art work. There might be some at the university or even somewhere else around town. That he could bring here for safekeeping. That and anything else small that looked valuable.

Right now, Jim intended to paint. Yes, plein-air oil painting in his own front yard. He set the easel up next to the Plymouth, facing the barn. It might not be any use as a barn but it was picturesque enough. He doffed his cap, mopped perspiration from his face. Way hotter here in the sun than he was used to in England. Brighter, too.

A gray barn. Weathered wood, weathered shingles. The big sliding doors stood open. Jim wasn't positive they could be closed. Shadows inside and sky peeking through from the other side, through the hay loft doors. But there were colors there. Colors everywhere. Gray wasn't just gray; it was blue and beige and purple and rose. Clouds behind, shifting colors as they moved. A vulture soared high up, no, two of them. They might nest up behind the house.

Viridian and-alizarin. Add white. That was a pretty good gray. Much better than adding black to white, as a beginner might think to do. A touch of ultramarine in this daub. Yes. He should get a sun umbrella, a big one to set up over his easel. Some sky. Cobalt blue? No, stick with the ultramarine. That would help pull the colors together. Lots of white and, hmm, a bit more of the viridian as he worked closer to the horizon. Careful, careful, don't mix mud.

Who was this? A panel truck had pulled in beside the wagon. Old and a bit rusty, and white once upon a time. The woman who emerged wore jeans, the legs turned up as cuffs; a sleeveless

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white blouse exposed firmly-muscled arms. She glanced at his work but only nodded without comment.

"I would guess you are Randy Fry."

"I am. I go by Jim these days." Eventually everyone would know that. He doused a rag from his can of turpentine and wiped the brush clean. Sort of clean; it would need more thorough attention later.

"Joan Woodson," she said. "I was a friend of Rick." The woman did not extend a hand. Wisely, considering how much paint was on Jim's. He began to wipe it clean too.

"Pleased. What can I do for you, Joan Woodson?"

"I understand you're going to take care of all Rick's belongings."

"I am. I'm surprised anyone knows that." He looked at the painting. Enough for today. Maybe he should have a stool when he returned to it, though Jim did prefer to paint on his feet.

"Arnie came down to the studio first thing this morning—"

"That would be Arnold Rozelle?"

"Yep. Rick shared studio space with me and a handful of others. I'm a potter, by the way. Anyway, he came sniffing around but I wouldn't let him touch Rick's things and then I called up his father and he said you were in charge of it all."

"So it seems," replied Jim. "Want to get out of this sun?" The mid-afternoon was perhaps not the best time to paint. He would try to get out earlier the next time. Or later.

"Okay. By the creek?" She pronounced it 'crick.' Both headed that direction. "I've been down here with Rick and his painter friends. Don't paint myself but it was a nice place to picnic." Her eyes went to the dark hemlocks across the valley. "Maybe not so much after Connie was gone."

They stood at the edge of the cliff directly across the road from the house, well up from the swimming hole. A maple, little more than a sapling, provided some shade. It hadn't been that long since all this area was cleared but sumac and ironwood had

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sprung up to screen the creek and bottom land. In spring, flood waters might cover that from cliff to cliff.

Maybe he would take this brush down sometime. More of a winter project, but he would be taking classes in winter. Was this woman an instructor at Ohio?

"You knew my sister."

"Uh-huh." Joan began to walk, apparently with no goal in mind. Maybe she just needed to move. "I can give you the address of Rick's apartment. You'd want to take care of it first, I'd think. His things can sit at the studio as long as need be."

"How about at the university?"

"Wouldn't know. You'd have to ask there." She thought on that just a second or two. "He had an office, of course. Valuable real estate. You'll want to get to that before they clean it out and give it to someone else."

"I'd best get down there tomorrow morning." With his document in hand. "I suppose I'll bring it all here to sort out before sending it on to the Myers. What they want of it."

She halted again, halfway down the path. "You know the parents well?"

"Barely at all."

## ELEVEN

CONNIE HAD, OF COURSE, KNOWN the Myers family pretty well. Their tolerance of her and Rick's other friends amazed her at times, she had confided.

Some might style Max Myers a slum lord but Jim was not inclined to use that term. As far as he knew, the man dealt fairly with people. Better than fairly. But he was a businessman and expected a return on investments of any sort.

Rick's furnished studio apartment had held little he needed to take away. He seemed to have led the most spartan of lives there, using the space only to sleep. Everything had gone into the back of the Plymouth wagon with room to spare, all of it by noon.

Of the van, there had been no trace. Maybe it was at the studio Joan had mentioned or at the campus or maybe even the police had it. They would have his personal effects too, which they might or might not be willing to release to him. Jim would visit the university next.

Lunch first, at the place Rick had taken him only a little over a week ago. There was no point in occupying a booth, on his own. Jim took a seat at the counter. The restaurant was even emptier than the last time he'd visited. Athens was a bit dead with the school between semesters. Maybe it would be all summer.

Jazz played on the jukebox. That wasn't surprising in a college town. Weren't the kids more into folk music now, though? The whole beatnik thing had faded while Jim was overseas. Faded as four years passed. Faded since his parents had died on that wintry day in early Fifty-eight.

Jim had entered the navy as soon as classes ended that spring. Then Connie had divorced, moved to the farm by fall. To also die, in fall of last year, Nineteen Sixty-one, a few months before his enlistment ended. He'd missed a lot.

But he didn't regret any of it, nor would there be any point if he did. "That apple pie looks good," he told the woman behind the counter. "I'll take a slice." He wondered if the apples were locally grown. Too early to pick any this season.

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"Refill on the coffee?" He nodded. She was kind of cute. Wedding ring. Not that he had been likely to flirt. Jim wondered briefly about the potter he'd met yesterday. He'd be seeing her again, he knew. Ah, forget that sort of thing, Jim! You're going to be way too busy to start thinking about female companionship.

The pie wasn't bad. The apples came from a can, of course, and possibly from the other side of the country.

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Rick's office had already been packed up, all his papers and personal nick-knacks in a couple file boxes. Jim did not bother to look them over. "I don't think any of his work is here," his escort told him. "He kept everything at his studio."

Todd Clemmer had been the only faculty member on hand to take charge of him. He taught design classes. Jim might end up in one of them. No point in bringing that up. "If something turns up we can call you? Or someone else?" Clemmer didn't sound overly eager to do either.

"How about Joan Woodson? Know her?" He might as well put some of this on Rick's friends.

"Certainly, certainly. That would be simplest." The man fidgeted with the top button of his plaid sports shirt. "That, um, takes care of everything?"

"It does and I thank you. Oh, do you know if Rick's van is on the campus?"

Clemmer looked confused. Jim saw he didn't like unexpected questions. Maybe not expected ones either. "Not that I know of. I'll, um, leave a note with the, um, campus security."

"Great." Jim shook his hand, took a box under each arm, and got out of there. Room enough to fit them into the wagon with the rest of Rick's things.

As long as he was here he should go over to the main administration building—the art department was at something of a remove—and check that his transcripts had arrived. Make sure the government knew about his tuition, too. And it might be

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better if he checked with the campus cops himself instead of leaving it to Todd Clemmer.

When he found the van he would need to get someone to drive it to Columbus, with him in the Plymouth. Between them they could probably get all of Rick's stuff there. That should be an end to it.

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"His vehicle? It isn't listed." That was the third strike on trying to find Rick's van. The sergeant looked over his authorization again. "Hmm, I don't believe the case has been closed yet. Let me check with Detective Ames." He exchanged a few words on the phone. Jim heard a 'yes, sir' and a 'right here,' he was pretty sure, before the policeman turned back to him.

"Myers's effects can't be released yet. It shouldn't take but a day or two. Detective Hennings would like to have a word with you, if you have the time."

Jim nodded. "Same room as before?"

"Yes, sir." He found the way without problem. Only Hennings was in the cramped office.

"Good afternoon, Jim," he said, waving him toward a chair without rising. "I hear you're looking for Myers's car."

"Gathering all his belongings for his parents," Jim explained, taking a seat. "Somehow they roped me into it."

"I suspect they think you're more reliable than the other friends I've met," said the detective. "I'll send out a bulletin to look for it. We might want to look it over ourselves. Too many things we let slip by."

"Like the body maybe being moved?"

"Exactly. No one bothered to check for anything like that. Way too late now to look at the crime scene again."

"And not much interest?" Maybe he shouldn't say that.

Jack Hennings didn't seem to be bothered. "More than you might think. He was an instructor at the university, after all, and they take care of their own. The administrators over there don't

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like their people being murdered. Enough so that the mayor has become aware of the case.”

“Will that make a difference?”

“Unlikely. It still seems pretty much open and shut. The body was found near a bar frequented by homosexuals. But,” said Jack, leaning forward just a little from his normal sprawl, “everyone agrees Myers never went there.” He settled back again. “I’m sure you would know there are those who feel he got what he deserved.”

Jim knew it very well. “There are those who think homosexuals are dangerous. A threat to society.”

“And those who are afraid of them. Sometimes the same people. Homophobia is a real problem and one the public knows little about.”

“I doubt they want to.”

“I suppose not. Unfortunately, we have our share of bigots on the force. Bigots of all sorts.”

That did not surprise Jim in the least. He knew individuals personally who truly believed the communists and the homosexuals were conspiring to destroy America. Most of those he had met in the navy but Jim suspected others like them could be found everywhere.

And then there were those who had similar views about civil rights for blacks. Athens, with its university, was almost certainly better on such issues than many other places.

He rose. “Thanks, Jack, for giving the whole thing a little more attention. I do appreciate it.”

“It’s my job. A job that is usually pretty boring, petty thievery and illegal liquor and that sort of thing. You know, there’s quite a bit of moonshining still going on in this part of the world.” The detective paused just long enough Jim thought maybe he expected an answer. No, he went on. “I have to admit it aroused my interest. Not just Myers’s murder but the possible connection to your sister’s death.”

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Was there a connection? Jim didn't see one but that didn't keep him from thinking about it all the way home.

## TWELVE

ONE THING HE HAD FOUND at Rick's apartment was the man's own journal. It was spotty and intermittent; he had only written something when the mood took him, apparently. Loose jottings were inserted here and there between the pages. Thoughts he might have had elsewhere and carried home.

He had done no more last night than give it a brief look. It wouldn't hurt to read through what he had written before turning it over to his parents. Not that he had to turn it over at all.

And he should get back to Connie's journal. Jim had hardly made a start there. There were other things to do this Saturday morning.

The caves. Jim would go up to the caves, armed with the new information in the report Dundee had left. It was not a great deal of information, to be sure, but more than he had previously.

Was that someone beeping a horn? From the front porch he spied a small white car, a sports car, pulled off the road. Maybe someone was actually going to ask permission to trespass. By the time Jim was halfway down the hill, he recognized his visitor.

"Mike!" He gave his brother-in-law a wave. Former brother-in-law most would say but Jim had a Catholic disapproval of divorce.

"Hi, Randy. I called a couple times yesterday but you weren't in. So I drove down!" The two shook.

"I go by Jim now," said Jim, once again. "A frog-eye Sprite. I believe that's the first one I've seen in this country."

'Frog-eye?'

"That's what they're called in England."

"They're bug-eye Sprites here."

Jim nodded. It was unlikely he'd run into many of the petite Austins. "I didn't have anything particular to see you about. Just letting you know I was back." That was not, perhaps, strictly true. Michael Gil might have something relevant to say about Connie's death.

A mellifluous laugh—a laugh Jim remembered. "And I didn't

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have anything to see you about either. I just thought I'd use your call as an excuse to come down here on my day off."

Seemed reasonable enough. "Been down recently?"

"Not since before the divorce. Connie took me up to the caves once, years ago. I haven't set foot on this farm since."

"I intended to climb to them this morning. Up to coming along?"

Mike was dressed well-enough for it, jeans and sneakers, a polo shirt. He frowned now. "Where Connie fell?"

"Yes. I intend to locate the exact spot." He might as well let the man know that.

At first glance, Michael Gil gave the impression of being a bigger man than he was. His head was large; when one looked with more scrutiny, it seemed oversize for his body. The hair was dark, not as long as Jim remembered it four or five years ago, more conservatively cut. He doubted Mike was particularly athletic but he could probably make it up to the caves.

A moment of apparent indecision. "Okay. Is it, um, safe to leave the car here?"

"Take it up there," Jim said, pointing to the drive. "And then come in and have a cup of coffee."

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Jim had thought to take a steeper, more direct route up this morning but, with Mike in tow, decided to use the more familiar path from the corn field. The once and future corn field, even if it grew a crop of weeds this season.

He and Mike stood now at the narrow cleft that led to the first cave. "We can go up and over to the second cave from here or through to the first one."

"First one is the deep cave, right? The one with two entrances."

"Right. We always numbered them from it. On across the upper tier—" Jim pointed more or less eastward. "And then back on the second."

"And one more below it."

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“Uh-huh. Might as well go look at the first.” Mike followed him through the gap. Two minutes later they stood before one of the entrances. Jim looked down the steep slope. “You can go up and down right here if you want. You can also climb up to the second cave from below, but it’s way easier to go across the top and back down to it.” He went inside the cave, took a quick look around, emerged from the other opening. Both were high enough a man could readily walk through erect, and the roof rose beyond them. One could go quite deep before needing to crouch.

“There is a third way to the cave number two,” Jim announced. “Along this ledge here. It will take you straight to it.”

Mike gave it mistrustful perusal. “Narrow.”

“Not so much. Or at least not most of the way. There is a little stream that falls over it a way down. Just a trickle at times. Probably is now.” He turned from it. “Usually we’d go up and around.”

But he remembered Connie sidling across on the ledge. His sister could be fearless. Or foolhardy. Back through the cleft and up. This was the level above all the caves, where he had walked a few days ago. And there was the little stream that trickled down across the ledge. Where did one go to descend again?

“The second cave is really pretty close to the first,” he said. “Looks completely different.”

“We have to go past and back to it?”

“Yeah. There’s a way down between caves two and three.” And there it was. Not too steep. The third cave, the largest of them, could be glimpsed to their right. They turned to the left.

Recess caves those who studied such things named them, different from the first cave, the deep one, though formed through the same process of erosion. They were open rock shelters, as wide as they were deep, set in a cliff face. Large chunks of fallen sandstone littered their floors. The seven caves were arranged in tiers, four above, two below, and yet one more below that. Some didn’t count the fourth as a separate cave but Jim did.

They stood, facing somewhat northerly, at the mouth of the

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second cave and gazed across the little valley. All the caves, save the first, could be seen from this angle. The others were oriented more toward the west.

"Indians used these caves, I understand."

"It would seem likely, though I've never seen any artifacts. All discovered and carried away before my time, maybe."

"Shawnee?"

"That's possible." Shawnee had been in the area at one time. They would not have lived in the caves but they could have taken shelter. Or any of several other tribes, stretching back hundreds of years. Thousands.

"I'd love to bring a camera crew here. Too far from Columbus, I suppose." Mike sighed over the lost opportunity.

In unspoken accord, the pair started toward the third cave, the largest. The one Jim had truly come up here to see. He stood on the wide ledge before it and peered upward. If Connie had plummeted from up there, she would pretty much have needed to leap outward to miss landing here instead of below. Jim wasn't entirely willing to dismiss that possibility. The supposed accident could have been suicide.

No one had mentioned it. It was inevitable some had thought of it. "It seems likely she fell from here." Neither man chose to go out to the edge and look over.

"And nothing of hers was found up here?"

"Not according to the report." Jim wondered if anyone had checked above. It hardly mattered. In the eight months since, nothing would be left.

Eight months. Just a week before Connie's twenty-eighth birthday. Mike looked around once more and said, "Let's move on." Both knew where they were headed.

On to the fourth cave first. Some saw it as part of the larger third cave, to which it admittedly connected. Not Jim. The two were clearly separate. "There is a way down here but most go back to the way we came."

"Oh, the hole in the wall. I went through it."

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There was, indeed, a man-sized hole in a sandstone wall. One did not need actually go through it as there was a way around, but many chose to and then descend the rest of the way to the second tier. The fifth cave opened before them.

Jim called it the fifth because he had pretty much always gone through them in this order. He could see others numbering them differently. And wrongly. "Less impressive," was all Mike had to say. Neither deep nor high, more a bit of overhanging ledge than aught else, it definitely fitted the rock shelter description.

"Someone smoked here." A cigarette butt lay in the dry sand inside the cave. Trespassers were bad enough; it was worse when they littered too.

Mike nodded and they moved on into the next cave, the one lying directly below the third. "Was she found here?"

Jim shook his head. "The one below. It is possible she fell from here instead of—" He looked up at the ledge in front of the third cave.

Gil went over to the edge. Close to the edge. "But it's not so much of a drop."

"Enough to break either of our necks." But he greatly doubted Connie fell from here, although there was, admittedly, slippery leaf litter underfoot. There had been none of that above, only bare rock. The third cave, almost certainly; he couldn't even see the crest above the upper tier from this angle. Their way curved to the right and they were at the slope where they had come down to the second and third caves. Down further, now, down to the last tier and the small seventh cave at the very bottom. The place Connie's remains were discovered.

"This is where—" Mike choked out when they stood before it.

"So the report says." No traces of the investigation would still be around. No traces that a human had ever been here, in fact. It was a bit damp down here, near the floor of the hollow. Ferns grew beneath the oaks, where the slopes above them had only fallen leaves.

"You know I loved her. Even at the end." Mike went a short

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way into the cave, looked about. "She just made it so damned hard."

"I know, man," said Jim. "Let's get back to the house."

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Jim had sought not to learn but to understand. To see it all with his own eyes, to correlate it with what he had been told, with what he had read. That was necessary, he felt.

Now? His own life went on, whether he ever learned anything more about Connie or not. Whether he learned anything about Rick, for that matter. Mike's life went on too. Jim hadn't known how hard it had hit the man. Not just Connie's death but the divorce.

Mike would move on. He had a promising career as a local celebrity. Jim had always liked him though he was no one he would choose to hang around with. Gil had been a radio personality when Connie met him. When she'd married him, for that matter. He wondered when he'd made the move to television.

On his way back to Columbus now in his little Sprite. Jim lay back in the brown creek water. It was cool, almost too cool, but there was not much alternative for a bath. His Saturday night bath! The water's surface was dappled with sunlight breaking through the leaves of the trees, the oaks standing above the rocks. Shadows were lengthening from those rocks, as they surely lengthened from the ridge behind the house. The sun would sink behind that ridge soon. The trees, the cliffs, all would fall into darkness, and owls would greet the night. the shrill screech owls, the deep-voiced barred owls that haunted the bottom lands. Jim was fairly sure he had heard a great horned as well, distant among the wooded hills.

He climbed out onto the gravel bar, retrieved his towel from a projecting rock. Safely skinny-dipped once again. Considering how many people had dropped in unexpectedly recently, maybe he should not count on that continuing.

Wrapped in his thoughts and a terrycloth robe, Jim Fry headed up the hill.

## THIRTEEN

THIS WASN'T THE SUNDAY MORNING to have the bean pot going. Jim headed to Athens immediately, intending to attend church there and then find Rick's studio space. He had driven past the Catholic church, Saint Paul's, when he was in town on Friday. It stood quite close to the School of Art and Design.

There was a chapel on campus too, he understood. A Catholic student center or something like that. He could look into that another time but it probably wasn't for him. Leave that for the younger students who lived nearby, in dorms, in apartments.

Saint Paul's looked every bit as Gothic as Saint John's in Logan, and apparently was built around the same time. It overflowed today. After mass, he emerged into the morning, his mind on his chore.

"Jim! You are here after all." Paul Nossi. The voice was friendly, with no note of accusation.

"My business in Columbus concluded sooner than expected. Now I have business down here."

"Business on a Sunday?"

"I came down to find Rick Myers's studio. I'm gathering all his things to send on to his family."

"Oh." It took only a moment for him to digest that. "That is good of you. But you must come to dinner when you are done." Paul didn't seem to think it would take him long.

"I wouldn't impose on you on Fathers' Day." Very much a father. Were all those kids his?

Paul waved toward his small mob of children. "They would love to have you. And to talk about Rick." They didn't actually look at all eager and Jim didn't blame them.

But there was no real reason not to take the invitation and no reason to get off on a bad footing with a man he might see much of over the next couple years. Maybe more years than that; Jim had no real plan for any future beyond achieving his bachelor's degree. "Very well. When should I show up?"

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Rick Myers's blue and white Volkswagen bus sat beside an older brick building near the river. Undoubtedly a warehouse once. A wood sign with routed lettering announced it as being the *Riverside Art Collective*. Jim walked over to look at the vehicle.

A young man emerged from the studio almost at once, in the company of Joan Woodson, and began explaining. "I was using it to run errands the night—ah, the night it happened. This seemed the best place to park it when I heard."

"You might want to tell the police that," Jim informed him. "I sort of set them looking for it."

To Joan he said, "Has Rozelle been by again?"

"Nope."

He might have gotten word of what Myers had arranged by now. He had a business to run in Columbus too. Would the man be able to continue selling Rick's paintings he had on hand? Jim didn't know what their legal status might be.

Nor was it his concern. He turned from the van. "I guess this is as good a place for the bus to sit as any, now we know where it is. More so as I'll want to load it with whatever Rick left here and drive it all to Columbus."

"Then come in and get a look at it," invited Woodson. "This is Blair, by the way. Blair Jarodsky." Jim shook the young man's large, strong hand. "He's my apprentice, so to speak. Another potter. This was supposed to be a craft commune but we let Rick in."

Blair allowed himself a little smile, perhaps a sad smile. "He was the only one sure to have the rent money on hand each month."

"And he covered for more than one of us when we didn't. Rick Myers was a good guy."

"He was." Jarodsky gave Jim a bit of scrutiny. "Maybe you need some studio space?"

"Jim here has a big farm where he can paint," Joan told him.

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“We’re all going to go out there and impose on him from time to time.”

Through a side way they entered a large, open space with wide double doors on either end, facing the street and the water. Jim wondered if there was a wharf of some sort out there, not that the Hocking was a particularly large river, even down here. A few tall windows broke the bare brick walls, and a wooden stairway along one of those walls led to a second story. He was pretty certain there were only two stories here. There would have been offices up there, maybe, when it was used as a warehouse.

And there would have been an elevator, an open freight elevator probably, over there. Jim could see a boarded over square in the ceiling. Below, a concrete floor, much cracked. Stone might underlay it. Partitions along the walls to each side divided the studio spaces of those who worked here. Sold here too? Jim thought it likely. “Rick had his studio upstairs,” said Joan. “He didn’t need anyone watching him paint.”

They started up the stairs. “Where is this farm of yours, Jim?” asked Blair.

Joan supplied an answer before he could. He had an idea she was inclined to do that. “Oh, you’ve been there. Connie’s place. Jim is her brother.”

“Oh.” He looked like he might have wanted to say something about Connie but didn’t know what.

“Some of us actually live up here,” she told him when they stood on level—more or less—floor. “Or at least sleep here occasionally. This is our communal space. Kitchen over there.”

More windows, more light, up here, but far lower ceilings. “Some of the rooms are just used for storage,” his guide continued. “This one is where Rick painted.”

It was good sized. So was the easel that stood in its center. Jim wasn’t sure about even getting that out of here, much less into a vehicle. A wheeled metal taboret, with Rick’s palette resting on top, stood beside it. A shabby couch was shoved against one wall. Along the other three walls were racks, half-filled with canvases

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and drawings. Good light came in through three large but somewhat dirty windows on the far side. It wasn't quite the clichéd northern exposure; the Hocking River could be glimpsed beyond.

"Aside from the artwork, I'm not sure if there is a point to taking any of this," said Jim. Rick's parents wouldn't want it.

"The couch was here when he moved in," offered Blair.

"Then I won't need to ask your help getting it down the stairs." He looked closer at the easel. Ah, it could be disassembled. Not a problem, then. "His last piece, I suppose."

All three looked at the painting on the easel. Wasn't that the one Rick was working on when Jim last saw him? Brought back here for its finishing touches. "I know that view."

"Me too," Joan said. "Rick may have found his style these last two or three years. He was very much into Color Field painting when I first met him."

"You're a painter, Jim?" asked Jarodsky.

Once again, Joan jumped in. "He was daubing away at something when I dropped in on him. Looked like imitation Bonnard."

"You could say worse things about my painting," allowed Jim. "I'd better start getting these together."

And cataloged. He would send a list to Max Myers before carrying any of it north.

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All Paul and Teri's kids were on the short side and uniformly dark of hair. Like their parents. The youngest might have been nine or ten. Paul introduced her first.

"This is Lizzie."

She eyed Jim with some suspicion before venturing a, "Hello."

"Chris. Jean. Tony." Each nodded politely. "Tammie."

"Short for Tamale!" crowed one of the boys. It might have been Chris.

"Tamara," she corrected him, placing the accent on the first syllable. "Call me Tam."

"And me Pam," said her sister, who might have been slightly older. Both were probably past high school.

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"Pleased to meet all of you," he said. The Nossis' home was north of the university campus, in more rolling terrain. The floods of the Hocking River would not reach here; Jim suspected they flowed through the *Riverside Art Collective* from time to time. Springtime to springtime.

As they did through the university, from what he had heard. He would have to wait and see about that.

"Pammie and Tammie both work in the store sometimes," said Paul, ignoring his daughters' preferences.

"A good reason to shop there," observed Jim. He realized how stupid that sounded as soon as it left his mouth.

But the girls didn't seem to notice. Maybe they were used to hearing that sort of inanity. "I'll be in my mom's shop as soon as I get my license," Pam announced. "I'm taking classes in Marietta."

"Oh?" He had no idea what she was talking about.

Tony enlightened him. "She means Mom's beauty parlor."

"Not a beauty parlor," Teri sniffed. "A salon."

"And I'll be a hairdresser, not a beautician," added Pam. "Or hair stylist. That's good too."

"It runs in Teri's family," said Paul. "Her father is a barber over in Marietta. Pam stays with him while attending school."

Hair stylists, eh? Jim did not think much of the bouffant hairdos both women sported. Tam's bob seemed much more attractive.

"My shop is close to the campus," Teri Nossi told him. "We get lots of students."

"I don't think Jim will be one of your customers! But he will be starting college this fall, just like Tammie."

"As a junior," Jim pointed out. "And a rather old junior."

"Oh, yes, you were in the navy, right?" asked Teri. A buzzer sounded somewhere. "Oh, the lasagna should be ready to come out of the oven. Give it a few minutes and we can all dig in."

"She fixed my favorite," Paul informed him. Paul had some sort of accent, a northeastern accent. He might well have grown

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up in an Italian neighborhood, thought Jim. He had heard a lot of different accents over the past four years and not all of them American.

Teri and the kids sounded like typical southern Ohioans—a bit mid-western, a bit southern. This part of the world was more akin to West Virginia and northern Kentucky than to the central Ohio where Jim had done most of his own growing up.

“In the navy?” one of the boys asked. “Were you on a ship?”

“Maybe an aircraft carrier,” said the other.

“I spent some time on ships but mostly I worked ashore. In England. The navy put me into logistics right away, which means I was essentially a supply clerk. Storekeeper is the official designation.”

“I'd love to visit England,” stated Pam.

“It rains a lot,” he told her, “but it's not so bad. Better than Mississippi—that's where they sent me for my training.”

“Then you know something about business. That's what I'll be studying,” Tam said. She sounded just a tad satisfied with herself.

“More than I want to! I hope to never have to make another inventory.” The levity faded from his voice as Jim added, “I suppose I just did with Rick's belongings.”

There were sober looks and nods all around, even from little Lizzie, but none commented.

“So you joined the navy and saw the world, as the saying goes,” spoke Paul. “But you ended up here.”

“Honestly, I like it better right here in these hills than anywhere else I've been.” Yes, he loved these hills, these remembered hills of his youth.

“Get in here and help me put dinner on the table!” called Teri Nossi from another room. “You too, Jim!”

## FOURTEEN

THE INVENTORY OF RICK'S BELONGINGS was on its way to Max Myers. Jim had typed it up yesterday and got it into the mail today. He could check later whether the mailman left anything in his box. There was no hurry on that.

All the paintings came home with him on Sunday, but he and Joan and Blair had packed the rest of the stuff—or most of it—into a storage space at the studio. It was up to Rick's parents now to decide what to do with it all. The van, too.

For a while this morning, Jim had watched Johnny Bone on his tractor, plowing the field beyond the barn. The work could still be heard but he had lost interest in observing its progress. Johnny had come back to him with a new idea, seemingly having cogitated for a while. "I'll just take everything on myself," he had offered, "and pay for use of the field. I might use the corn myself as cattle feed. Maybe green silage."

Jim recognized weather would play a role in how early it had to be cut, whether it would be harvested green or the ears allowed to ripen. How early the first freeze came. He wasn't sure about all that but assumed Johnny was. And Jim would be spending nothing; Bone would provide both seed and labor. "Okay," he'd said. "But not a flat rental fee. I don't want you risking more money for nothing. Make it part of the value of the crop. And I'll depend on you to tell me what that is."

Johnny was trustworthy enough. He wouldn't jeopardize his relationship with his closest neighbor either.

Hmm, maybe that closest neighbor could get fresh milk from the Bones. He'd seen the milk cans out by the road for early morning pickup. The family did keep a few dairy cows; Jim had seen them, too, grazing on the slope above the house. He knew they needed more than the grass that grew there.

There was an awful lot he needed to learn if he meant to farm. All that was for the future. His other education, his art degree, came first. Summer would pass, classes would begin.

It was just two weeks to the Fourth, wasn't it? Fireworks and

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barbecues. He hadn't seen much of that the past four years. Jim had no intention of shooting off any fireworks nor even of going somewhere to watch them.

But he just might see about firing up the little grill down by the creek.

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Rick's journal contained his thoughts on this and that, painting, art history, odd bits of information that had caught his attention. *The Hocking Hills are part of Appalachia and Color Field is to Abstract Expressionism as Synthetic Cubism is to Analytic Cubism and One can buy heroin on the streets of Athens.* Much of it was like this, statements without further explanation. Maybe Myers intended to elaborate on them later.

I'll have to shave the beard again when I report to the Guard. That got a chuckle from Jim. Then, *Connie has a secret lover. I think he must be married.*

Jim had to close the notebook and think on that. A boyfriend? That wasn't surprising. Keeping it secret from her close friend was. At least a little. It probably didn't matter in the least but maybe he should know more about it. Certain local men came to mind. Undoubtedly there were local men of whom he knew nothing, as well.

Johnny? That seemed more than unlikely. What of her old boyfriend from over the hill, Ken Pell? He should go by the Pell family orchards someday. It wouldn't be a bad move to put in some apple trees here. Maybe he could get some ideas.

There was Will. No, the deputy wasn't married, not that Rick necessarily guessed right about that. He did seem to have had some sort of relationship with Connie. Perhaps only friendship, though he might have hoped for more.

Was the tractor getting louder? Jim stepped out onto the front porch. Oh, Johnny was finished and driving down the road toward his own farm. Finished plowing. There would be more to do, especially with the field having lain untilled so many years, Discing, right? Or harrowing? He couldn't think of all the various

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stages of preparing a field. Except planting. That was the point of it all.

And the corn would sprout and there might be fertilizer involved at some point as it grew taller and taller. Assuming there was sufficient rain. Jim would have to worry about the weather now—part of being a real farmer.

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The phone rang as Jim spread his mail on the kitchen table. Nothing of any importance, it appeared.

“James Fry.” He needed to come up with something more friendly than that.

“Good morning, Mister Fry.” It was still morning, though barely. He needed to think of fixing some lunch. “This is Wyatt Ames with the Athens Police Department.” The detective barely paused before launching into what he had to say. “We wanted to let you know we’re releasing what we still held of Richard Myers’s effects. We looked over the van where you said it was but there was nothing of interest there.”

“I might as well pick the things up. I’ll be down there again soon.”

“So we assumed. Um, we also found Myers’s wallet. Or a kid did, several blocks from the, ah, body.” Jim suspected the young policeman might have thought ‘body’ was too blunt but it seemed like the best word. That was what it was.

“I don’t suppose there was anything of interest there, either.” He hoped he didn’t sound sarcastic. Or too sarcastic.

“No, sir. There wasn’t any money in it, of course. We did dust for prints but it had been out in the weather too long. If there were any in the first place.”

“Understood, Detective Ames. That’s being released too?”

“It is, sir. Just ask the desk sergeant for everything.”

In other words, no need to bother the detectives. What was that beeping? “I’ll do that. Thank you, Ames.” Jim hung up and went out onto the front porch. He didn’t recognize the stake truck pulled in beside the Plymouth. The rear appeared half-

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filled with crates. He didn't recognize the man standing beside the green cab, either. Might as well go down and see who he was. Lunch could wait a few minutes.

A big, broad-shouldered guy, dark curling hair allowed to grow as it would naturally. He wore denim overalls and a white tee, sleeves rolled up. Ken Pell. He'd been in the service, hadn't he? Maybe just the two years of army that faced most draftees. Damn, Ken was a handsome guy. He understood why his sister had fallen for him.

He also understood why she dumped him as too 'square.' He hadn't at the time and wasn't sure Ken had either. Jim had still been a teen the last time he saw him. The boy—pretty much still a boy then—had stopped by the farm when the family was there one weekend. Connie had refused to see him.

"Hi, Ken. I'd been thinking to come see you. Maybe hiking over the hills some day when I have the spare time to get lost in the woods."

The big man grinned. "That's what apple thieves do. We might shoot first and figure out who you were later. It's good to have you back here, Randy."

"Call me Jim, if you can figure out who that is. And I think it's good to be back too."

"Jim. Okay. Hey, sorry about what happened to Connie. You know, we got to be friends again after she moved in." There was only a slight chuckle. "More with my wife than with me."

That addition, that qualifier, sounded just a tad suspicious to Jim. He remembered again Rick's conjecture about Connie seeing a married man. And Ken lived right over the hill, beyond the caves, although it was a rugged way over the ridges and through the woods. His wife lived over there too. That shouldn't be forgotten.

Oh, stop creating scenarios, Jim told himself. "I'll have to meet her," he told Ken.

"Our three kids too. Not to mention my parents. They'd be glad to see you."

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"Your folks are doing well?"

"Yep. Dad still runs the place when I let him." A sudden frown. He's remembering what happened to my parents, Jim thought. Mine and Connie's. It was best to not dwell on that.

"I'll have to buy some apples while I'm there," he said. "Maybe I should get some trees and go into competition with you. Only in a small way; I'd as soon leave most of these hills in woods."

His visitor gazed up at the forested slopes behind the house and nodded. Jim thought Ken Pell understood what he meant. Not everyone who lived in these hills did; they saw only profit in the land. "We sell some stock. I can set you up with a few trees. That's a project for cooler weather."

"When I'll probably be busy with school! We'll see how it goes, Ken." Pell didn't ask about the mention of school. He might already have heard gossip from someone. He was friendly with Johnny Bone, wasn't he? Or had been. Plenty of other suspects. Mail carriers and deputies and other folks who made rounds of the area.

A few more words, a handshake, and Ken was off in his truck. Jim didn't ask where. Maybe home, to the Pell Orchards, via the road he would have to use. Unless he did hike over the ridge someday. Orchard Ridge Road, it was named, an unpaved way, narrower and less used than Hemlock Road. The northern end joined Hemlock up a couple miles; one might have thought it someone's drive if they didn't know where it led. Jim wasn't sure where the southern end was. Over toward Fifty-six somewhere.

He could drive on past the orchard and find out, couldn't he? Jim watched the truck disappear around the bend toward the Bones' place and then climbed the hill. Time for that postponed lunch. He glanced at the stack of notebooks in the front room as he entered, Connie's journals. He should finish looking at them sometime, he told himself. But he hadn't finished Rick's. He'd want to do that first so he could send everything to his parents.

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Jim made a sandwich and took one of Rick's notebook onto the porch, to continue where he'd left off.

## FIFTEEN

"I DON'T KNOW, MAYBE I felt sorry for Johnny," confided Abby Bone. "At first anyway. A little. Mostly, I admired the way he held up despite all the setbacks—his father dying, his mother's health, the farm."

"You two met at church, right?"

"Yep." Jim was helping Abby in the kitchen, or watching while she worked. "I'd just moved to Logan to work in Doctor Hearth's office."

"You're a nurse?"

"I hope to become one, time and finances permitting. I'm a nursing assistant now." Her expression suggested time and finances might not permit anytime soon. "That's all that's needed for what I do. Assist!"

Assist at home, too. Abby worked just as hard there. He looked about the large kitchen, not unlike the one in his place but considerably neater. There was a gas stove too, added since the last time he saw the inside of this house. Jim would have been in his teens. As his own, it was an eat-in kitchen, a 'country kitchen.'

Johnny wandered in. "Father Ed is hearing Mama's confession," he announced. "And having a private talk while he's at it, I reckon. Hey, Jim, do you want to take communion? He'll be offering the sacrament to all of us as long as he's here for my mother."

It would be kind of awkward to refuse it, to hide out here in the kitchen. Nor did he wish to, but Jim was just a little peeved he hadn't known this beforehand. He disliked surprises. "Sure," he responded.

Abby grinned. "If you have anything serious to confess first, you'd better go up and get it taken care of."

"I've been a good boy," Jim informed her. "Not much opportunity lately not to be."

Johnny looked just a little scandalized by the exchange. He glanced toward the hall. "We're ready." All three went up front,

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where the door to the parlor stood open. Father Malone was busying himself at a table, unpacking items from a small leather case. A little gold box, a pyx, which contained already-consecrated hosts, and a small gold plate, the paten.

“Ready?” asked the priest, giving them a quick looking over. Maybe making sure he had the right number of hosts. “Let us pray.”

Abby and Johnny went to their knees at once. Jim followed their example. The short prayer was in Latin. Father Ed lifted a host from the pyx and stepped toward Silvie Bone. Johnny held the paten beneath his mother’s chin as she received, then knelt again, holding it below his own mouth as he took the bread on his tongue. He passed the little plate on to Abby as she took communion, and she to Jim. He wasn’t sure what to do with the paten then but the priest took it from his hands.

Everyone rose; everyone but the elder Missus Bone. “Will you stay for supper, Father Ed?” she asked.

“I’m afraid I can’t, Silvia. I’ve other visits yet to make this evening.” He turned and addressed Jim. “Allow me to welcome you to the parish, Jim. I offer my condolences and my prayers for your sister.”

“Thank you, Father. I don’t suppose she ever managed to show up at church.”

“I’m sorry to say she didn’t, my boy, but she knew she was welcome. We spoke here a few times.” The gray-haired priest paused a moment, as if recalling the occasions. “I do expect to see you, Jim.”

“It’s likely you will, Father.” Unless he was in Athens of a Sunday. He wouldn’t say that.

Goodbyes were exchanged and Father Malone was out the front door. Johnny accompanied him to his car, parked just off the road. “So Connie spent time over here?” he asked the women. Either or both. Abby was wheeling her mother-in-law toward the kitchen.

“From time to time,” said Silvie.

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Abby added, "Mom liked Connie."

"I like anyone who will come and spend some time with me," declared the old woman. "She would come by on a Saturday afternoon and we'd watch the pro wrestling from Cincinnati."

"I remember she was a bit of a fan," said Jim.

"She sometimes typed things up for us. We don't have a typewriter."

Jim nodded. He had used Connie's portable Olivetti himself. He should probably put typewriter ribbons on his shopping list. "I could do that for you," he offered. "I'm a pretty fair typist." That had stood him in good stead in the navy.

Or he could just give the Bones the typewriter, couldn't he? Get a bigger, newer one for himself, one like he had used in the service. Or even an electric.

Johnny emerged from the dusk, coming into the kitchen through the side door. "*You* are staying for a meal, right?"

"That's why I'm here, Johnny. Free food! I wasn't expecting the rest of it."

Silvie chortled. "Ambushed!"

Jim shrugged. "I would have met Father Malone sooner or later. He's the pastor, isn't he? Can I help you, Abby?"

The young woman was setting the table. The better china, he suspected.

"Yep, Father Ed is pastor at Saint John," spoke Johnny.

"I've got it," Abby said.

Johnny went on. "There's an assistant."

"Father Don," said Silvie.

"An Italian." Johnny sounded like he didn't quite approve. Irish priests were apparently all right.

Abby added to this. "Father Don Arturo. He's not an *Italian* Italian. Grew up in Columbus like you, Jim."

Was the name familiar? Maybe he'd run into the priest or his family at some time. Maybe not. "I suppose one finds families of Italian origin in pretty much any Catholic parish." Such as the Nossis.

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“Porto Rickuns, too, these days,” Johnny said. “That chicken smells mighty good.”

It did indeed.

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It was early yet when Jim returned home. He had no interest in sitting and watching TV with the Bones family. He walked; the farm houses were close together—close enough—and the weather was good. On nights like this it seemed a shame to go to bed at all. He’d rather sit on his porch, watch the stars through the leaves of the big maple, listen to the life all around. Night was louder than day, in the country. A lot of people didn’t realize that.

He did sit a while, pondering whether to take a walk somewhere. He didn’t quite trust these roads and their drivers enough to get on his bike at night, even if it did have lights. No, get in there and finish reading Rick’s notebooks, he told himself. Jim rose, stretched, went inside. He switched on that favored lamp he’d brought back from England, and began where he’d left off.

Again, nothing of much interest. Some of the entries were incomprehensible to anyone but Rick. Jim assumed Rick had known what they meant. Comments about art. Comments about art teachers.

Comments that seemed to have no connection to anything. *Will carry a package when I fly this weekend. I only do this for Connie.*

Rick didn’t date his entries so he had no idea when it was from. He was delivering something to Connie? Maybe not. The words could be understood in a number of ways. Misunderstood too.

A couple pages later Rick mentioned Connie’s death. *I can’t believe it*, he wrote. *I don’t believe it.*

Her name did not appear in the remaining pages, but one statement did seem to obliquely refer to her. *No one has a hold on me now. No more delivery service.*

Jim read through to the end of the journal and returned it to its box. He might as well try to get some sleep.

SIXTEEN

JIM WAS NOT SURPRISED BY the early phone call. He had expected it. Not Max Myers himself but his assistant, Benjamin. Benjamin Witts, he announced himself as. Or maybe Witz; he didn't spell it out. Jim hadn't known the family name.

"We could send someone down to drive it back," said the voice on the phone. "Or to help you drive it, if that's your plan."

Hmm. "I'm driving down to Athens today to pick up the effects the police have released. I'll talk to someone there about helping me and get back to you, okay?"

"That would be fine, sir. Um, can you think of anything I might be overlooking? I'm known to do that." A self-deprecating chuckle followed. Undoubtedly a lot of stress went with Benjamin's job.

Jim thought a moment. "The van. Rick's van. I don't know if it is paid off and whether Mister Myers would want to be bothered with that."

"Ah. Yes, that is something I should check on." There was a short pause. Possibly Benjamin was writing down a reminder to himself. "Mister Myers sees no reason to send his son's art supplies to him. Those can be donated locally, if you wish."

Good idea. He might just donate that big easel to himself. "I'll look into that," Jim promised.

Shortly, he was on the way south, in the Jeep. He did not expect to need the station wagon's cargo space today.

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Joan had known he would be coming by the studios. Jim parked and surveyed the old brick building. The place did not look at all busy. He hadn't expect otherwise on a Thursday morning in the summer.

The tall doors were hanging open at both ends. The river did flow close, didn't it? Jim thought he might step out there and take a look at it. Joan emerged from her space to stand beside him, gazing out the far doors. "Something important out there?" she asked.

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"I was wondering if you artists ever sat out there and fished when you got tired of making stuff."

"Come spring, the fish sometimes just swim right in. Hey, I was busy making stuff, as you so poetically put it, when you came. I'd better get back to it."

"You look like you've been playing in the dirt," commented Jim, following the potter to her studio. She was well spattered with clay.

"That's a good description too. 'Bout done with that for the day. Time to start on some glazing. I fire them at night when it's cooler. This time of year, anyway."

"Does your apprentice help you? I don't see Jarodsky around."

Joan shrugged. "Blair had some sort of mysterious errand to run. Not the first time he's taken off without much explanation." She leaned in to impart a whispered confidence. "I think maybe he has another potter on the side."

"Or maybe just a girlfriend."

Joan sputtered a laugh. "Make that boyfriend. Blair's gay, you know."

"I didn't." It wasn't something that had crossed his mind.

"Yeah. I don't know if there are more homosexuals in the arts or if they're just more open about it."

Jim wasn't sure either. "I don't know if it matters."

"We don't know much of anything, do we?"

"Better than believing we do," opined Jim.

"Oh, sure. People assume things, don't they? I'm sure more than a few have decided I'm a lesbian."

That *had* crossed Jim's mind but there was no way he was going to admit it. Nor was he going to comment now. Joan had taken a seat at her wheel. "I hope this didn't get dry while you gabbed at me," she said. "What's the word on Rick's things?"

"Not much new. I picked up what the police had before driving over here. Now we have to decide on how to get it to

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Columbus. I may need another driver.” He was not going to mention the offer of free art supplies. Not yet. Maybe never.

“Someone can probably manage it. Maybe even me. There. That looks right, doesn’t it?” She leaned back and surveyed her urn.

“Righter than I could ever get it. There’s also a decision to make on the van. His parents may want to sell it here rather than bother with hauling it back to Columbus.”

“My International is good enough for me,” Joan informed him. “This needs to go in a cupboard for a while. Help me, will you? Moving stuff without breaking it is the main reason for having an apprentice around.”

“If Blair doesn’t come back, I’ll apply for the job.” Each got their hands under the piece of plywood on which the pottery rested and lifted it onto a shelf.

“Nah, you’re going to be a famous painter. Can’t have you slumming with us crafters. But you could take one of us to lunch.”

“Sure,” said Jim. “Which one?”

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Joan and Jim stopped in at Paul Nossi’s store after eating—*Nossi’s Campus Arts and Crafts* as the sign said. It was a very nice sign. Maybe one of the faculty had a hand in its painting. Paul was there. He might always be there. So was Tam. She gave Joan a distinctly unfriendly look.

“Rick’s Volkswagen?” said Paul, when the latest news was delivered to him. “I might know someone who is interested.” He glanced toward his daughter. “Or her sister.”

“Not practical for either of us, Daddy,” Tam informed him.

“Maybe not, but best to keep an open mind. That is how one finds bargains.”

The girl seemed to grudgingly agree but was unlikely to tell her father so.

“Tammie has her eye on you,” Joan let him know as soon as they left.

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"I knew that already. Pam, too."

The woman only snickered. He had sounded a tad conceited, hadn't he? Tam and Pam remained on his mind as he drove home that afternoon. Joan too. He liked Joan. He liked the attention of the two younger women. Girls. They were girls still, really.

He should invite someone to come to the farm some weekend. A cookout. Swimming. Whatever. Maybe the Fourth. That was close now. Two weeks. Two weeks yesterday, to be precise. He'd think about it.

At mid-afternoon, Jim pulled up his driveway. The shadows of the hills were already stretching across the valley, the sun sinking toward the cliffs. A quick swim might be good right now, wash away the day and relax.

The rear door, the one from the north porch into the kitchen, stood ajar. One of the panes of glass was broken. Jim suddenly felt vulnerable. He reached into the Jeep to retrieve a tire iron and warily approached the door. No sounds, no lights. Easing the door open, he flipped on the overhead fixture. Nothing seemed disturbed in the kitchen.

He crossed the room and peered out the other door. Nothing there. Back to the hall. The living room seemed untouched. That didn't mean someone hadn't crossed it and gone up the stairs. They could be lurking there now. Jim intended to thoroughly check every room and closet.

The parlor—his bedroom, for now and maybe the future. There were papers scattered. The notebooks. Someone had gotten into the notebooks. Jim's mind immediately went to Deputy Dundee. He hadn't mentioned them to anyone else, had he?

No. Connie's journals were still here. Tossed to one side, but here. Rick's were missing.

## SEVENTEEN

"THERE ARE TIRE TRACKS HERE," noted Will Dundee. "Someone drove in behind the house where they couldn't be seen from the road."

"It's a pretty narrow space."

"Just wide enough. They might have known that." The deputy perused the faint marks. "A car, I think. Not a truck."

It was a good thing he had taken the time to finish reading Rick's papers. Who knew about them? The Athens police might. The woman who had rented Rick his apartment. Jim could not see her ransacking his place. He had told Joan, he believed. Blair too. Either of them could have blabbed about it to anyone. The journals had not been mentioned to the Myers family nor anyone who worked for them. Jim had only listed 'personal papers' in the inventory.

Joan Woodson was the only person he could be positive had not been here. He was her alibi! Or she could have distracted him by going out to lunch while her partner struck—

Pretty damned unlikely. How much of this should he share with Dundee?

"Only some papers taken," Will said. He wanted to know more.

"Rick Myers's journals. I would guess someone thought there was something important in them." There. He had stated it plainly. "I think I should share this with the detectives in Athens." Jack Hennings just might be interested.

"I'll make sure the official report is sent on to them. There won't be much to it, I'm afraid." He hesitated before adding, "I could try to get someone else to come out and check for fingerprints."

The deputy had dusted himself and concluded the intruder had worn gloves. Jim was entirely willing to believe it.

"That would be a waste of everyone's time, wouldn't it? Like this is." He pretty much spat out the last words.

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"Don't let yourself get frustrated, Jim. That never accomplishes anything."

"I hope there is something that can be accomplished." Jim turned away from the intruder's parking spot. "Nothing else you can do right now, is there?"

"No, but we know the reason for the break-in, and that's something to go on." The phone in the kitchen rang. "I'd best let you get that and move along." He waved a goodbye and hurried down the steep hillside to his vehicle.

It was Max Myers himself this time. "Jim! I hope I find you well."

"Well enough, sir." There was no reason to tell him he'd just been burglarized. Myers had his own troubles.

"I understand you intend to bring my son's things yourself. You have someone to help you with this?"

"I do." Almost certainly. Someone was sure to be willing to assist.

"Then I thank you for it and all you have done. About Rick's automobile. The van—we would as soon someone simply took over the payments. One of Rick's friends or colleagues, or maybe you could use it?"

Another way of thanking him, perhaps. "Not me, sir. It's not something I need. But I may have someone who does." He felt unsure but went on. "Did Rick ever mention the Nossi family?"

"Yes, many times. They were very kind to him, he said. They need a vehicle?"

Jim got the impression Max might be thinking of gifting the Volkswagen outright. "Maybe one of the daughters. I'll talk to them."

"Very well, Jim. Ah, I have heard things."

"Things?"

"About my son's death. It seems not everyone is convinced it was as we were first told. You have something to do with that, don't you?"

How would Myers have heard that? Jim found out almost

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immediately, as the man did not wait for a reply. "A Detective Hennings of the Athens police spoke to me. Jim—it is maybe better to leave things as they are. Rick is gone and that can not change."

"I'm leaving that all up to the police," Jim assured him.

"Very well. Call my office when you decide to drive up."

"I shall. Before the Fourth, I'm sure."

After Jim hung up the receiver he admitted to himself that he had lied. He would be involved in figuring out what really happened to Rick, and why. And he could not forget that it might be tied to Connie's death.

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He should finish going through Connie's journals now. Both of them. Jim opened one but couldn't find the concentration to follow the words. He set it aside and picked up the guitar. A strum. It required no tuning, he decided, or not enough to matter to him. Jim had figured out how to do that and little more.

An LG-2. That was the model of Gibson Connie had purchased. Jim had been told they were good little guitars. That's what the guy in the music store in Athens said, anyway. Where was the instruction book he'd bought there? Everything had been disarranged by his unwelcome guest. Okay, here we go. A C chord. Easy enough. He'd be playing in no time, right?

An hour later he could play three chords. Three would do for now. Jim suspected his musical education would be more of a winter thing.

Now for a summer thing. He'd been planning it a while.

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There. Those coals should keep burning. He might add more charcoal later but should try cooking something now. Using this grill down by the creek made more sense than getting the big stove in the kitchen going. He'd want that for heat come winter, maybe. There was an old pot-bellied stove sitting unused on the front porch but it might be hooked up to the chimney again. It

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had been replaced by an oil-burning heater in the parlor. What Jim was inclined to call the parlor.

Or maybe he should call it his studio, come winter. One of the two front rooms would have to serve. For now, the back porch was the better choice. He was pretty certain he would just close off the upstairs rooms when it turned cold. Shoot, he could probably live in the kitchen.

Simple fare today. The simplest Jim could manage. Hot dogs. He would have to make an extra effort to mess those up. Four wieners directly on the grill. He'd open the buns up and put them further out to toast just slightly. That made enough of a lunch. More than enough. A beer too, of course. Yeah, strictly, it was ale. He would have to stock up on beer if he had guests here. Soft drinks also. Ketchup and all that sort of thing. Jim himself was not fond of putting lots of condiments on his dogs. A little mustard was quite enough, thank you.

Ah, yes. The best hot dog he'd had in at least four years. He took a long pull on his can of Ballantine's and leaned back to watch Hemlock Creek flow by.

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Connie had gotten into folk music. She ran on a good bit about it in her notebooks. It had grown dark in the parlor so Jim had removed to the front porch to continue reading. In a half-hour or so, he'd have to go in and turn on a lamp.

There were some song lyrics. Her own? Considering the erasures and crossings-out, it seemed likely. This one on the next page wasn't. Connie had written 'by Pete Seeger' below the title. She had undoubtedly sung it sometime. Played that little guitar too. Maybe he should try to learn the song.

Here was something about Rick. Just a mention that he'd be gone that weekend, flying with the National Guard. He must have done that frequently. A weekend each month? Was that how it went? Jim wasn't sure what base Myers reported to. Columbus?

The phone. He might as well move inside. "Jim Fry," he

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answered just on the fifth ring. That was an improvement on 'James,' wasn't it? Less formal.

"Hi Jim. Jack Hennings here. A report came across my desk that you'd been burglarized."

"Did it also say what had been taken?"

"It did. That's why I rang you. Just Myers's personal journals, was it?"

"Whoever broke in was interested in nothing else. I suppose Will Dundee sent the report your way."

"He did. It was the right thing to do and the smart thing to do, even if you told him to. Many another wouldn't have bothered in his place."

Jim wasn't quite sure if he or Will was being complemented. Maybe Jack wasn't sure either. "I had read through those notebooks and didn't find much. A thing here and there maybe."

"We should talk about that."

"Monday?" He already had plans for tomorrow. "I might drive down on Sunday but I wouldn't intrude on your day of rest."

"Don't you know the police never rest, Jim? But I won't be in the office. Monday would be good."

"Okay. Till then."

Monday sometime. Jim immediately regretted making the appointment. Sort of appointment—they hadn't set a time. He didn't really feel like driving to Athens two days in a row. Oh, he'd be doing that all the time once classes started. He'd already chosen his courses and set up his schedule. Rick had helped him navigate that.

Was it too early to start some supper? He didn't feel like reading any more.

EIGHTEEN

JIM HAD A CLIMB AHEAD of him, this early Saturday morning. He intended to hike across the ridge and locate the Pell apple orchards. He would learn just how close they lay to the caves, how easy it would be for someone to come and go. Not that he had any sort of suspicions about Ken Pell. His curiosity had been aroused.

He wanted to check something at the caves anyway. Above the caves. He didn't have to actually visit them. The sun had barely risen when he crossed Hemlock Creek at the usual spot, past halfway down the corn field, and started climbing. A right turn before the cleft rock, up, bypassing the first cave.

Nor did Jim turn left again to the other caves. The lower caves had still been somewhat visible from above the second cave. Much further and they would not be. He had never gone further. He'd never had reason.

Now he did. The hillside did not slope steeply here above the caves, as it did below them. Those were real climbs down there which was why most approached the caves roundabout. He followed the cliff top on around to a point above the third cave, the big one. The one Connie fell from. Most likely fell from. This was not unlike standing atop the cliffs behind the farm house. There was a long view down the narrow valley.

There was also plenty of slippery leaf litter. He was not going to move closer to the edge. But—if someone lost their footing up here and slid down the slope, they might shoot out quite a distance. They might miss the rocks in front of the third cave altogether. One wouldn't need to jump outward, as he had told himself before. When he was here with Gil.

There was nothing else up here to see, of course. It had been far too long for any sort of evidence to remain. Well, not glass or metal, but leaf fall and snow and rain was likely to obliterate that sort of thing too. He turned back toward the ridge. There was still some climb before crossing over it. When he did cross over, he'd find out what was on the other side.

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Someone else's property, yes. A boundary line surely lay somewhere around here, close on one side or the other of the ridge. No fences. He might or might not walk into the Pells' land. If you had any sense, Jim Fry, he told himself, you would have found a map before doing this.

He was climbing out of a side of the valley, wasn't he? He hadn't gone all the way to its upper end. It was unlikely it mattered and it was still a pleasant walk beneath the tall trees. No reason to make things any harder; this was the easy way to go up.

But he wanted to make sure he didn't drop into the next hollow over and wind up at the Bones' farm. No, he was moving the wrong direction for that. Not that it was easy to tell with these big oaks hiding the sky. Southeast he should be moving. More or less.

Jim was surprised to suddenly find himself on the edge of a dirt road. Not some farm path, a real road, surely Orchard Ridge Road. He stepped out into it. Which way? Only woods lay close on each side here. North seemed the best choice. More so when the vista opened up around the very first turn. Apple trees! This land lay atop a broad ridge, gently rolling. A good place for an orchard. Jim was a tad jealous. He didn't have anything to compare on his farm. Not on this scale; he could always grow a tiny orchard on that plot Johnny had just planted for him.

He strolled up the road. There were the Pells' barns and storage buildings, over to the left. The house should be behind them, at the end of a somewhat long drive. He remembered all this from riding the school bus, a decade and a half ago. Jim had not been in here since.

Well, if he went up the drive, the Pells wouldn't shoot without asking questions. Locals did come in here and buy a bushel or two of fruit, in the season. Apple juice too? Maybe that was only for friends. He'd have to be a friend.

Framed in an open garage door, over to his right, Ken Pell was bent over an automobile. He straightened up as Jim approached,

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wiping his hands on an oily rag. "Where's your car?" He looked past Jim as if he expected it to magically appear.

"I found my way over the hill. Whether I can find my way back, there is no telling."

"You won't be carrying any trees back that way either, I'd think."

The vehicle, a pre-war Ford, he thought, was in a state of disassembly. "I remembered you had a thing for cars."

Ken gave that a chuckle. "Yeah, there's a bunch of us hot-rodders. Will Dundee. He comes over here and works on projects." That helped explain how certain gossip reached Ken.

"That old Mercury of his goes. Used to belong to a bootlegger who made some legendary runs with it. Hey, it's early for lunch but come up to the house and say hello to Marge. Maybe she'll make us some coffee." The man reconsidered. "Or maybe lemonade with it getting hot like this."

"Your parents aren't here?" asked Jim, falling in with him.

"Off for the day and took the kids with them. Just me and the wife today. You remember Marge?"

"I don't think so." He had no idea who Ken had married.

"She remembers you," he was told.

But Jim didn't know the small woman who greeted them at the screen door. The first words from her mouth were, "Ken tells me to call you Jim now."

"Um, yes, I use Jim, ma'am."

She snickered, probably at the 'ma'am.' "He really doesn't recognize me," she told her husband. "Well, come on in and get reacquainted."

"You knew me as Marjory Ball," she said, as he and Ken took chairs at the kitchen table. "We went to school together in Martinton. Third Grade, wasn't it?"

"Well," admitted Jim, "that *was* the year I attended." He didn't admit he still had no memory of her.

"He was an odd kid," she confided to her husband.

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"Daydreamer. And able to come up with the most imaginative scenarios on the playground."

"I guess you did know me."

"Course I remember you then too," said Ken. He grinned at his wife. "I didn't take any more notice of that skinny little girl than you did."

But he had been noticing Connie. Both of them teens by then. Ken Pell had been his sister's first real boyfriend.

"She grew up pretty well," Jim told him.

"That she did! Not just good looking but smart. Marge has a degree. She could teach school but we need her to run things around here."

"That's for sure," agreed Marjory Pell.

"And she's into history. Local history."

"There's a society," Marge told him. Jim suspected the woman was an officer, if she didn't run it outright. She gave that sort of impression, of being one to take charge.

Cold lemonade was set before them. Ice was a good thing on hot summer days. Marge took a seat across from the men. "I know your family has an interest in Johnny Appleseed," spoke Jim. "I recall your father talking about him, Ken."

"Tall tales, and most likely not true, according to Marge."

Marge jumped to Appleseed's defense. "But he did spread apples across the state. Mostly further north."

"Day lilies, too," offered Jim.

"Yes, that's true." She seemed a little surprised he knew this. "He carried bulbs along with his bag of seeds."

They grew by many country houses in Ohio and Indiana, half-wild, propagating themselves over decades, maybe even since the time Johnny himself had given them to farm wives across the region. He should have some.

"Not much profit in lilies," felt Ken.

"Why, you could branch out into them," Jim told them. "Pell's Lily Orchards. It has a nice ring, doesn't it?"

Ken gave it about as much of a chuckle as it deserved. "We *are*

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branching out into nursery stock,” he said. “That’s Marge’s doing, a lot of it.”

“Direct retail too,” she added. “More and more people are visiting these hills.”

“And there goes my privacy.” Jim was, in part, serious about that. He’d as soon the tourists spent their weekends elsewhere. He turned to Ken. “I will be back to get those trees we talked about. Do you have winesaps? I remember liking those.”

“Stayman winesaps. Sure do. I’ll make sure to set some aside for you. You might want another variety too, and maybe a crab apple or two for pollination.”

Jim nodded. There would be plenty of time yet to work out details. He rose. “Great seeing you and the place,” he told his hosts. “I do want to see if I can retrace my way home. It’s early. Lots of time to find my way back.”

“You wouldn’t want to be lost in the woods at night and go over a ledge.” Ken stopped short, realizing what he’d said, what memories of Connie’s death he had inevitably awakened.

Marge jumped in. “I’ll run you home, Jim. I have errands and it would be on my way. Sort of.”

Why not? “Thanks. I’ll take you up on that.” All three went outside, Ken back to his tinkering, Jim and Marge to a green Ford F-100 pickup, with ‘Pell Orchards’ emblazoned in gold on the door. Marge turned left as she exited the drive. He wouldn’t learn where the other end of Orchard Ridge Road was today.

A minute down the road, she asked, “Do you remember Sally?”

He knew who she meant immediately. “I do. I was kind of in love with her. As much as one can be at that age.”

“Oh.” She digested that for a moment. “I guess her death would have hit you even harder then.” Jim had come to school one morning to learn the girl had passed the night before. Diabetes complications of some sort. He’d never heard the details and probably wouldn’t have understood them anyway at

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that age. The day before he had sat with her on the steps behind the gym and shared lunch.

It wasn't far to where they met Hemlock Road. Jim felt he could walk or bike to the Pells by this route without much effort. Aside from the final hill they had come down—and he would have to go up. Marge turned left again. "I was upset when Connie moved back here," she said. Her voice was even; she'd been thinking about this, had prepared for it. "Her and Ken. I knew I was just a drab little thing beside your sister. I was afraid they would take up where they left off."

"They left off on pretty bad terms," Jim told her.

"Yes, Ken told me about that. But they were friendly again and I was jealous. I'll admit that." She was silent a minute or so. They drove past the Bone farm. "I had no reason to believe they were involved but I was jealous anyway."

"Connie could do that to people."

"Yeah." She pulled in to let him out. "I hope we'll see more of you, Jim. Whether you come through the woods or not."

"I'm sure you will. Thanks for the lift."

She u-turned and drove north, up the hill toward Martinton.

NINETEEN

JIM COULD STILL FIND A little suspicion of Ken Pell in himself. Suspicion of what? Maybe of being unfaithful to Marge, of having had an affair with Connie?

Suspicion of a jealous Marge, for that matter. All scenarios he could envision seemed to border on the preposterous. He could not see either Pell crossing the hills as he had, but one or the other could still have been at the farm. Even at the caves.

He was on his way to Athens this morning, after attending mass in Logan. Father Ed would suspect him of being a good Catholic now. Jim wasn't so sure of that but tried to be, now and again.

He drove straight to the craft cooperative and pulled the Jeep in beside Rick's Volkswagen. Joan Woodson emerged almost before his feet touched the ground, her apprentice in her wake. "Found any takers for the van?" she asked at once.

"Not yet."

She turned to the young man at her side. "You could use the van, Blair. You were always borrowing it anyway."

It was hard to read his face. The man appeared almost appalled by the idea. "No. Not me." He seemed adamant but offered no reason.

It didn't matter to Jim. "If I can't find anyone who wants the van—"

"Or who can afford it" said Joan.

"Right. Max Myers offered to let someone just take over the payments." That made no difference to either potter, as far as Jim could tell. "I'd need someone to drive it up to Columbus and leave it if there are no takers."

Joan considered that only a moment. "Give me a day or two notice and I'll do it."

"Okay. I'm still hopeful one of the Nossi girls will jump at this new offer. Maybe I should go by their house now. They'd be back from church, I think."

"No need. I'll just call them up." Woodson led them back into

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the studio building and went at once to a black desk phone on, of course, a desk just inside the door. That was the small side door Jim had used when first he visited the place, not the big ones. Those were pulled shut at the moment.

A minute later, she announced, "Paul will be by in a while with one daughter or another." She smirked a bit. "I think he believes it too good a deal to pass up, whether either of them wants it or not."

"That would depend on how close it was to being paid for," Jim felt.

"I doubt there is more than a year left. He had driven it a couple years, hadn't he?" This she addressed to Jarodsky, who only nodded in reply.

Maybe he should have taken it himself! No, not with two vehicles already. "Why don't you guys get the doors open?" Joan asked. Or maybe ordered. "There are always customers dropping by on Sundays," she offered to Jim in explanation.

"But we don't get much work done ourselves," added Blair, as they swung them open. It was not long before a wood-paneled Chevy station wagon pulled up. Not a customer. Paul Nossi. It might be the vehicle he used for business. Which girl was in the front seat beside him? Tam. He could tell from the hair before he saw the face.

Jim went out to greet them at their car. "So," he asked, "are you here to buy the bus as a surprise for Pam?"

Tam made a face at that. "Pam wouldn't be caught dead in it," she confided. "Totally uncool in her book. I think it's kind of cute. Practical, too, if I actually needed a car." Or the expense of one, Jim added in his head.

"You could drive your siblings all sorts of places," he told her.

"Oh, that's just the kind of thing I want to avoid!"

"Much might depend on the payments," said Paul.

That, Jim knew. It was not a particularly large payment but he had no idea what the girl—or her father—could afford.

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"Not so bad, not so bad at all," mused Paul, on hearing the amount. Even Tam might have shown some approval.

"And less than a year to pay?" she asked.

"I'm not certain of that. If not, I doubt it would be much more." He should have asked that of Benjamin, when he got the payment amount. Or Benjamin should have offered it. "Chances are it's in the mess of Rick's documents I have at my place."

Father and daughter looked at each other. He wasn't sure which nodded first. "I think we'll go for it," said Paul.

"After you call us with the details," stated Tam.

Jim nodded. "It can all be taken care of by mail," he said, "or we could drive up to Columbus as soon as tomorrow and sign everything over. I must deliver Rick's things anyway."

"Oh, I want to go along," chirped Joan. "Even if it's not necessary now."

"It's all right with me."

Paul immediately said, "Tammie should not drive the van anyway, maybe, until the title and insurance are taken care of."

Jim doubted it mattered, but was willing to agree. More likely, Paul thought a chaperon was a good idea if a man he barely knew was taking his eighteen year old daughter off to Columbus. "And it will be in Tamara's name?" Maybe her father would rather he held the title.

"Absolutely. I do not intend to be involved any further!"

Tomorrow was probably too soon. "Would Tuesday be good?" he asked anyone and everyone. Except maybe Blair. "I could set everything up with Myers' office by phone tomorrow." Tam nodded. So did Joan.

"It's set then. Expect my call." No. "Oh, wait, I'll be coming down tomorrow anyway. I'll drop by the store." He turned toward Joan and Blair. "And we'll have to pack all Rick's belongings into my wagon and the van." Including those he intended to keep himself.

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Jim had turned down a dinner invitation. Two weeks in a row

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with the Nossis seemed a bit much. Another time, he assured Paul. Maybe he assured Tam, too, though she didn't appear to care much one way or the other.

Nor did he mention a Fourth of July picnic at the farm to anyone. That subject might be better approached separately, not that he had expectations of any interest. He was home by early afternoon, with little to occupy his time. He picked up Connie's journal where he had left off.

Much of the same as before. Here was something different—a mention of her ex-husband. *Mike knew about my affair. I think I wanted him to.*

Just that one statement. No, she came back to the subject a couple paragraphs down. She'd even drawn a little arrow down to it. *Mike was jealous. We had a terrible fight and I filed for divorce the next day. It was the best thing for both of us, wasn't it? I was truly afraid he might hit me. He'd never been violent before. He kept his cool pretty much and just stormed out.*

Mike always kept his cool, even when I could tell he was close to exploding. I might have wanted him to do that too. To show he cared enough. But he was willing to just let me go, I guess. I think maybe he cheated too, after that, after I'd hurt him. Was it really cheating when we were already splitting? I don't know.

There wasn't much to grab Jim's attention after that. Some gossip about the people she worked with at the school. One of the bus drivers? Connie seemed to hint about something there, something between them. Maybe just wishful thinking.

It was time to make something up for a Sunday dinner. He should see what cans he had on hand.

TWENTY

HE HAD CLEARED EVERYTHING WITH Benjamin Witts. It was spelled Witts; he'd seen it on one the papers he'd gone through. That didn't mean it was the original family spelling. He'd found all the figures he needed, too, or got them from Benjamin.

Armed and ready to face Tam Nossi. Another stop first; Jack Hennings expected him. He was waved right to the detectives' office. Ames wasn't there but a stranger was. "Jim Fry, meet Roy Barley. He's an ATF agent. Maybe I should have had someone from the drug enforcement world but he'll do in a pinch."

Roy shook his hand. "In that the two worlds overlap, I can probably help." He gave Jim a look that suggested at least a little suspicion. "Or you can help us."

Jim took a chair. "ATF? You guys are way ahead of me, I think."

"So fill him in, Roy," said Jack, leaning back.

"Okay, the condensed version. The biggest bootlegging organization in the area expanded into drugs sometime back. We've known that but couldn't pin anything on anybody." Jim nodded. Jack had mentioned moonshiners to him.

"There's a possibility—just a possibility—that your affair is connected. Rick Myers was clean as far as we know, but some of his friends—acquaintances, maybe I should say—weren't."

"And we are aware your sister used," commented Hennings.

"Nothing hard," Jim replied. "I'm sure of that."

"So we understood, too. That's what our bootleggers ran into the area for a long time, barbiturates and the like. Heroin is new here, in the quantities we're seeing now."

"One of the entries in Myers's journal suggested he was a bit shocked it could be purchased on the streets of Athens."

Jack went so far as to lean forward. "The stolen journals. That's why I asked you in, Jim. Do you recall anything else from them that might be important?"

"He mentioned Connie might have a married lover. That may

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have no bearing on your, um, investigations but it seemed like it might be important to me.”

“Any idea who?”

Jim shook his head. “I have a lot of married neighbors.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Errands. Rick was running errands for someone when he flew. I guess you’d call them errands. Delivering packages, he put it. I’m guessing that might have been when he was doing his duty with the National Guard.”

“It’s possible,” admitted Barley.

“And he wrote there would be no more of it after my sister passed. No one had a hold on him.” Jim thought on that a moment. “Or maybe on Connie.”

Jack looked to the other lawman. This was the sort of thing they were after, wasn’t it? “I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s what the burglar was concerned about.”

“Or it might have been all about Connie’s death,” Jim reminded him.

“There’s no saying they’re two different things. Anything else useful you remember, Jim?”

“That’s all that stood out.” He tried to pull up more but nothing came. “I have my own experiences and memories of smugglers in the navy. There were lots of tempting situations.”

“I would imagine,” said Roy Barley. “Well, Jack, I think we’ll have to bring in someone else on this one.”

“As you wish, Roy, as you wish. I’m officially only investigating a murder.”

Two murders, thought Jim, but didn’t say it.

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Tamara Nossi was not working in the store this Monday morning. Pamela Nossi was. She studiously ignored Jim and her father as they finalized their arrangements. “Eleven payments? Excellent,” said Paul. “Tammie is getting a very good deal, I think.”

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“So do I,” agreed Jim. “Woodson promises to come and pick her up at your house early tomorrow, to meet up in Logan.”

“And then to Columbus. Very well. I would tell you to keep an eye on my girl but I think maybe she is the most responsible one of the three!”

Jim could hear Pam snicker at that. It might be true; Joan and he were a pair of ne’er-do-well artist types. “We’ll be sure to caravan both ways,” he promised. “I won’t let your daughter out of my sight. Tam, that is.” He glanced at Pam who at once glanced away.

“Good, good.” Paul seemed to have missed their exchange. As soon as he went to take care of a customer, Pam began a leisurely move in his direction. Jim gave her time to reach him. He might as well be nice to the girl.

“So is Tam going to see this farm of yours before any of the rest of us?” she asked. It sounded almost like an accusation, as if he should have extended an invitation the first time he laid eyes on her.

Jim thought maybe he would invite all the Nossis down someday. Not soon. “Probably not. I’m thinking of doing a cookout or something of that sort on the Fourth. Would you like to come?”

Pam certainly hadn’t expected immediate results. That didn’t slow her down a bit. “I think I’ll be free, Jim, but it is a big holiday. Lots to do. And there is my family.”

But apparently no boyfriend to get in the way. “Think about it if you want and get back to me. It’s all still in the planning stages.”

She gave a hesitant nod. Jim was sure she wanted to say ‘yes’ right then. Maybe she felt a need to run it by her family first. She was nineteen, right? At the awkward divide between childhood and independence.

One more errand, he told himself, as he exited the art supply store.

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"I'm surprised how little space is left," said Joan. "I didn't think Rick had that much stuff." Both the van and station wagon were packed. Jim would drive the wagon home that afternoon, unloading what he wanted to keep for himself, loading Rick's artwork he'd been holding. Then Joan and Tam would come up early the next morning in the van, to meet at McCormick's Garage and Service Station in Logan. Ted's place, where his sister's car had been stored.

And off to Columbus. "I want to talk to Arnie Rozelle while we're there," Joan had informed him. "That's one reason I invited myself along."

Jim was good with that. He couldn't think of much he would want to say to the man but it wouldn't hurt to meet him.

"I'm planning a picnic or cookout or whatever you want to call it at the farm on Independence Day," he told Joan. "You're invited. You too, Blair. And any friends you want to drag along. They don't even have to be friends, for that matter. You know a bunch of artists and I don't know much of anyone."

"Like the crowd that used to come when your sister was there?" she asked. "It won't be the same without her and Rick."

"Then you and I will have to be host and hostess," Jim informed her. "As long as you don't get in the way of my date."

"You didn't invite that Nossi girl, did you?"

"One of them. Both seemed a bit much."

"Oh, why not? Sure, I'm in and I'll spread the word. I didn't have anything better planned!"

And that was that. It would undoubtedly be a good thing to meet people in the arts community. He might even like some of them. Jim got into his late sister's red and white station wagon and began the drive home. He'd best get to bed early, if he could. Tomorrow would be a long day.

TWENTY-ONE

THEY HADN'T QUITE HIT THIRTY-THREE north to Columbus at dawn, but it was close enough. Jim led, Joan following behind in the van. Tam chose to remain Joan's passenger rather than ride with him. That was fine with him. He wouldn't have to talk with anyone. And it gave him time to think. Jim had a great deal to think about.

All that he had learned about Connie. He had to remind himself her death could still very much have been an accident. Not Rick's. Were the two related? Did one lead to the other? Jim considered this from one angle and another and could conclude nothing. He began to make a list in his head, a list of those who seemed to be involved in some way, who might be involved. I ought to write this down, he told himself. Not while he was driving.

Mike Gil wasn't quite the innocent he had thought. Maybe his jealousy had got the best of him. Maybe he did finally explode, after letting it build for years. Jim had difficulty believing it but it did remain possible.

Ken Pell. The old flame that might have reignited. He knew Ken had that somewhat privileged outlook that went with being a handsome, athletic sort. How he had ever ended up with Marjory Ball he couldn't imagine. But if he were rejected?

What of Marge Pell, for that matter? What if she were jealous? Marge was a diminutive woman but it wouldn't take much to give someone a push. More so if that someone were drugged.

None of the three had any connection to Rick Myers. Not that he knew of. Will Dundee? There was an outlier. There seemed to be no secret he liked Connie. He wouldn't be the married man Rick had mentioned, but he could be jealous of someone. He knew the caves. He'd been up to them with Connie.

Oh, throw the net wider. Joan? Who might know what secrets she had? She certainly knew Rick well. Or better than most, anyway. Or the apprentice for that matter. Could Blair have had a relationship with Rick? There was no breath of anything like that.

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One man did have a relationship with him, Arnold Rozelle, whom he might meet today in Columbus. Jim didn't know enough one way or another about the gallery owner to have an opinion, only what he had heard others say, some favorable, some not. Columbus. Connie's lawyer was there too. His own lawyer or at least his former lawyer. Jim realized he really knew very little about Daniel Folkes. Might as well add him to the list!

Hmm. Not the Bones. Either one, though Johnny was a married guy and close at hand. And someone who worked in a doctor's office might have access to drugs. Okay, don't cross them off yet.

That school bus driver Connie mentioned in passing? Jim knew absolutely nothing of him, not even his name. There would be a number of people she interacted with at the Martinton school. Also nameless.

And there was, perhaps most importantly, the person for whom Rick delivered packages. Jack might have an idea who that was; so might Roy Barley. They would not be likely to share. But both Connie and Rick seemed to be involved with him somehow.

Damn, you're getting suspicious of everyone, he told himself. This is Lancaster, isn't it? Halfway there, or something like that.

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Max Myers' offices were in a surprisingly shabby neighborhood. They parked on the street in front of the brick building, where two black men helped them unload the vehicles and carry Rick's belongings to a store room. All except the artwork. That went upstairs somewhere. Only Witts was there to take possession.

He also took care of the paper work for Tamara Nossi's new car. That proved quick and painless. "You can drive it now," Joan told her.

"But you have to wait for us," said Jim. "I promised your father we would caravan."

"Or convoy, as the truck drivers say," Joan added.

"Good with me. I've no need to rush home. How 'bout some breakfast? Jim has to treat."

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"That will make it a date, you know," Joan told her. "You'll be one up on your sister."

"Who's to say I'm not dating you?" Jim asked. Not that he considered either this or a cookout at the farm to be a date.

"I am," came Joan's quite sensible reply.

Jim and Tam devoured eggs and bacon and hash browns at a little restaurant a few blocks over; Joan devoured oatmeal. "I'm not a carnivore," she let them know.

"Omnivores," Tam corrected her. "We're omnivores."

"We eat anything," Jim added to this.

"Especially if it's fried." Tam popped another crispy strip of bacon into her mouth.

He wondered what Joan might eat at a picnic. She'd probably drink beer. Hmm, artsy types always went for wine. Jim thought he mixed up a pretty good bowl of sangria. That should go over.

"When do you think we should go over to Rozelle's?" he asked.

"Ten-thirty. I called him and we have an appointment."

"Oh."

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"All Rick's art is in his parents' possession now."

"That's where it belongs," said Arnold Rozelle. "Except, of course what is here." It was impossible to tell what he meant by the statement. He seemed neither mocking nor serious.

Jim looked around the show space. It was a reasonably swank place, a bit on the austere side. The paintings tended toward the representational; some seemed just a bit out of style. There was probably a clientele for that. Joan and Tam were across the room, looking at what hung there.

The gallery wasn't open yet. Eleven, the sign on the door said. The two women returned to them. Good thing; Joan was the one who wanted to talk to him, not Jim.

"You should hire Miss Nossi here as an intern," Joan asserted. "She knows the art biz."

"If she truly knew it, she would run away from it," answered

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Arnie. He was a very ordinary looking man, in a well-cut gray suit, a subtly striped blue tie. Jim was sure it was a look he cultivated, bland yet sophisticated.

"I may just sell art supplies like my dad," said Tam. "Or something else entirely."

A small smile from Rozelle. "I know your father. Give him my regards, won't you? Now, Joan, do we have business?"

"I think Rick is unfinished business. The police are finding, ah, new and interesting information about his—" For once Joan Woodson seemed at a loss for words.

"His death? I had my own doubts." The man, of a sudden, became another man, a man who sagged a little, whose face no longer hid his thoughts. "It was not like Rick to—to be where they claimed he was."

"Everyone knew he didn't cruise. He loved you, Arnie. For some reason, he loved you."

"I know. I miss him terribly." Then the least bit of doubt crept into his voice. "He would never have cheated, would he?"

"Never. I always thought he just went home and jacked off."

Tam Nossi blushed very red.

But a lopsided smile came to Rozelle's face. "Yes, that would be like Rick."

Jim felt it was time he jumped in. "Was there anything odd going on with Rick? Anything you know of? There seem to have been some mysterious errands he ran."

The controlled Arnie returned, like a stretched rubber snapping back. "When he was flying?" Jim gave a nod and he continued. "Something was going on but he wouldn't talk about it. Something he wasn't happy about. I could tell that, at least." He sighed, shrugged. "But little else."

"On his National Guard weekends."

"Not just then. He sometimes flew a private plane. Rick couldn't afford one himself but had friends—a friend maybe—who let him fly. He wouldn't talk about that either."

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That was something new. Jim would tell Jack Hennings about it sometime.

“So I guess that wraps that up, Arnie,” spoke Joan. “Is there anything we can do for you?”

“No, I think not. Life goes on and Arnold Rozelle keeps selling pictures.”

“You may want to sell some of Jim’s one of these days. An up and coming talent!”

“Yes,” said Tam. “I just might snap him up for my own gallery.”

“I don’t think you’ve seen any of my work,” Jim told her.

“Oh, that doesn’t matter.”

TWENTY-TWO

"IT WAS NICE OF YOU to invite Arnie to your celebration. He's unlikely to come."

Nice? Jim considered it a courtesy, as much about professional relationships as anything else. Joan rode with him now in the Plymouth, while Tam soloed in the van, directly ahead of them. After riding up to Columbus together, the two women did not want to be in the same car back to Athens.

"It's your turn to put up with me," the potter had announced.

But she didn't prove very talkative. Jim suspected she even nodded off for a few minutes. Maybe she wasn't used to rising so early.

"Do you want me to bring anything?"

"Huh?"

"To your party. Food, drinks, paper plates, strippers."

"Just yourself would be fine. Whether you want to strip is up to you."

"Oh, I've had the urge to skinny dip in your creek once or twice. I always chickened out."

Jim wondered if all Connie's guests had been as discreet. "Feel free to bring anything. Well, not fireworks." He wasn't fond of them. "Something vegetarian for yourself maybe."

Joan sighed, gazing out the side window. "I might as well not have asked you."

"You'll learn," he replied. "I should find a way to mow the place before the Fourth. Some of it."

"The picnic area."

"Right. By the creek. Down the line, a lot more of it." Clear brush too. All those sumac that had come up in the strip of woods down there between the creek and the road.

"You'll want more than a little push lawn mower for that. At least a high-wheel."

"I may need a tractor eventually. Or a tiller."

"Don't those have mower attachments?"

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Jim wasn't sure. "Might." Probably not the thing for mowing his yard. "There are some steep places to navigate."

"Connie managed to rope someone into mowing now and again. Usually a different guy each time."

They made Athens by mid-afternoon, following Tam as far as her home and then turning toward the Riverside Art Collective. A few of the craftspeople were there, working quietly. "This place is dead," said Joan. "Let's go get something to eat. I'm starved."

It had been a while since a light lunch in Columbus. Jim nodded and started toward his car.

"No, let's walk. I'm tired of riding."

Their way along the sidewalk paralleled the Hocking River, carrying them toward the campus. They weren't going as far as that place near the art school, were they? Not that it was that much of a walk. Not the equal of climbing over the hills to visit the Pells! Jim was still sore from that.

"Maybe I should take you to that queer bar you've heard about," she told him.

"I thought they said 'gay' now."

"The guys seem to be okay with either. There are far worse things they could be called. But we'll drop in here instead." It was a storefront with the name 'O. U. Kid' painted on its window. Drapes prevented Jim from seeing inside. "It's mostly a student hangout. Not so many of them around right now."

None at all it seemed. The place was nearly empty. "No alcohol available here, I'm sorry to say," Joan told him, taking a small round table next to a low dais. Jim was fairly sure it was supposed to be a stage. Candles flickered on a couple other tables. Jazz played, turned so low as to be barely made out.

"They have shows?" he asked, nodding toward the stage.

"Open mikes, mostly. Folk songs, poetry. I think they tried a comedy night but nobody laughed."

"That's kind of funny," he told her. "Maybe you should be on stage."

"No way! I freeze up in front of a crowd. Hi, Patty." A woman,

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older than Jim might have expected here, had come over to the table. Maybe she ran the place?

"I hope you came for the food," said the woman, "'cause the entertainment isn't much right now."

"Bring us a couple bowls of your black bean chili, won't you? And, uh—want anything in particular to wash it down, Jim? No? Okay, just cokes then."

On Patty's departure, Joan said, "Connie came in here a few times. Even played her little guitar once."

"I'm learning to play it," Jim informed her.

"How wonderful. Patty hit on her but that wasn't Connie's thing, of course. She was nice about turning her down."

"I would have expected Connie to drag a man along with her."

"Not that I ever saw. Aside from Rick and he doesn't exactly count."

No, Rick wouldn't. But he would, wouldn't he? Maybe this met the definition of a date. But Joan claimed she was the one to say and she would say it wasn't.

Jim was certain of that.

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The brakes felt kind of soft, didn't they? He'd have to check the fluid tomorrow. Things were likely to go wrong with an older and well-used car like this. Jim was headed home through the dusk, via Fifty-six. No need to pass through Logan again.

No need to go through Bloomingville either. South Bloomingville, he should say. He could turn on Three Seventy-four, the road that ran past all those state parks. That would carry him to Hemlock Road.

There was the turn now. Took too much time to slow down. Best to go slow the rest of the way. Especially when he got onto the gravel of Hemlock. He drove north on the pavement. Slowly.

Fortunately, there were no appreciable hills on Hemlock Road between the turn north and his farm. A few lay past that, on the way on into Logan. But he would go up and down some before then.

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Here was one now. Pretty steep. Nothing happened as he hit the brake on the other side. He pumped the pedal and still nothing, as the Plymouth picked up speed. Emergency brake? Jim knew that might not be a good idea and might send him sliding sideways, not that he had much time to think it through. Someone with more experience in that sort of thing might pull it off.

And a curve at the bottom of the grade. He hit the emergency brake and did indeed slide, slide off the pavement and into a tree.

“Damn,” growled Jim, as he stepped out of the wagon. He wiped his forehead and looked at his hand. Blood. “Damn,” he said again, and sank onto the grass.

## TWENTY-THREE

HE'D ONLY BEEN BRUISED UP a little. Well, and he'd busted his forehead open when it hit the steering wheel. That had taken some stitches. Johnny Bone had showed up at the emergency room to give him a ride home. Jim didn't have much of anyone else to call.

Hey, he could get Abby to take out the stitches. Then he wouldn't have to bother visiting a doctor. "Do you know if the doctor Abby works for is taking new patients?" He should have someone local.

"Only if they're under twelve. He's a kids' doctor."

A pediatrician, huh? "I can act twelve."

For once, he got a laugh out of Bone. Johnny was a difficult audience. "You're spending the night with us," he informed Jim. "Doc says you should stay awake in case you got a concussion, so you're gonna sit up and drink coffee."

It was a good thing the Bones had indoor plumbing. Coffee tended to pass through Jim quickly. He didn't press his luck and say this out loud.

Silvie was in bed but Abby had sat up waiting for them. "I'd be okay at home," he told them.

"Nope," Abby replied. "You're under our care, mister."

"You two don't need another responsibility."

"We've had lots of practice. We're used to being here for Johnny's mom."

"Mostly we worry about Mama getting her insulin," said Johnny.

"If and when she needs it. She does pretty well otherwise on her own."

Despite being wheelchair-bound, with a leg amputated. Jim wasn't sure he would want to live that way. To be a burden to anyone. To be a burden to himself.

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Abby had told him it should be safe to sleep now. If he weren't so full of caffeine, maybe he would. Jim had insisted on walking to

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his house at daybreak, as much to prove to himself he could, that he was back to normal, as for any other reason.

He suspected the station wagon would be headed for a junkyard. Someone had towed it away, to Logan he assumed. They would contact him eventually. He'd been towed to Logan too for medical treatment. The nearest hospital was there. His accident had occurred just within the bounds of Hocking County.

He sat himself on the edge of the front porch. If he grew sleepy he could lie down right there. And if the phone rang he would ignore it. Let people think he was still over with the Bones.

Will Dundee didn't call. He drove up in his black and white. Jim waved but didn't go down the hill. Will could come up and see him if it was important enough.

Which he did. "I volunteered to follow up on everything," the deputy told Jim. "We probably won't bother with a reckless driving charge or anything of that sort." He smirked a little. "You'll be paying enough for towing and ambulance and so on that a fine would be kind of redundant."

Jim figured his insurance would take care of some of that. He should find a local insurance agent too. Dealing with someone in Columbus was likely to be a bit of a bother.

"So, your brakes failed?" asked Will. "That's what you said last night."

"They did. If I'd had any sense I'd have pulled over when I first noticed they weren't working quite right." And driven home in second gear, maybe?

"Oh? You didn't mention that." His eyes went to the road below them. "More visitors?"

Two men, in suits, emerged from the vehicle, looked up the hill, and began their ascent. Jim recognized one as Jack Hennings when he was about halfway up.

He had something to tell him, didn't he? What he'd heard from Rozelle. That was it. He raised a hand in greeting.

The man at Hennings's side gave Dundee a look. "Oh, the deputy should stay and hear this," said Jack. "He's already in on

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some of it. I have a different Fed with me today, Jim. This is Agent Sawtelle of the FBI."

"Call me Jay." Jim didn't bother to stand up and offer his hand.

"Right off: your accident wasn't an accident Your brake line was cut. We became suspicious as soon as we heard of it."

"You became suspicious," noted Sawtelle.

Cut? "I'd driven all the way to Columbus and back earlier without any problem."

The agent and the detective gave each other looks that must have meant something. "Was the vehicle left unattended anywhere?"

It had been, the hour or so he and Joan had gone to eat. "Yes, I parked it at the art coop a while."

"Hmm. Could well have been done there," said Jack. "Whoever did it didn't sever the line completely. Just nicked it so the fluid would leak out slowly."

Jay added, "That might have been on purpose or they might not have had the right tool on hand. No telling."

"We definitely can't charge you with reckless driving now," commented Will Dundee.

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Jim had told Hennings or Sawtelle or both what Arnold Rozelle had said. Then all three of his visitors left and he took a nap.

What to do now with what remained of the day? He could brood about what had happened and wonder who would want to hurt him. Maybe not. Better to read some more in Connie's journals while he was laid up a bit. Finish them, maybe. He sat on the parlor carpet, back resting against the sofa.

It was more of the same for a couple pages. Then, *I was offered some bennies last night but resisted temptation. The stuff my doctor put me on is keeping me solid these days. Don't need that other stuff.*

That was followed by a rather bad 'confessional' poem. Oh, it probably didn't seem bad to Connie. It was personal. It meant

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something to her. Technically—that was another matter. A mention of Rick but not of any importance, just saying he had been there to paint. The Fourth of July was coming? That would have been one year ago. Connie had invited a bunch to the farm, just as he was doing this year.

He was nearing the end of this half-filled notebook, her last notebook. *My account is almost empty. I don't know why. Could I have spent everything? It doesn't seem right but I just don't know. Sometimes my memory is such a fog bank!*

Jim had wondered about that himself when he saw her account. The attorney, Folkes, had it with the other papers. Before Connie got straightened out, she could well have frittered her money away without realizing it.

Or someone else could have. She wouldn't have realized that either.

The last page. Another song lyric. He reached over, picked up the guitar where it lay on the sofa. Three chords were all he needed, right? Jim began composing a tune to go with it. It wasn't much of a tune, he knew, but he was fairly well satisfied with it by the time he broke for supper.

## TWENTY-FOUR

THE PLYMOUTH WAGON HAD FISHTAILED around and slammed into the tree with its rear. That had more or less been Jim's intention. Or hope might be more accurate. He would have hit the steering wheel on the rebound, not the impact. Not that it was that hard an impact. He'd felt that even as it happened, that he wasn't really moving so very fast.

"We'd just got this fixed up for you, hadn't we?" asked Ted McCormick.

Jim nodded. "Is it worth doing it again?"

"I think so. No drive train damage I can find. It may all be work for a body shop, not me."

His insurance would cover it. "I guess I'll have to decide whether I really want to keep it."

"It's getting a little old," observed the mechanic. "Those law enforcement fellows were pretty interested in your brake line. They had me take it out so they could carry it away and look at it."

"Oh? What did you think of it?"

"Some kind of saw, I thought on first look, and maybe not a very sharp one. Then I realized it had been done with a triangular file. Someone doesn't like you, Mister Fry?"

"Jim. And so it seems." Jim wondered if 'those law enforcement fellows' had come to the same conclusion. Or if Ted had enlightened them. He looked over the wagon again. "I think I'd as soon sell it, if only to a junk yard," he said. He didn't need it. He didn't need the expense of two vehicles.

To be honest, he didn't like driving it.

"I might be able to take it off your hands," said Ted McCormick.

~~~

Now Jim regretted not snapping up Rick Myers' van. Oh, it went to someone who probably needed it more. He'd just have to call Tam Nossi if he needed to haul around something large.

Like a tiller? A trailer. That's what he needed. A trailer he

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could pull behind the Jeep. Right. Jim was satisfied with that solution. He'd put it into action sometime later.

After laying up for a day, it was back to business on this Friday morning. He headed on from Logan to Athens. There had been concerned phone calls. Even from Joan. Pam Nossi had expressed a concern that his picnic might be canceled. He assured her otherwise but wasn't sure whether she'd actually accepted the invitation yet.

Max Myers too, though he hadn't heard about the accident and Jim chose not to tell him. He called to thank Jim for bringing Rick's things and had mentioned Tam had written him a thank you note. Max approved.

And Jack Hennings would like to talk with him again. That was okay because Jim would like to talk to Jack Hennings. The desk barely paid any attention to him when he walked into the police station. "Hennings," Jack had said, and pointed. The sergeant nodded.

There were no federal agents in his office, or his and Ames's office. Wyatt Ames was in this morning, busy on the phone with someone. There was a cardboard box on Jack's desk.

"We found this near where you parked your vehicle." He held up a large triangular file. "It belongs to a woodworker at the cooperative. Someone had lifted it from his tools, most likely. He nearly had a fit when he saw how it had been abused."

"At least he cussed some," said Ames, who had ended his phone conversation. "I think it was cussing, It was in Spanish. Gotta run." The detective rose, gave them a nod, and hurried off somewhere.

"That's twice my troubles seem tied to the commune," said Jim.

"How so?"

Didn't Jack know? "The people there were the only ones I'd told about Rick Myers's journals."

"Oh, right. Hmm. But as you said, the word could have spread."

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But the place still was at the center of it. "I don't suppose you found any fingerprints or any of that good stuff."

"No such luck. Of course, nobody saw anything, either. Everyone was busy with their own work."

"Would that everyone did that. Oh." Jim unfolded a sheet of note paper he'd had in his shirt pocket and slid it over to the detective. "Stuff from my sister's journals I thought was interesting."

Jack looked the lines over. "Bennies, huh? Mmm. And money." He looked up at Jim. "I don't know if money is the root of all evil but an awful lot of crime revolves around it. Even so-called crimes of passion."

He looked at his watch. That was the second time. "Who are we expecting?" asked Jim.

"Roy Barley. I wouldn't ask you to wait around in hopes of him making it here anytime soon." He settled back—sprawled—in his chair. "I can tell you everything he knows anyway. It is our theory—and we think it is a pretty good theory—that Rick Myers was being blackmailed into making drug deliveries. Most likely your sister was being used as leverage. Someone had something on her? Maybe. We don't know what."

"But that may have been related to drugs too."

"It does seem likely, doesn't it?"

Jim could only shrug. He still knew only bits of his sister's life here. He couldn't fill in between them.

"Not much I can do about any of it," he said, rising. "Except hope no one else thinks I know something and tries to do me harm."

A sober nod from Jack. "Be careful, Jim. There are bad people out there."

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There was no reason to go by the cooperative. No reason to go by anywhere, in fact. He could just head home. And he was getting a little leery of the place!

Oh, he might as well stop in Paul Nossi's store. Not that he

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needed any art supplies; he had all Rick's now and had used his down time to get them out and somewhat organized. Tam was at the counter when he walked in.

"If you're looking for my sister," she said at once, "Pam is off at her classes in Marietta—in Mom's car, as usual. So the family immediately imposes on poor Tam to run errands and give rides."

"But you can have me to yourself now."

"Oh yes. Pam is *so* jealous I spent the day with you."

"Sometimes I'm jealous of myself for spending so much time with me."

It took her a moment to unravel that one. She only shook her head once she had. "You look awful," she told him. "Like Frankenstein's monster."

She was referring to the stitches in Jim's forehead. Everyone else had been polite enough to say nothing. "I'd almost forgotten these were here," he said, bringing his left hand up to lightly trace the wound. "Except when they itch. They do itch now and again."

Tam's voice became more serious. A little. "We are glad you're okay. You didn't tell us you were so accident prone."

She didn't know it wasn't an accident. Did anyone other than law enforcement? It would be best if he said nothing of that. Except maybe to Joan when he saw her. Somehow, he felt it would be good to keep her updated. Maybe because of Rick.

No sign of Paul. Oh, he probably left his quite competent daughter in charge while he stepped out to lunch. Maybe he should get some lunch too.

Or just head home. "I may see you all on Sunday," he said. "Have to run now."

"Without buying anything? Sheesh."

"Don't blame the customer," Jim told her, "but the salesperson." With that he was out the door before she could come up with a rejoinder.

TWENTY-FIVE

TED McCORMICK OFFERED A COUPLE hundred dollars for the old Plymouth. Jim took the offer without haggling. He felt he was well rid of it and had some cash. In his book, he'd come out ahead.

So he told Ken Pell and Will Dundee when they came by this Saturday morning in Ken's hot-rod. Out for a test run, they informed him. Just joy-riding, Jim thought. He admired the candy-apple red paint job.

They, too, felt he was well rid of the wagon. "It was kind of a dog," felt Will.

Ken agreed. "Being a Plymouth station wagon was a mark against it right from the start."

"And it was a six, right?" asked Will.

"It was. Not that the Jeep here has any more power but it's a lot lighter."

"Jeeps are good," agreed Pell, and turned to his buddy. "We could drop an eight into it, couldn't we?"

"Over my dead body," Jim informed him. "This is a war veteran and deserves respect." He doubted it had ever seen combat, in truth. It had probably hauled GIs around Britain from the time it was commissioned till he brought it home.

Will gave the machine a salute, both men climbed back into their rod, and sent gravel flying as it took off toward the Bones.

Jim finished unloading the high-wheel mower he had just picked up in Logan. The trailer could wait for another day.

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"You ought to call Pam Nossi."

"Why? I can talk to *you* now."

It was Joan Woodson on the other end of the conversation.

"God, you are dense, aren't you? Didn't you ask her to your cookout?"

"Yes, and that ball is in her court. I'm waiting for her to return it."

The woman muttered something he couldn't make out. He

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suspected that was just as well. "I'll most likely see her tomorrow anyway."

"Maybe that will help. But women like to have a little attention paid to them. Shoot, everyone likes to have a little attention paid to them."

"And if I were dating Pam Nossi I would pay attention to her. Some anyway! But I only invited her to a picnic, along with a bunch of other people."

"Okay, see it that way, but be assured she doesn't."

Jim knew that was true but wasn't about to admit it. He wasn't quite ready to jump into dating anyone yet. Maybe he would feel differently after the Fourth, after he got to know more people, be more comfortable. He was testing the waters, so to speak, easing into socializing.

And, deep down, he knew he was hoping to impress Pam with the older and more sophisticated guests that would be there. That he hoped would be there. He might need to socialize with Pam's friends later on. That was a thought on which he did not wish to dwell.

"I mowed the picnic area today." A change of topic wouldn't hurt.

"And you didn't crash the mower?"

"Um, I was going to say something about that. Maybe tomorrow—"

"Spit it out, Jim. I'm not Pam Nossi, after all. You can speak to me!"

"Ha-ha. Okay. My accident was not an accident. Someone cut my brakes."

"Damn. Really?"

"Yep. And it was while you and I were at that, uh, club? Is that what you call it?"

"Patty would call it that. I'd say dive. Do you suspect me of luring you away so someone could sabotage the Plymouth?"

"Hadn't crossed my mind." Which was a lie. "By the way, I sold the Plymouth. It's all Jeep from here out."

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"Sounds like a good choice. Okay, I'll let you go. You're probably all sweaty and dirty after mowing."

"Nah, I jumped in the creek when I was done. Skinny-dipping."

"Darn, Jim, and I wasn't invited?"

She hung up on that note.

~~~

That's not as hard as I thought it would be, Jim told himself. Just keep practicing and pick up speed. He thought he liked finger picking a whole lot more than using a pick. The phone? A little late. He almost decided to let it ring.

A deep, rasping male voice. "Keep your mouth shut and listen, punk."

Jim was undecided whether to do that or hang up. "You need to keep out of things, you hear? Somethin' bad might happen to you otherwise."

Jim decided to ignore the admonition to keep his mouth shut. "Like with my car?"

"Car?" The man sounded surprised by that. "Don't know nothin' 'bout a car."

"You didn't cut my brake line?"

Silence. "Still don't know nothin'. But this is a warnin' to you. Don't be helpin' no cops. Don't be givin' us no trouble. Got it?"

He hung up.

Jim felt fairly sure the speaker was not the man responsible for his accident. But who he might actually be, he had no idea.

TWENTY-SIX

THIS WAS THE FIRST DAY of July, wasn't it? And on a Sunday. That meant a Friday the Thirteenth this month. Which didn't mean a thing to Jim Fry.

What did matter was his picnic this week. It mattered to him. Maybe not so much to anyone else. He needed to start stocking up on food and everything else on the long list he had been making. Jim knew he was forgetting things. He'd ask advice this morning. From someone.

No shopping today, even if he wanted to. Not many stores opened on Sunday. Not around here. He had kind of forgotten how that could be while he was in Europe.

Jim emerged from Saint Paul's front doors. Mass wasn't quite as crowded as two weeks ago but they were pretty jammed in. Folding chairs around the back and sides, and people still standing. He'd arrived early enough to claim a place in a pew. So had the Nossis. Jim waited for them to come out, greeting the parents and then saying to Pam, "Well-meaning folks have told me I should have called you and pestered you for an answer about the Fourth."

"Maybe a little," she admitted, smiling.

"Okay, I always do as little as I can. So, have you decided to come?"

He expected maybe a glance at the family but she looked straight at him and said, "I'd love to come, Jim."

"Shall I pick you up? Or would you prefer to steal your mom's car?" He realized, somewhat suddenly, that the choice had connotations—connotations as to whether or not it should be considered a date.

Oh, he didn't care what it was considered.

The girl laughed outright. "Joan Woodson and I have already arranged that I would ride with her."

Jim felt like a bit of an idiot. That was nothing new.

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He had to show Joan his shopping list. She added a couple

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things. He also had to tell her about his odd phone call. He would let Hennings know about it too, sooner or later.

"It was pretty much a southern Ohio accent. Tough guy voice. He might have been putting that on."

Joan nodded. "To sound like someone's hired muscle."

"Just so. I'm not sure anyone actually talks like that."

"Hillbilly gangster."

A pretty apt description, Jim felt. Especially considering she hadn't heard it.

"You aren't having dinner with the Nossis today, are you?" she asked in a sudden shift of direction.

"Nope. They didn't even invite me. I'd guess they had something planned."

"People often do."

"Unlike us. We're being shiftless today."

"I know. I should go play with clay but I don't feel at all motivated." The two of them had wandered to the rear doors of the cooperative building and stood looking out at the Hocking River.

"A canoe would be nice today," said Jim. "Hey, that could be another business for you. Rent out canoes and launch them right here."

"That's a pretty good idea. Too bad I'm too lazy to follow up on it."

"Then rent the concession to someone ambitious. Tam Nossi."

That might have been a pretty good idea too, and one as unlikely to be followed up on. They watched the river for a minute or two before Joan said, "Tam has a scholarship for this coming year. Right here at Ohio. She told me about it when we were riding together."

"She's bright."

"And brash. She doesn't hide her brains."

"You can be pretty brash yourself."

"Yeah, but I don't have the brains part."

Jim decided it wasn't worth calling her on that. Let her have

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her camouflage, her charade. Joan was in no way the ditsy artist she sometimes pretended to be.

~~~

"I don't suppose Detective Hennings is in." He didn't really expect him to be on a Sunday noon.

"No sir. I might be able to reach him if it's important." The sergeant did not seem eager. Jim didn't think he'd seen this man before.

"Not at all. Could I write out something and leave it for him? I have a little information he might think is interesting."

"Certainly. Need paper?"

In a few minutes, Jim had written out all he remembered of his threatening phone call, including his own thoughts on it. Even if the detective didn't care about those. One page was sufficient.

He folded it over, wrote 'Jack Hennings' on the outside, handed it to the sergeant. It would get to the man soon enough. Everything tied up. He could relax for a few days now, paint, have his party, forget about death for a little while.

He would have to remember it again, soon enough.

TWENTY-SEVEN

"NONE OF THEM WOULD EVER have known Connie if it weren't for Rick," Joan told him. "Now they're curious about you."

Or maybe they were only attracted by the food and the setting. Seven guests so far; with Joan and Pam and himself, that made ten for the picnic. More were entirely likely to show. He hadn't known if anyone would come.

And he had Joan to thank for those who did. Well, not for Blair or the friend he'd brought along. "What's down that way?" asked Pam, standing at the top of the rocks and peering south along the stream. Cliffs stood on this side, forest on the other.

Jim had not walked any of that in the time he'd been here. Maybe it was time now. "Mostly brush and gravel bars. Want to see?"

"Sure. How do we get down?" She gave the sloping rocks a doubtful look.

"He could just toss you in the water," suggested Joan.

"Maybe later. We are going to swim, aren't we?"

"But not skinny-dip," Joan said, with just the right touch of disappointment.

"Let's get away from her," said Jim. "Down this way. Here." He extended a hand to the girl and helped her edge down onto the sandstone outcropping. "You can climb down over there," he said, pointing, "or just jump off the end here." It was a short drop to the gravel. Chest-high for Jim.

Joan called from above. "Or he could climb down and catch you when you jump!"

"Not necessary," said the girl, hopping down. "You might have to lift me when we come back." She wouldn't be very heavy, that was for sure. Pam looked upstream first. One could see only to the sharp bend at the north end of the pool.

"There's deep water around the corner too," Jim told her. "Good enough swimming up that direction but none the other way."

"Why not?" A sensible question.

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Low cliffs rose directly across the creek. The water flowed dark beneath them after exiting the pool. Hemlocks overhung the pools. "Wade into that first pool and you'll find out. I did that once and came out with a half-dozen leeches on my legs." Pam made an appropriately horrified face. "It's mostly shallow further along anyway, and there's a lot of debris that can scrape you up. That gets washed out of here."

They started south along the gravel bottom land, below the higher west cliffs. Pam was in calf-length pants. Pedal-pushers, Connie had called them when she was a teen. He'd also heard culottes. Jim wasn't sure what term was in vogue right now. They would probably do for where they would walk. At least as well as the shorts Jim wore.

So would her sensible canvas shoes, though socks might have been a good idea. Pam might not consider them fashionable. She had a healthy regard for fashion, he had recognized. Small scrubby trees and weeds rose here and there from the sand and gravel. It was not a place for them to flourish and flood waters covered much of this, most springs. Deeper some years than others.

"We could climb the cliffs to go back up," he said, nodding in their direction. They rose ten, twelve feet high to their right, bits of vine clinging to them here and there. Poison ivy, maybe. "I've done that." When he younger and somewhat stupider.

"You'll have to carry me up on your back."

"I'll look for a lower spot first. Connie climbed them too."

"Your sister sounds interesting. I wish I'd met her."

"So do I. She should have had more friends like you and your family." Not a bunch of artist and drug users. "There's quite a lot of old wood here that washed down the stream."

"Carry some of that up the cliff too. We could have a big fire."

"We could have that down here. Drag some to the gravel spit where we climbed down."

"That would be nice at night. We could swim by fire light! I love your place, Jim!"

THESE REMEMBERED HILLS

That's what all the girls say, almost popped out of his mouth. Instead, he said, "I'm glad you like it."

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"You two were gone quite a while. Must've done a lot of smooching."

"Only a little," claimed Pam. It was the truth. Jim hadn't kissed a woman in—how long? He wasn't sure. Too long.

Joan seemed to accept that. A tall middle-aged man in sports shirt and slacks stood at her side. "I'd like you to meet Harold Stump. *Professor* Harold Stump. Chances are you'll be in one of his classes, Jim."

No reason to ask which one. He'd find out sometime.

"Thank you for inviting me," said Harold. Jim doubted anyone called him Harry. "And all of Rick's friends. We see this day as a sort of memorial to him."

"Connie too," Joan added.

That might help explain why this many showed up. More than a dozen now. Here came someone else down the path from the road. Four someones, two of them rather diminutive. "Sammy!" called Joan. "You brought the whole family."

"So I did," said Samuel Salinas. "I hope you don't mind my kids being here, Jim."

"Not at all. Just what this party needed."

"Absolutely," agreed Pam. Once the family had passed them by, she whispered to Jim, "They're Filipino, aren't they? Some attend our church."

"Yep. Or their parents were. Sammy does woodworking at the craft commune." He'd met him there. It was Sammy's file that had been stolen to sabotage his car.

He took a quick look at the sun. "It's time I got the charcoal burning. I'm likely to be on grill duty the rest of the day."

"Good. I'm getting hungry."

~~~

Jim didn't think he would join the pair of painters who'd set up

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easels. His job today was host. And cook. Some of those here were artists, some were university faculty who had nothing to do with the arts. Another child had joined the little Salinas girls. He should have encouraged more children. They livened things up.

Harold Stump. Art History, he had learned. He also surmised there was some sort of relationship between him and Joan, a relationship played cool. A detached attachment.

He surveyed the other guests standing about beneath the tall oaks. It looked a lot better there since he'd mowed, didn't it? Just picking up fallen limbs had helped a lot. Some names he would remember, others he wouldn't. That girl daubing over there was an art student. Angie something. "She's a wild one," Joan had confided. He couldn't tell how serious she was.

At least the girl was sober. As was pretty much everyone else, so far, despite plentiful beer—others had thought to bring some along—and wine. Blair's boyfriend might be on something though. Jim had seen that look. 'Downers' of some sort.

Pam had wandered over to the grill again. She didn't quite seem to know what to do with herself. "Did you bring a swim suit?" he asked her. "I do intend to go in the water when I have a free moment." It would encourage others to do the same. Hardly anyone had even gone down to the creek yet, and those did no more than wet their feet. Or sketch. It gave one a different view down there.

"I did. Can I change in the house?"

"Better than here. You should be able to find privacy in one room or another." Jim hadn't locked up; he'd expected people needing to go in. Most of them would already know there wasn't a restroom inside, of course.

"Okay." The girl took off. Where her things might be, he didn't know. Maybe still in Joan's vehicle.

A few minutes later, Pam returned in a modest electric-blue, one-piece suit, her unbuttoned white cotton shirt on over it, a rolled towel beneath her arm. "Jim, there's a man sitting on the porch who says he needs to talk with you."

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“Did he say who he was?”

She shook her head. “No. He just said it was important. He looked kind of scary, Jim.”

Maybe he should ask someone to go up with him. Nah, it probably wasn’t any big deal. Maybe one of the lawmen he had met had dropped by.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

TWENTY-EIGHT

THERE WAS INDEED A MAN on his porch, a big, angular man he didn't know. He stood up as Jim approached. "Jim Fry?" The voice was deep, a tad harsh. It was the voice he'd heard on the phone, he was pretty sure, but no longer being disguised in any way.

He would not mention that to this guy. No point. "I'm Jim." No point in saying more than that, either. The man would explain himself.

"Missus Cook would like to talk with you," he said.

"Cook? Do I know her?"

"You should, mebbe. Elizabeth Cook." There was a fleeting smile, little more than a twist at the corner of his mouth. "I reckon your police friends would tell you things about her."

"But you won't?"

His visitor frowned. "Let's just say she's important around these parts. And that the two of you might be able to help each other. We, um, heard about your accident. And that it wasn't an accident."

Only the police—and Joan—should know that. The man went on. "Some of your friends aren't good people." Jim had to smile at that. The big guy chuckled at his reaction. "Yeah, I'm no one to be sayin' that, mebbe. But there are people down there—" He nodded in the direction of the creek. "You'd be better off not trustin'."

"I'll take your word for it." He would, too. He didn't know those 'people down there' well enough. "So your—what, boss?—your boss wants to talk with me? An appointment or something?" He hoped the man didn't intend to force him into a car right then and spirit him away, like in a gangster movie. Fortunately, there was a lot of ground between the house and the nearest automobile.

"She said to give you a heads-up on it, so you wouldn't be taken unaware. When she's ready to talk, that is. That will happen when it happens. Got that?"

THESE REMEMBERED HILLS

"I understand what you've said. I think there is a lot more unsaid I don't understand."

"And I'd say you're better off not knowing about it." Without another word, he turned and started down the hill.

Jim could only shrug. He would say something to someone in law enforcement tomorrow, of course. Now, there was nothing better to do than go inside and find a towel. A plunge in Hemlock Creek would be welcome.

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"I've never seen those legendary caves," said Blair. "You'll have to give me a tour sometime."

"Sure," agreed Jim.

"We could do a cave party!" Joan enthused. "Later in the summer, maybe. All of us go up together."

That sounded like a bit of a nightmare. But he said, "Sure," to it, too. "I'm going into the water again."

Pam was down there. He thought maybe he'd rather be in her company. "What are you doing, Jim?" asked Joan. There was a trace of alarm in her voice.

"Making my famous death-defying dive." He'd positioned himself at the spot on the cliff above the deepest hole. The last time he'd dove from it, Rick was here. No one alive had ever seen him do it, had they?

Over he went, down, plunging deep into the dark water. There was the sound of applause when his ears reached the air. The applause of two or three pairs of hands. "Thank you, folks," he called to those looking down at him. "Next show at Four!" He stroked down to where Pam was sitting, submerged to her waist.

"What a show-off!" was her greeting.

"Only when I have an audience of pretty girls," he responded.

"It must be deep there."

"Over my head, anyway. It scared me to go in there when I was a kid." But he had jumped in, regardless. "It might scare me a little now."

"I should hope so. What--?"

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A splash behind him. Jim turned to see Joan Woodson bob up and swim toward them. "That's not so bad," she announced. "'Course I jumped rather than diving."

"You would horn in on my act."

"You looked much more graceful," Pam assured him. "And got more applause."

Joan squinted at the girl. "You're not going to get your hair wet, are you?"

Jim turned back to give Pam a looking over. Her bouffant was as dry as when she had arrived. "That hairdo seems more trouble than it's worth."

"Ooh, blunt," breathed Joan. "He may recommend a crew-cut next."

They ignored her. Pam lifted a hand to her hair. "We students give these to each other at the school. My style may change from week to week."

"From what I saw in Europe," said Jim, "that style may be going out of style."

Pam nodded. "I've seen it in magazines. The more natural look."

"Hair can't look much more natural than mine," said Joan, and stroked back toward the deeper water.

It was true. Joan's hair was short and maybe not styled at all, in any normal sense. "I think she's going to swim laps," Jim told Pam. "You go to school in Marietta on Fridays?"

"Thursday, Friday, Saturday morning. Then I drive home."

"Then I should call you some Saturday afternoon, shouldn't I?"

"It wouldn't be a bad idea."

~~~

As she had come, Pam rode away with Joan. It was well after dark; maybe some fireworks might have been nice after all.

On the whole, Jim thought it had gone well. It was the sort of crowd that was good at entertaining itself. Guitars had appeared.

THESE REMEMBERED HILLS

A banjo, too, wielded by Harold Stump. He would never have guessed that one.

He recognized he would need a lot more practice before joining them.

Jim sat by the creek after the last car had driven away. The coals of his fire still glowed dimly in the sandstone grill. Thunder, distant. Maybe nature would supply some fireworks. Old Jove might throw a few rockets.

But stars were just as good and a lot less noisy. He walked over to the edge of the cliff, the spot from which he earlier dove, and looked down at their reflections in the black water. They would all scatter, broken, if he dove again.

But they would come back, just as he would emerge. Not now. Not when he was alone. Even I know better than that, he told himself.

He could just lie back here and go to sleep. So what if the rain came? Lightning lit up the sky, to the north, beyond the Bones' farm.

The air was growing cooler. Jim took a deep breath, turned, walked toward his house.

TWENTY-NINE

HENNINGS HAD NOT GOTTEN BACK to Jim about the note he had left, the note about his phone call. He decided to call the detective to tell him of this new twist. He did not feel like driving to Athens this day.

“Of course we know Betty Cook,” said the detective, after hearing him out. “She heads the biggest bootlegging operation in the area. Inherited it from her daddy, old Patterson Hill. You probably never heard of him either but he’s a legend around these parts.”

“So—should I talk to her?”

“Your choice, Jim. I suspect she sent her man just so you would tell us about it. That way, we’ll know she doesn’t intend any harm to you.”

That made surprising sense. “How would she have known my accident wasn’t an accident? I sure wasn’t spreading that around.” Jim regretted not letting his friends know. Johnny and Abby, most of all. Pam, and the rest of the Nossis, for that matter.

“Oh, she has people who can tell her that sort of thing. Definitely some in the sheriff’s department down here. Probably in the State Police.”

Jim couldn’t think of anything to say about that right then, so he said nothing.

“You’re thinking about the Athens Police Department. It might not be worth Cook’s while to have anyone here but I wouldn’t put it past her. We have known she’s made pay-offs to the campus police for a long time. No doubt her father did too. Students are always a reliable market for alcohol.”

“More so when they can’t buy it legally. Okay, I suppose I’ll wait and see what happens.” Jim thought just a moment. “If it does happen, I hope it’s in Athens or Logan. I don’t want to meet that big guy at my place again, nor your crime boss, for that matter.”

“Aaron Long. That’s who your big guy would most likely be.

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He and her sons help Cook run things. He's probably her lover too."

"You know an awful lot about her. Why isn't she behind bars?"

"Not the man to ask, Jim. That sort of thing is way above my job description."

~~~

Thursday. Pam would be off in Marietta, Jim assumed, unless they extended the holiday. No, not in a little private school like that. The students would want to be there, getting their money's worth.

Pretty much everyone else would be back to their normal routines as well. He should have a normal routine. One would be forced on him, come fall, wouldn't it? He could do without until then, he decided.

Clean up by the creek first. Then he might as well continue his mowing. A lot of yard remained, grass standing tall. Art? He'd get to it.

He worked until early afternoon. Enough. Call it a day. A dip in the creek would be good now. Yes, a skinny-dip. But not diving—he wasn't going to stand naked on his rock platform! That might even be visible from the Bones' farm. Or at least that stretch of road leading to it.

He should visit the Bones. Later when it started to cool down. Right now, he felt more like a nap. That should be part of his routine too.

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He had ridden his bike over to the Bones' place and told them the facts of his accident. Little more than that; the couple didn't need details of all that had been going on. He just let them know it was related to the murder of Rick Myers.

"And someone thinks you know something?" wondered Johnny.

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"Because of the things he read in his journal," Abby reminded him. "Or your sister's?" She wasn't quite straight on it either.

"Maybe both. Mostly Rick's. I'd have told you all this earlier but the police weren't releasing any of it." They still weren't, though there wasn't much reason not to.

"Well, I hope you'll be safe now."

So did Jim.

"It looked like the old days over at your place yesterday," said Johnny Bone. "Connie's friends?"

"Some of them. I'm branching out and meeting new and interesting people!"

"Not too interesting," warned the farmer. "They're the sort that get you into trouble."

On getting home, Jim busied himself with supper. There were odds and ends left from yesterday's party. That was inevitable. Some were things he hadn't bought himself. A hodgepodge meal or two and they'd be out of the way.

The phone rang as he was throwing it together. "Fry Farm," he answered. Jim had decided to try that out. Maybe it sounded pretentious. He wasn't really farming anything yet.

"Jim? Hi, it's Blair Jarodsky. I was wondering if maybe I could take you up on that offer. The tour of the caves."

"We could schedule something, I'm sure." He didn't want to. Not at all.

"Tomorrow? I have tomorrow open."

"Well—" Might as well get it out of the way. "Sure. Just you?"

"That's right. Only me. That idiot I was with yesterday wouldn't want to come. Early? I can be there really early."

"Early is good."

"All right then. Thanks and I'll see you!"

Blair had sounded wound up. He wondered for a moment if the young man was another who popped a few pills. One didn't know.

Neither Rick nor Connie had mentioned him using. In fact, he was pretty sure neither had ever mentioned Blair's name at all.

THIRTY

JIM DIDN'T RECOGNIZE THE CAR Blair drove. Borrowed. He remembered he didn't own one. Jarodsky drove up the hill and parked close to the house. It was barely past dawn. The young man still seemed on edge. Jittery. He was uninterested in the breakfast Jim offered him.

That didn't prevent Jim from taking the time to enjoy his own. Blair could wait a few minutes. Maybe he should wait a few days. He wasn't quite sure of taking him up today.

But, again, best to get it out of the way. You're much too nice to people, Jim Fry, he told himself. "I'm ready if you are. Anything special you want to see?"

"The whole thing. Let me get my stick." Blair retrieved a walking stick from his car, a staff some four feet or more of length, thick and heavy. Hickory? No, that twisting, spiral shape carved into it probably required a wood easier to work with. Maybe walnut.

"Well prepared, huh?"

Blair seemed momentarily distracted before answering, "Yeah. Sammy made it for me a while back. Let's go."

Jim decided to skip the easier ascent, the one that started from the cornfield, and led him across the creek nearer the barn. Just at the end of the cliffs he'd been showing Pam Nossi a couple days ago. "We can angle up that way," he said, pointing the way. "A little steeper but you have your stick."

That got no response. Blair listlessly surveyed the forest they passed through, before fixing his eyes steadily on the way ahead. They came to the narrow passage through the cleft rock. Jim hadn't been so sure he would hit it. He led on, simply announcing, "The first cave is right ahead."

Blair displayed little enthusiasm over it, though Jim thought it really the most impressive of all seven. In a sense, the only one that seemed like a 'real' cave, the sort people imagined when they heard the word. His guest spent more time looking down the steep slope before it and across to where one could glimpse

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some of the other caves. "Want to walk the ledge to the second cave?" asked Jim. "Everyone else has been chicken."

"Lead on."

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Cave two didn't seem to impress any more than the first. They didn't dawdle. Blair stood quite a long time at the third, the big one, the one where Connie most likely fell.

When he spoke at last, it had nothing to do with where they were. "A lot of people showed up yesterday."

"Yes, quite a few." Where was he going with this?

"I saw Aaron Long. Old Missus Cook's man."

"You know her?"

"All too well. But why would she send him here?" He seemed to be asking himself the question as much as he was Jim.

Jim could only shrug. There was no good way, really, to answer. "Just interested in what I've been doing, it seems."

"Yeah," said Blair, staring toward the ledge before them and the space beyond it. "Too interested." Without warning, he swung his heavy stick, a wicked blow aimed at Jim's head.

The uneven, rocky ground prevented it from connecting. Blair tripped, lost his balance, as he stepped into the swing. The stick missed Jim's head by inches. The two stood staring at each other.

"That killed Rick, didn't it?" Jim asked.

"It did. I did." He was going to swing again. Blair was a big kid and looked to have strong arms and hands. Maybe from making pottery. With or without that staff, he would be dangerous. Hardly thinking of what he did, Jim slipped his belt out of its loops, wrapped it around his hand with the buckle dangling. This would work best if his pants didn't fall off.

The kid was on something, wasn't he? Hopped up or however one preferred to describe it. That might be necessary for him to do something like this. Like he had done to Rick. Damn. Jim stepped forward, swinging the belt.

He wasn't sure Blair knew what to make of it. "Did you kill Connie too?"

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“What? No.” A quick, sharp laugh. “There’s someone else in all that and you’ll never live to know who it was.” A feint with his stick. Jim barely acknowledged it.

The next one was bolder. He ducked it and swung the belt. The buckle caught Blair on the shin. The man backed away; it only stung, of course. He wouldn’t really damage him that way.

Then Blair charged, apparently deciding to simply overpower him. The stick hit him crosswise, Jarodsky’s weight behind it. Jim went with the impact, rather than standing against it, let himself go down onto the rock. Blair stumbled past him.

Jim made it to his feet as quickly as he could though not as quickly as he might have wished, and leaped on Blair’s back, wrapping the belt around his neck. Good, he reached up for it, instinctively, dropping his staff. That hadn’t quite been the intention but Jim was good with it. Both went back and down, Blair falling atop Jim.

We’re getting beat up by these rocks more than each other, thought Jim. He’d lost the belt. The stick was over there somewhere. They’d go at it hand-to-hand, both on their feet again. He wasn’t all that optimistic of the outcome.

“I was Connie’s supplier, you know,” said Blair, eyeing an opening. “Rick might have spilled all that, exposed me and way too many other people.”

“Had been Connie’s supplier.”

“Yeah, right, she got straight. That might have lasted.” Blair didn’t seem to put much faith in it. “And then you decided to talk to Cook. I couldn’t let her tell you things.” He dove for Jim’s midsection.

The kid didn’t know how to fight. Not that Jim was an expert but he’d learned a few things in the service. Again, he did not stand against Blair’s impetus, letting himself go down but rolling through it and coming out on top. He couldn’t resist hammering a fist into the man’s face before rolling away and regaining his feet. Not quite so quickly this time.

But Blair was slowed down too. Perhaps both saw the stick at

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the same time. Both certainly scrambled for it, grasped it at the same time, rolling over and over, gripping it between them, neither willing to relinquish the hold of either hand. Knees and feet jabbed and kicked. Once Blair head-butted Jim. He wasn't sure it was on purpose.

This was going nowhere. A change in tactic was needed. Jim gathered his legs, released the stick, and gave his opponent a strong push back with both feet, intending to jump up and take advantage, press a new offensive. It was unnecessary. Blair rose, wobbly, at the edge of the cliff and then stepped over it. Jim crawled out to peer over the precipice. The man was definitely dead.

## THIRTY-ONE

“AND YOU DIDN’T EVEN HAVE the last stitches out yet.”

Jim gave Deputy Dundee no more than a polite smile. He hadn’t called the Hocking County sheriff’s office but left things up to the operator, as soon as he’d made his slow and painful way home. Then he’d collapsed.

Obviously, the operator had notified those who needed notifying.

Another deputy came in. “There’s a Detective Hennings to talk to you, Mister Fry. Athens police. He’s here as a courtesy, in that this, um, Jarodsky seems to have killed someone over there.”

Didn’t this guy know anything about the case? “Rick Myers. That’s what this was all about. You’ll find the murder weapon somewhere up there.”

“We already did, Jim,” Will assured him. “It went over the edge with him.”

“And the FBI have kind of taken over,” said Jack Hennings, entering the hospital room. Jim wasn’t sure why he was here instead of at home. “I don’t think they’re likely to learn a lot we didn’t already know.”

“Blair is sort of that piece of the jigsaw puzzle that suddenly fits into place, isn’t he? He stole Rick’s journals and he cut my brake line.”

“Not to mention killing Rick Myers. He shouldn’t have hung onto the murder weapon.”

“Nor tried to murder me with it.”

“A definite mistake,” felt Will Dundee. “I’m going to go see if we can get you out of this place.” He stepped into the hall, disappearing one direction or another. It was morning now, wasn’t it? Jim had kind of lost track of time. He sat up. “I need my clothes.”

“I’m sure they’re around somewhere,” the detective assured him. “Lots of people are going to want to talk to you. Talk to you some more. I guess you got plenty of questions yesterday.”

“I don’t know if made any sense answering. Hey, we also

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know why Blair had the van the night Rick was murdered.” He frowned, amended it to, “The night he murdered Rick.”

“Hmm, yes, I suppose so. Too bad we didn’t connect some of these things sooner.” Hennings didn’t think long on that. “As I was saying, people will want to talk to you but it’s best you go home now and all that is saved till later. Dundee volunteered to take you.”

“I haven’t ridden in a squad car since I was a teen.”

“I won’t ask why you were in one then.”

“Probably for the best,” said Jim, rolling out of the hospital bed and going to look for his clothes in the closet.

~~~

Deputy Dundee wasn’t driving the black and white. His black Mercury awaited at the hospital’s front entry. Two doors, early Fifties, maybe, Jim thought. From before tail fins sprouted on cars.

“I bought my black beauty at auction after it was confiscated,” Will told him as he climbed into the passenger side. He tried not to wince as he settled into the seat. “Didn’t change much of anything other than taking out the tanks for the illegal booze.”

“A missed business opportunity.”

“Too much competition.” Will closed his door with a solid thud, cranked the vee-eight, pulled away from the curb. “The days of bootleggers making runs in machines like this are pretty much over anyway. They’ve gotten more sophisticated.”

Jim was willing to believe him. The total of his knowledge on the subject came from watching ‘Thunder Road.’

The deputy didn’t quiz him on yesterday as they rode. For that he was thankful. He’d think about it all, talk about it, eventually but not this morning. Out Six Sixty-four they went, past Lake Logan. Lots of cars out on this Saturday, local, tourist. Jim wondered if the caves were blocked off as a crime scene. That would keep people out of them.

Will stuck to the scenic route, not as far as most of the state parks, though they passed Old Man’s Cave. Ash Cave, Cedar

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Falls, would have been further down the way if they hadn't turned. Again, lots of traffic. Not so much on Hemlock Road when they took a right. They would be approaching the farm from the south.

Past the way up to the caves. Sure enough, a deputy had his vehicle parked there at the side of the road. Dundee slowed down, gave the man a nod and a wave, fingers-only as he gripped the steering wheel, and continued toward the farm house. The barn was the first thing one saw from this direction, weathered and almost in ruins. Green had sprouted in the field beside it, Johnny Bone's corn.

Someone was mowing? That was Joan Woodson's truck parked at the road. It didn't look like Joan pushing the high-wheel around the front yard. "I'm leaving you in good hands," Will said. "Or so these young ladies claimed when I was by earlier. I'll just let you out now and maybe swing by later."

"Good enough. Thanks." He slid out to see Joan descending the hill. The small person pushing the mower had turned it off and stood watching as Dundee sped away. Not until she doffed her straw hat to fan herself with it did he recognize her as Tam Nossi.

"We're here to nurse you back to health," proclaimed Joan. "I needed someone level-headed to help me with it."

"Then you should have brought Tony instead of me," said Tam, joining them.

"Oh, your brother would pester me endlessly about the navy." Jim surveyed the yard. "Rather than mowing my overgrown lawn."

"You should have bought a self-propelled model. This one is sure hard to push up the steep places!"

"Have Joan push it up the hill and you push it back down."

Joan ignored that, as she did much else he said. "We figured we might as well be useful while we waited. Gosh, you look awful, Jim."

Tam nodded. "Even worse than the last time I saw you."

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He didn't feel so great, either. He suspected he wouldn't get much sympathy if he said so. They headed up to the house.

It was Joan who brought up what was on both their minds. "So it was Blair. I should have been more suspicious about his mysterious errands."

"There were clues—I guess you'd call them clues—everyone missed." The women stepped onto the front porch but Jim sat down on its edge. Both came back down to sit beside him, one on either side.

"I knew he had friends who abused drugs. Acquaintances might be more accurate. Not so uncommon among people both of us knew."

"He used himself. Blair was definitely on something yesterday." It might have been necessary for what he intended to do. Or maybe the drugs had made him decide to do it. Chicken and egg and yet another chicken. A whole flock of them.

Joan didn't reply to that. Maybe she'd had her suspicions. Maybe she'd turned the proverbial blind eye.

Tam jumped in. "The only drugs you're getting, mister, are aspirin. And you have to rest."

"Then I'll just sit here and do that," he told her, "and watch you mow."

~~~

The women were gone when Will Dundee, as promised, swung by again. He was in uniform now, and driving the Ford the county provided its deputies. "Checking you're okay," he said. "Officially, this time. No one intends to bother you till Monday. All the higher-ups think everything's over and there's no hurry."

"Connie's not over," Jim replied. "I'm convinced now she was murdered."

"Oh." That sank in for a few seconds. "Let me know if I can be any help to you with that. Officially or not. I—you know I liked your sister."

"I got that impression." No one had said outright there was something between the two.

## THESE REMEMBERED HILLS

“Uh-huh. Connie wasn’t ready to let anyone in yet, I think. Maybe if we’d had time.”

“That’s true of an awful lot of things, Will.”

“Yeah. You don’t think this Jarodsky was responsible.”

“I don’t see how he could have been.” And he had said it was someone else, there at the caves, before the end. Blair Jarodsky could tell him no more about anything.

He thought that was all until the deputy asked, somewhat out of the blue, “Is Joan Woodson your girlfriend?”

“She is not. Neither is Tam Nossi, but I guess I’m dating her sister.” And hadn’t thought to call Pam on a Saturday afternoon. She would probably forgive him.

“Tam. The little girl that was here with her.” Dundee nodded his head. “Okay. I, um, ran into Joan from time to time in the old days, when lots of Connie’s friends came here.”

“And you kind of liked her, too.”

A slightly embarrassed laugh. “I guess you could say that.”

“She seems to be involved with some professor from down in Athens. A real dud, I’d say. You should go for it.”

Will gave him a deservedly suspicious look.

“But you should be warned,” Jim went on, “he plays the banjo. You’ll have to be able to top that.”

“All I can play is the radio. Okay, Jim, I’ll be moving along. I’m supposed to be patrolling these roads and I can’t dawdle with you all evening.” He looked up toward the house. “Can you make it up the hill all right?”

“With enough time and motivation.”

## THIRTY-TWO

"WE WEREN'T SURE YOU'D MAKE it," said Johnny Bone.

"I had a hard time making myself get out of bed. Once I was, things got easier." They stood before Saint John the Evangelist. Mass had just let out.

Now the couple would know he was still alive and well. They'd undoubtedly heard of all that happened. Well, not all but a lot of it.

"That eye looks bad," allowed Johnny. Abby nodded in complete agreement. He knew it had turned an ugly color.

"The rest of me isn't much better. At least I didn't need any new stitches."

"We're proud of you for stopping that murderer," said Abby.

"And," added Johnny, "we hope that's the last of it."

"So do I," said Jim.

Perhaps it would be. Perhaps it wouldn't. He didn't feel like driving home. There was a movie theater in Logan. He remembered going to it, way back, when they had lived down here for a while. Too early for even a matinee but he could drive by and see what was playing. On one of the main streets, wasn't it? There must be plenty else in Logan he didn't know about, things going on. Not like Athens with its university but it was a decent-sized place, after all.

There was the theater. Nothing showing that interested him. Pam would expect him to take her to a movie sometime, wouldn't she? The public drinking fountain still stood on the corner. The 'colored only' fountain beside it had been removed. Once when he was a kid, Jim had taken a sip from it, just to see what the difference was. He was a little disappointed he couldn't notice one.

Jim found himself driving in the direction of his home though he hadn't decided on that destination. Across the Hocking. It could be canoed here too, he would think. Might one float down to Athens without any obstruction? He should check it out.

As if he had time for canoe trips. What road was he on,

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anyway? Oh, Three Twenty-eight. A sign came up shortly telling him he had entered Wayne National Forest. Okay. He could follow the way down to Fifty-six and then turn toward home. It was as good a place to spend Sunday as any and as good a way to get there.

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The yard looked good. No, it looked better. It needed a lot more work. Jim wouldn't be doing any of that himself for a few days. He was too sore, too stiff.

He ran the Jeep on up the drive after looking the place over, parking by the rear porch. Tam or maybe Joan had left the mower there, next to the washing machine. And Rick's big studio easel. Joan would have recognized that.

He would be moving those things around. Not today. Jim eased into a kitchen chair. He was sore, yes, but he'd come out that of that deadly fight by the caves pretty well. Shoot, just surviving had been doing pretty well.

Lots of scrapes. Sandstone *was* a bit abrasive. And hard.

Jim still couldn't fix his mind on all that happened, how it all tied together. The essentials, yes. The murder of Rick had been solved. Did any of it really have anything to do with what happened to Connie? The picture was a blur, like someone had been dissatisfied with their painting and rubbed it all out with rags and turpentine. Maybe he needed to start over with a new sketch, new paint.

More likely, he needed to stop thinking and rest some. Soaking in the creek, even if the water was cool, should help, shouldn't it? And it was getting too hot for anything more ambitious. He'd probably wear trunks with so many visitors coming and going.

He crossed the road, angled left toward the swimming hole. No diving today, not even off the lower rocks. He didn't even hop down to the gravel but carefully descended using the foot and hand holds that had served for decades—some natural, some chiseled into the sandstone. It was cold, wasn't it? Ah, not so bad

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once you got all the way in. He lay there in the shallows, head and shoulders partly supported by the gravel, let the noontime sun shine down through the branches. He could fall asleep here. If he started to drown, he'd wake wouldn't he? Maybe he shouldn't test it.

"Helloooo, Jim!"

He definitely wouldn't fall asleep now. Jim opened his eyes to see a young woman peering down at him from the point of the rocks. Who the heck was she? Maybe just a bad dream. The sort one had when one was drowning!

No, it was the girl from the Fourth. Angie? He sat up, submerged to his waist. "Okay if I set up my easel here, Jim?" she called to him.

"No, you have to go back to Athens," he replied. "Painting by appointment only!"

"Oh dear! What if I offered a bribe?"

"What have you got?" Chocolate might do. Or a beer.

"How 'bout some hash?"

Odd suggestion. "Corned beef?"

Angie giggled. "The kind you smoke, Silly."

He stood up, immediately serious. "I don't mind you painting. Come anytime. But don't bring drugs here, okay?"

She cocked her head at him. "Okay, Jim. Your playground, your rules. Um, you don't mind beer, do you?"

"Not at all. And even less if you offer me one."

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Angela Pearce. That was her name. A senior at OU; they would be running into each other this coming semester. She had taken off in a red VW Beetle a little before dusk. Jim could make no sense of the canvas on which she had been working.

This would be a good time to ring Pam, before he ate supper and got too sleepy. Long distance charges were lower on a Sunday evening, weren't they? Not that calling Athens was a big deal but things added up. Teri answered. As soon as he

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announced himself, she called Pam without even asking whom he wanted to talk to.

"So you managed to make it to the phone?" were her first words. "From reports, you can barely hobble about."

"You shouldn't believe everything your sister tells you."

A snicker. "I already know that, Jim."

"I should be better tomorrow but I have a strong suspicion law enforcement types will take up a lot of my time."

She didn't say anything for a few seconds. "I'm glad you're okay. We heard some pretty wild reports of what happened."

"They may not have done it justice. But it's over. Water under the bridge and on its way to the Ohio."

"Good." Another pause. "Don't tell me anything about what happened. It's enough just to know you're safe and well."

He didn't want to talk about it anyway. At least not to Pam Nossi. "We can find other topics of conversation."

"When law enforcement isn't making demands on your time."

"The H-E-double toothpicks with law enforcement."

Pam laughed. "What are you, Jim, ten years old?"

"Just being careful in case your folks are listening on the other phone. Anyway, I intend to give the cops the slip after tomorrow. Think you'd like to go on the lam with me one evening?"

"Tuesday. We'll plan our escape for then."

"It's a date then."

"Yes, it is. Pick me up at the store, why don't you? I can slip out mid-afternoon, if you'd like."

"Sounds good. I'll see you then."

"Bye!"

"Bye."

## THIRTY-THREE

"THIS IS STILL THE ATHENS police's case. The Myers murder. We were only interested in the drugs tie-in and there doesn't seem to be a whole lot there for us."

Detective Jack Hennings nodded. "And most of that is pretty old."

"So it is," agreed Agent Sawtelle. "You have your own investigation, Larry."

The third lawman there was a Hocking County deputy, Laurence Boyer, high up in the hierarchy. The Sheriff himself saw no reason he should attend. Neither did anyone else. This meeting, however, was being held in his offices. "It's pretty much wrapped up, as far as we're concerned," spoke Boyer. "The DA will want to make some formal statement but it's open-and-shut self defense. The new evidence you gentlemen discovered makes that all the more solid."

Jim was happy to hear that. It hadn't even occurred to him he might be charged with something.

"I'm going to read through your statement," Boyer told him. "If anything is incorrect or needs something added, stop me and let me know."

"We'd probably just let him read it," said Hennings in an aside to Sawtelle.

"Oh, Larry likes to hear his voice," the agent replied.

The deputy ignored them and started in. Jim was surprised at how accurate it was. He didn't remember being so lucid. He did not break in but at the end he said, "Jarodsky made some statements as we, um, faced off. I don't seem to have mentioned them."

Boyer looked back over the paper. "The references to the Cook organization?"

"No, later. He mentioned my sister and said someone else was involved in her death."

"We figured he was good for it too," said Sawtelle.

"And we still have it as an accident," added Boyer. "I'm not

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convinced it wasn't." He sighed. "That very much would be our case." He jotted down an addendum to the statement. "Sign here," he said.

With that, Jim assumed he was done. Not so.

"It's only right we bring you up to date, Jim," said Jack Hennings. Sawtelle didn't look like he completely agreed. Boyer looked like he didn't care.

"We searched Jarodsky's apartment," the detective continued, "and found some interesting things. Pills, for one."

"As expected," broke in Jay Sawtelle. "And not so interesting."

"There were also forged prescriptions with your sister's name on them. We can make a pretty good guess that was what he was holding to blackmail both her and Myers. You know, she'd already been charged a couple times with possession when she was younger. Misdemeanors, but with that on her record, it could have been prison this time. Other things she'd signed—or someone forged with her name—could have been incriminating too. We haven't pursued those to their ends yet."

"And all that went down the drain when she died," noted Sawtelle. "No more leverage. That might well have brought about the eventual murder."

"Right. The likelihood is that Rick Myers had been carrying drugs for him on his flights."

"Not for Jarodsky, exactly. For whoever was pulling his strings. That could be Elizabeth Cook."

"Be sure to ask her when you see her," said Hennings, with a bit of a crooked smile.

Jim frowned. "Blair didn't seem to be friendly with Cook," he said. "In fact, he sort of said she was the reason he intended to kill me."

"That is baffling, isn't it?" asked the deputy. "I think it's time to break for lunch. Thanks for coming in, Mister Fry."

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Jim wondered if Blair had been the one who offered Benzedrine to Connie. The incident she'd mentioned in her journal. If he had

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been her supplier he would certainly want to pull her back in.

And the fact that he couldn't might frustrate him. Especially if she were becoming more lucid, more of a threat to him and maybe those higher up than him. But he couldn't work that around to him killing her. Myers made sense, maybe, at least to someone who might be getting desperate and not thinking straight from the start. Who could say what might be going on in Blair Jarodsky's mind when he was full of drugs?

Maybe he should never have come back to the farm. Left things alone, sold the place, attended Ohio State as he had originally planned. Connie was dead and nothing he did would change that.

Ah, but he loved these hills. He had told the Nossi family that and had believed it with all his heart at the moment. Deep down, he knew he still did. They were real, these hills, tangible. That was the best sort of love, when one could see, smell, grasp something in ones hands. He could savor the taste of the Hocking Hills through the seasons, each change in flavor, and never grow sated.

By himself? Jim didn't know. Maybe he would find someone who felt as he did, who could share that love. Become that love herself, all one, woman, hills, life. He believed it was possible.

Here was the house. He was going to get out the paints this afternoon and try to capture some of that love on canvas. That was why he painted, wasn't it? To understand and, through understanding, to possess. To make his subject a part of himself.

And himself a part of his subject.

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"Yes, I am going to be down that way tomorrow. I would guess you have a spy in the Nossi household who let you know this."

"It's possible," admitted Joan. "So how are you doing? Healing up nicely?"

"Feeling better. Physically and mentally. I painted for the first time in—shoot, I can't remember how long."

"On Rick's easel?"

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"Nah, plein air. It's too nice out to be stuck in a studio, like some pot-maker."

Joan only made a rude noise in reply. "So, I could drop by and talk," he said. "Fill you in on everything."

"Anytime. I expect to be stuck in the studio like a pot-maker all day."

"It's not so bad, maybe, to be stuck with something you love. Something you're passionate about."

"Jeez, Jim. When did you become such a romantic?"

"I think I have always been and just forget it now and again. Girls like it, you know."

Yet another rude noise. "Not me. Maybe I prefer my men handsome and stupid, like Dorothy Parker."

"I don't think Harold fits that description." Though he was reasonably good looking.

"Oh, Harold. I like him a lot, but he's not the sort to bring out much in the way of sparks."

"Maybe he's not enough of a romantic. We're a special breed."

"Yes, you are, Jim. If I had a brother I actually liked, I'd want him to be just like you."

"I'll have the adoption papers drawn up. See you tomorrow."

"Yeah, bye."

## THIRTY-FOUR

“SO HIS PLAN WAS TO take you unaware and send you over the edge.”

“Yes. Not well thought out maybe but someone might have believed it was an accident.” Or even suicide.

“Like your sister.” Joan shook her head. Jim had given his complete story, as well as he understood it, to her and a few other artisans from the commune. They were curious about Blair.

“The end of his story,” someone said. “Rick’s too.”

For this group, probably so. Both men had passed out of their lives. Jim knew there would be more, that it didn’t all wrap up so neatly.

Best he run along now. Pam was certainly expecting him. He made his goodbyes and went out to the Jeep. A slim young man sat in the passenger seat, coat off, tie loosened. “At last,” he said, “Now we can go see Mom.”

Though he knew it sounded stupid, Jim asked, “Mom?”

“She said she wanted to talk to you and now is the time. I’m Eliot Cook.” He extended his hand. Jim shook it somewhat mechanically. “Of course, you don’t *have* to go. No one is forcing you.”

Jim slid into the driver’s seat. “Is it far?”

“Not at all. You know the place. O.U. Kid.”

It seemed a reasonably safe place to meet. “Just your mother?” he asked, pulling onto the street.

“Oh, Aaron will be there. Don’t worry about him. He’s mostly just looks. Now if my brother Steve were along, it might be different, but he’s back home running things. Mom only brings him along when she really needs to.”

“Steve, huh? And you’re Eliot.”

“Named for Eliot Ness. My parents seem to have thought that was pretty funny at the time. Here we go.”

A white Cadillac that looked like it had just been driven off the dealer’s lot but was a good fifteen years old sat in front. Someone

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in a suit, probably a driver, leaned against a rear fender. Eliot hadn't mentioned him.

A 'closed' sign hung on the door but his escort ignored it. Jim followed him in. Even darker than the last time he was in the place. "Jim Fry, meet my mother, Elizabeth Cook."

"Call me Betty." A small wiry woman with a high bouffant hairdo sat at a table, smoking a cigarette. At a table beyond, barely to be seen in the shadows, sat Aaron Long. There as an observer, guessed Jim, not a participant.

But Eliot sat down with his mother and motioned him toward a chair. "I haven't been in here in ages," said Missus Cook. "Patty's an old friend. She doesn't mind lending me her place for a few minutes." She listened a moment to the faint strains of a jazz recording. "I do wish she'd play some country music."

Jim only nodded amiably. He had no idea what to say.

"So, you killed that Jarodsky kid. Good riddance, I'd say."

"He didn't give me much choice, ma'am."

"So I heard. You should know Jarodsky wasn't working for us anymore. Not for quite some time. He'd gone over to the competition."

It was to be assumed there would be competition. There was always competition in any business. "Maybe that was good riddance too?"

"Definitely. I, ah, we recruited him when he was a small-timer, selling on campus. We should have known better."

Eliot broke in. "You understand we're just talking here. It wouldn't be good manners to say too much about it when you leave."

Betty waved a manicured hand. "I think Jim understands. Blair left us and he promised to deliver Rick Myers to his new associates. That didn't work out well, it seems."

"New associates, you say?" He might as well ask.

"From out of state. Lots of money, lots of muscle. Probably what some would call the mob." There might have been a note of frustration, maybe even anger, beneath her nonchalance. "To be

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honest, I'm thinking of letting them take over the market for the hard stuff. That wasn't our thing in the first place."

"If they take one thing from you, they'll go after another," said Eliot.

"That's the danger. They are moving into our territory and would like to take over everything."

"Squeezing us," rumbled Aaron from the shadows.

He might as well ask. "How did you feel about the Rick Myers thing?"

"We didn't care that much about Myers not working for us anymore, if that's what you mean. When we had leverage, fine. We used it. When we didn't have it anymore, we moved on and no hard feelings."

"All that went south, we understand," said Eliot. "The pilot wasn't cooperating with Jarodsky anymore."

"And now we learn he murdered Myers. Best we weren't involved in any of that."

Aaron spoke up again. "But we can't be sure the competition wasn't. They could have been putting pressure on Jarodsky."

"That's true," said Betty and turned her attention to Jim. "I almost canceled this meeting. With Jarodsky eliminated and this whole Rick Myers thing resolved, we didn't really need to straighten anything out between you and me. But I figured you might as well know what was going on."

"Then I should thank you." Jim realized he didn't really care about Betty Cook now he knew she wasn't involved in Rick's death. She hadn't dealt directly with him, it seemed, and probably didn't even know who Connie was. A dead end. Law enforcement might feel differently but that wasn't his business.

He also realized that no one had actually mentioned drugs of any sort in their conversation.

"And you are welcome. Will you show Jim out, Eliot?"

As they stepped outside, Eliot Cook said, "If we'd had any idea Jarodsky would go nuts like that, we would have warned you about him."

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Jim suspected Aaron Long had attempted to do just that. A minute later, he was in his Jeep, heading toward Nossi's store.

~ ~ ~

"You're pretty late," said Pam.

"Believe it or not, I was kidnapped."

"Oh, I believe it. Things like that happen to you, Jim."

They did, lately. "No more, I hope."

"But can't guarantee."

"Guarantees are hard to come by in this world, kid. We gumshoes live from day to day."

"Do shut up, Jim, and try to be normal. Now it's time for you to tell me what you planned for our evening. You did plan something, didn't you?"

"Moonlight canoeing on the Hocking?"

"I'd feel confident in vetoing that one. We're heading out, Dad!"

"Enjoy yourselves," called Paul from somewhere in the back.

"Shall we go to the other end of the spectrum then?" he asked, holding the door for her. "Dinner and a movie?"

"The conventional date? That might be a good idea this time. Don't always expect it to be enough." She gave the Jeep an appraising look. "We're riding in that?"

An implication of further dating. Jim had half-expected the girl to drop him after his latest misadventure. He seemed awfully unreliable. "The breeze in your hair will do you good." Her hairdo looked the same as the last time he'd seen her, at the farm. If there had been new styling in Marietta, he couldn't detect it. "Come colder weather I may need a top."

He extended an arm to help her in but she ignored it. "These seats are really hard."

"I suppose they are," he agreed, settling into his own. "I don't know restaurants in Athens, other than that diner near the art campus." He laughed. "And O.U. Kid."

"I've heard of it. You must take me there sometime. Not tonight."

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“Agreed.” One visit today had been enough. “I would think it’s not unusual to go out of town for an evening. The big city.”

Pam giggled. “Marietta.”

“I’d think you see enough of it. You leave again on Thursday?” They were still sitting parked by the street. He ought to start the engine and act like he was headed somewhere.

“Tomorrow night, so I can go directly to class from my grandparents’ house in the morning.”

“Then I did well to ask you out on a Tuesday.”

“Pretty well.” They pulled away from the curb. Pam would point him somewhere. He was fairly sure of that.

## THIRTY-FIVE

IT WAS BACK TO A routine. Or the beginning of a new routine. Things settled down, anyway. Jim had given a report on his meeting with Missus Cook, of course. He wasn't positive whether he gave it to Hennings or to Roy Barley, the ATF agent. Both were in the office.

The mention of the 'mob' moving in didn't surprise either. They would have a good idea already what was going on. Jack Hennings didn't really have a case to work on anymore, with Rick's killer being exposed. The ATF were unlikely to tell Jim what they were working on, as was the FBI, drug enforcement, or anyone else who happened to be involved.

Connie's death was the business of the Hocking County sheriff's office. Neither they nor he saw any direction forward on it. Her drug use? That seemed to have been the past, not a factor in her life when she fell to her death. That didn't mean she couldn't have been pulled back into that world, but Jim could find no evidence of it.

So maybe a love affair gone bad, which was kind of where he had started. The suspects remained the same. The mysterious married man remained mysterious.

But there was a new element—the forged papers in Jarodsky's possession. That led Jim's thoughts back to Connie's disappeared money. He didn't believe she had spent it all. If Blair—or someone else—could create fake prescriptions, they might forge other things. All the easier if his sister had been using at the time. This was why he had made an appointment with a lawyer, one with offices in Athens, to look into it. Joan had recommended her. Or Howard Stump had, when she'd asked him.

"You may need an accountant more than an attorney," Lucille Rice—of Rice and Rice, PA—told him. "And we may need to work with someone in Columbus, rather than trying to do it all long-distance. Getting the records is the first business. The main business. How forthcoming Folkes or the banks may be, it's hard to say. Feet can be dragged a very long time."

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Folkes? "You think Folkes might know something he didn't tell me?"

"I think it is entirely likely. He should have known what was going on." She shook her head of sleek dark hair, pulled back into a sort of bun. She most likely let it fall on her shoulders when she went home. "There might well have been negligence on the part of his office, though I hate to say that of a colleague. Negligence he chose to hide."

"I could see him not paying much attention to what was going on." Folkes had seemed rather disinterested in all of it when they had spoken.

"Then we'll set things in motion," she said, rising from behind her mahogany desk. "We will need a small retainer."

"Understood." That had been the first subject when he had come in. Jim probably shouldn't be spending the money but he wanted to get to the bottom of all this.

As he stepped out into the sunshine, he decided maybe it wasn't such an unlucky Friday the Thirteenth. He'd started things moving. Towards where, he would learn in time.

~ ~ ~

"You look better with those stitches out."

"I thought they added character," he told Tam. "Hi, Paul."

"Jim. Can I do anything for you this morning or do you just come here to monopolize my girls' time?"

"Canvases. I need canvases."

"Ah, you've been painting. I can stretch custom sizes for you, you know."

"I'll keep it in mind. Just some cheap cotton in standard dimensions today."

"Burlap's even cheaper," Tam informed him.

"And we don't sell it. Or we don't sell it stretched for painting. Not durable enough."

Tam was not to be put off that easily. "You can stretch it yourself or glue it to a board. We sell rolls for craft work." She gestured toward said rolls.

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Both ignored her. "We have plenty of ready-mades. Primed with acrylic at the manufacturer."

"Glue sizing can be skipped with that, right?"

"It can. An advance, I think."

Jim concurred. He knew where the bins of stretched canvases were and headed for them. Tam tagged along. "Afraid I'll slip one in my pocket and try to walk out with it?" he asked her.

"Happens all the time. We know artists can't be trusted."

"Your dad trusts me enough to date your sister." Sixteen by twenty? That could be a handy size.

"Having second thoughts, I assure you! But, um—" She lowered her voice. "That's because of all the dangerous things that have happened to you lately. Not that he is fond of poor artists, either. He expects better for his precious daughters."

"I think Pam was a little bothered by my mishaps too." Twelve by sixteen. No, he didn't like to paint that small. "I almost expected her to drop me."

"She still could! But you made a decent impression on Tuesday. Not one person tried to kill you."

"They don't dare. I have a reputation now as a dangerous man. Four of these and four of these, I think. Yeah. Go man the cash register, young lady."

"Woman the cash register, you mean."

~~~

Two easels had sprouted on his lawn while he was gone. Angie Pearce. Some guy he might have met. Both artists seemed to have chosen the barn as their subject.

"Don't use up all the view and not leave any for me," he told them as he walked over.

Angie laughed. The guy only gave him a perplexed look.

Pearce wore what looked to be a man's long-sleeved shirt over a pair of shorts. An improvised smock maybe. Or maybe a fashion statement. He had no way of knowing. Her wavy hair was tied back in a ponytail. She wore it longer than most girls these days.

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"You haven't met Clark," she said, nodding toward her companion. So he hadn't been part of the crowd on the Fourth. Those artists all looked the same.

"Hi. Jim, right?" said the man, only taking a quick glance away from his canvas. From where Jim stood it looked like a muddy mess.

"Yep. Pleased to meet you, Clark." He might or might not learn anything more about the painter, sometime.

Again, he could make nothing of Angie's painting. It all looked the same color. "I'm capturing its essence, don't you think?"

"Um, yes. Rather conceptual." Jim hated conceptual art.

"Oh, you get it. Are you going to join us?"

"Not now." He returned to the Jeep, drove it up to the house to unpack his purchases. When he looked out a little later, he saw the pair had stowed their gear in the girl's Volkswagen and disappeared. Maybe they went down to the creek to take a dip. He might later himself.

When next he checked they were gone.

THIRTY-SIX

"I FEEL A LITTLE REMOVED from these art students, even though I'm not much older." There were more painters here on this Sunday afternoon.

"Is that why you're not painting too?" asked Johnny.

"Could be. I won't be able to get away with that when I'm in class."

His friend only nodded. Whether he got it didn't matter. "The yard is looking better. Abby says we can't be ashamed of having you as a neighbor no more."

"Give me time. I'll do something to embarrass you. Maybe the whole valley. Another of those?"

"No thanks, Jim. Doctor says I shouldn't drink pop anyway. With all the sugar I'm liable to end up like Mama." Both sat on his front porch, looking down toward the road, the creek beyond.

"I need to get a chain saw next," Jim said. "Clear out that patch down there." He pointed.

"That used to all be open under the trees." Johnny swallowed the last swig of his Seven-Up. "There's a lot that can be cleared around the place."

"And put to the plow too. I do want to plant the old corn field this coming year."

"Shares? Let me know. I'd be willing to go in on it." Bone thought on that briefly. "Probably. That would be just about all I could handle, 'long with my own fields."

"Wouldn't have to be the entire field, I suppose. And I'm not planning to plant the field you're working this year."

"No? Thought you said something 'bout potatoes."

"I plan to put a little orchard there. Ken Pell has reserved some trees for me."

The young farmer nodded sagely. "Good place for it. So's this slope over t' the left here."

There was already a crab apple, near the road, and the remnants of the old orchard up the slope from the spring. "It is. I

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might go with more than apples. A pear tree or two could be nice. Maybe even grapes.”

“You’re getting ambitious, Jim. Don’t plant a bigger crop than you can harvest.”

Jim could only laugh at this bit of farmerly advice.

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“You should put in a concession stand,” advised Joan. “And charge for easel space.”

“I don’t think I’d make much money off this bunch.” He probably wouldn’t see much of them after Labor Day. There weren’t really many here anyway and they might all move along to some other interesting spot next week. An awful lot of barns around the region just begged to be painted.

He’d been surprised to see Joan. Sunday afternoons seemed like a good time to be at the coop to greet shoppers. “So, did you manage a second date last night?” she asked.

“Tam didn’t give you a report?”

“I think she might have had a date of her own.”

That was to expected, wasn’t it? He hadn’t seen her when he stopped to pick up her sister. “Yes, I went out with Pam again. Hey, should I be quizzing you about your dating life?”

“Or lack thereof? That would be pretty boring, Jim. Did you two sample the exciting Athens nightlife?”

“Sat and talked in a restaurant, mostly. Pam was a little low energy after driving back from Marietta.”

“Beauty college.”

“Hair styling,” he corrected her. “She should have her license by the end of this year. There’s an exam, I think.”

“And then her mom’s shop. I guess there are worse careers.” Joan looked down to the water. They sat on the low ledge overhanging the creek, feet dangling. “Worse lives.”

“She’s doing something real. Creating, just like us. That seems way better than sitting in an office.”

“That would kill me.”

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"I did it for most of the time I was in the navy. I think that was part of why I decided to pursue art when I got out."

"We've yet to see if that was a good career move."

"Maybe I should go into art history like your boyfriend. I mean, if it turns out I don't have any talent."

"I think there may have been a mean little snipe at Harold buried in that. But yeah, you have the brains for it. Most of these artists are pretty empty-headed."

"The cops!" someone called.

"Darn, not another raid." Jim stood up. He could see much of the picnic area that way. "Oh, it's just Will Dundee," he said and sat again.

Joan turned her head to see the deputy standing above them. "You're not dressed for swimming," she told him.

"And if you skinny-dipped you'd have to arrest yourself," added Jim.

"No naked swimming while on duty." He sidled down to squat beside them. "Saw there was a bit of a crowd as I drove by. Another party?" Will sounded doubtful about that.

"They all dropped in uninvited. Maybe you could make them move along."

"I'd have to call for backup. Look like a dangerous bunch. How are you doing, Miss Woodson?"

"Miss Woodson?"

"He has to be polite when he's in uniform," Jim informed her.

"Oh. Yeah, I believe that. Joan is well today, Deputy Dundee."

"And Will is glad to hear it. That water does look good. You guys should be in it." Dundee rose. "Back to patrolling." He clambered up to the grass and disappeared in the direction of Hemlock Road.

The two sat looking at the water a while.

"You know, Will kind of likes you."

"Oh, great."

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Everyone gone. He might not see that many at a time again this

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summer. Not unless he had another party. No plans for that. Not even Labor Day, Jim thought.

Not long after that holiday, school would start. He would have other things going on, other thoughts to occupy him. The whole question of Connie's death was likely to fade into the background, while his life went on. Getting a degree, working on the farm. Seriously painting. Those things were important. More important than dwelling on the past.

A car passed in the dark, headlights illuminating the barn for a few seconds, then disappearing behind its dark bulk. He wondered how late Dundee patrolled. Deputies did drive these roads at night, on a rotating basis, he thought.

He could just make out the ridge across the valley, across Hemlock Creek. There was no reason he couldn't go into the woods at night. Despite the Pells' admonition not to fall off a cliff. He'd almost done that, not too long ago now. Nine days? He wouldn't bother to count them off. It seemed like a year ago now.

There might be a great view from the hill behind the house. Up there, above the cliffs, he could see far more than from any other vantage. He would be able to spy the lights at the Bones' farm. Maybe the farm beyond it. Some night, he just might go up.

For that matter, he could haul his easel up during the day. That would be something different. Before the end of summer.

THIRTY-SEVEN

BOTH RICES WANTED TO TALK to Jim, husband and wife. Jeff was the husband, Jeffrey Rice. He didn't know which considered themselves the senior partner. They met in the office where he had spoken before with Lucille; she sat at the same desk, Jeff standing behind her.

Jeff was an innocuous looking fellow with a little mustache, graying at the temples. He probably felt he looked distinguished. Lucille led off and went straight to it. "The accountants have turned up a number of bogus expenses your sister signed off on."

Jeff took it right up from there. "Some of the signatures seemed suspicious to them. Whether forged or made under the, ah, influence."

"Nothing to be proved unless we can get more original documents. Folkes hasn't cooperated on those. These were copies of checks we were able to get from the bank." She looked up at Jim, over her glasses. "Thanks to the permissions you signed. At any rate, the payments seem to be for nothing real."

"Seem," emphasized Jeff. "We admittedly can't say for sure."

"Shouldn't my authorization get Connie's records from Folkes?"

"It should, but he can drag things out quite a long time. He might even claim that she gave him power over it all and you have no right to look at anything."

Lucille nodded agreement to this. "Not immediately, but I would expect it to come."

"So—" Jim gathered his thoughts. "Someone did embezzle Connie's money."

"Embezzle? That's probably the right word. Who, we can't tell."

"Yet," said Jeff Rice.

"You could look at Blair Jarodsky."

Jeff raised an eyebrow. "The man you threw over a cliff. He won't be telling us much."

"I don't think he could have pulled anything like this off

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himself but he could well have been involved. He might have known things." He didn't think Blair had the know-how. Nor any large amounts of money, stolen or otherwise.

"We'll certainly look at him," promised Lucille. "The police took all his effects as evidence, didn't they?"

"They did. Hmm, but they might have passed them on to one federal agency or another. Jarodsky was involved in more than murder. Or embezzlement."

"I think we need to look at the finances of Folkes himself," Jeff felt. "Whether we can manage it?" He shrugged.

His wife looked peeved. "Great attitude to trot out in front of the clients, Jeff."

Jim chuckled. "Some of us appreciate honesty."

~ ~ ~

Jim felt okay about his attorneys' progress. He knew it would take time. In less than two weeks since he'd given the go-ahead, they'd found out a fair amount. Enough to provide clear pointers toward the way to move.

A Friday morning in Athens Ohio. He could just drive home now but that seemed like the waste of a trip. Pam was still in Marietta. He'd seen her Tuesday, had in fact taken her to O. U. Kid. She didn't seem impressed. Maybe if he had tackled the open mike. Maybe if one of the Cooks were there and he could have pointed them out as dangerous gangsters. Jim was not going to deny his recent adventures added a little shine to him, maybe impressed her just a bit. Pam would never admit it; that was certain!

Nothing this coming Saturday night, though. She had accepted his invitation to come down to the farm on Sunday. In his Jeep, just the two of them. A step in some direction or another. He might even take her up to the caves. Or save that for another time. He was a bit distracted as he stepped out into the street, crossing over to the parked Jeep. A sedan suddenly pulled out and sped toward him. Barely in time did he jump—or fall—back out of the way.

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After all he'd gone through recently, he didn't believe for a second it was an accident. Someone, for some reason, still wanted to hurt him. The place they had chosen for the attempt said something about that reason, maybe.

He should cancel Pam's visit, shouldn't he? Putting her in danger was the last thing he wanted. He had her number in Marietta. Her grandparents' number. He might call tonight and explain.

Jim hadn't decided for sure about it when he pulled in at the farm.

~ ~ ~

He still hadn't decided when a late-model Chevy pulled off Hemlock Road and honked. Best to go down and see what it was about. He didn't know the youngish guy beside the car. Short but broad shouldered, maybe an athlete once, long-sleeved blue shirt. Nice watch on his wrist, understated but unmistakably expensive. The face reminded him of someone.

"Jim Fry, I believe," he said, stepping forward to shake. "Steve Cook."

It took a moment to register. Jim looked his visitor over. "Your brother seemed to suggest you were dangerous."

Steve grinned. "That's a joke between us. We accuse each other of being the bad apple."

"Which lets you play the nice guy? The good son?"

"Exactly. Of course, I *am* the nicer one. Also the savvy businessman, if I do say so myself. Eliot prefers to think of himself as the people person."

"I got that impression." Jim wasn't sure what sort of impression this man was trying to make. He was definitely uncomfortable standing here with him.

"Speaking of impressions, you made a good one on my mother. Which is why she wants to keep you well away from us and our organization."

"I am quite happy to do that."

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"But others aren't. We heard of your near-accident this morning. News gets around fast."

Jim wasn't sure he bought that. "If you're already watching someone."

That brought a smile. "Even faster then. Look, that was almost certainly our business competitors. You've upset them and we don't know how."

Maybe he and his family should remain ignorant. No. Jim decided just the opposite would be better. "That might be a bit of a long story. Or a complicated one, anyway. Walk down to the creek with me and I'll tell you all about it."

Ten minutes or so later, it had been pretty well laid out. "Then whoever stole your sister's money must have some connection to the mob. I can't see any other explanation."

"It sounds reasonable," admitted Jim.

"It's also probably nothing we can help you with. Sorry to say that. You'd better watch yourself, Jim. You might want to get a gun. And, though I don't normally recommend it, talk to the police."

"I think I'll do just that."

Steve nodded. "You sure have a nice place here. My kids would love it."

"Not for sale," Jim told him, "but they can come and swim anytime they'd like." He had nothing against this man. Nothing personal. And certainly not against his children.

"Thanks. We just might take you up on it, Jim. After people stop trying to kill you."

THIRTY-EIGHT

SKETCHING WASN'T HIS THING; JIM was willing to admit that. He preferred to just paint, to build his picture stroke by stroke, with no preliminary lines. He sat now above the cliffs, where he had sat when he first returned to the farm, sketchbook in his lap.

Carrying easel and paints up here seemed just a little much. He might attempt it another time. Up the valley toward the Bones? That made the best picture, in any conventional sense, the fields laid out, the house and barn, the road winding into the distance. His own barn didn't look like much from this angle.

And the ridge line across the valley. A moderately interesting shape. As interesting as any other, in an abstract sense. The view obliquely to his right was better, where a low ridge jutted out beyond the field of Johnny's corn, the untilled bottom land beyond, and the hills rising in the background. The way up to the caves.

When he was a kid, he had camped overnight in the first cave. As had his father when he was young. It might be fun to do that again. Him and the night and whatever ghosts might choose to visit. Not this weekend. He had decided not to cancel Pam, what with people likely to be in and out and about on Sunday. Some of them were going to be cops.

Yes, he had called law enforcement and told them of the attempted hit-and-run. He also told them of Cook's visit and even a bit about the investigation of Connie's finances. Laurence Boyer at the sheriff's office was the one he talked to. He was in charge here in Hocking County, in theory. Jim assumed his office passed the information on to others but couldn't guarantee. He would have liked to tell Jack about it all, too, even if it wasn't his investigation anymore. Well, that speeding car had been in his jurisdiction. The detective wasn't at the station so he didn't pursue it.

But he had called Jim this morning and told him the feds had filled him in. Which feds, Jim didn't ask. It seemed the possible mob involvement interested everyone. "There are going to be

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people watching out for you,” he claimed. Jim was willing to give that some credence but not to depend on it.

Finally, Will had stopped by, just before he climbed up here. “We’ve been ordered to drive by more frequently,” he let Jim know. “That may not amount to all that much. But I’ll tell you, I’m going to come back when I’m off duty and keep an eye out. If it’s okay with you.”

He could see no reason to object though he didn’t think it necessary. And Will wasn’t exactly a close friend, not a person he would normally turn to for help. Except in his professional capacity. “Bring your trunks this time and get into the creek,” he told him.

“Might not be a good idea to take my service revolver in,” Will had replied.

Jim did not have a handgun himself, despite Steve Cook’s advice. Nor had there been any weapons here when he moved in. Connie wouldn’t have a gun in the house. But it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have a shotgun or maybe a twenty-two around. Jim was no hunter but he knew there was occasional vermin to deal with.

Not the two-legged sort, he hoped. Maybe he’d stop in a hardware store on Monday.

That wasn’t a bad bit of pencil work. Enough. Time to climb down and fix some lunch.

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Marietta was no more than an hour drive from Athens. Pam could commute to school, if she wanted. Jim understood her preference to stay overnight, be away from her siblings, concentrate on her goals. She would have friends there too, fellow students at the least. She might even have a boyfriend to spend half her week on!

At three, he rang up the Nossi house. Pam might well have been home a couple hours already.

After a while, after the requisite pleasantries, he got to it. “The fact is, Pam, I may still not be safe to be around. But the farm is

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about as safe a place as any, except maybe your family's living room. I'm not sure about the dining room."

"It can be pretty hazardous," she agreed.

"But if you feel at all uncomfortable about tomorrow, we can cancel."

"And hang out in the living room. No, Jim, I'm looking forward to going. You're taking me to early mass, right?"

"I'll pick you up at, what, Seven?"

"Seven-thirty would do. Mass is at Eight." He'd only been to the Ten o'clock service in Athens previously. "Or we could be naughty and skip it."

"Miss Nossi! I am shocked."

"Me too! Okay, I'll be a good girl."

Yes, she would, he told himself after saying good bye. Jim had no intention of testing her limits. No more than she wanted him to.

~ ~ ~

There was racket in the background. Voices. Typewriters? "Hi, Jim? It's Mike. Mike Gil."

Mike. He no longer remained a suspect in Jim's mind. Not much of one. But he could have had access to Connie's account, couldn't he? Nah, that seemed awfully unlikely. "How are you, Mike?"

"Good enough. I hear you aren't though! Reports are you've had some rough times down there."

"All over now." He wouldn't tell Gil otherwise.

"I'd like to come down and talk about it. Maybe just to know what happened first hand, maybe to do a story. Would you mind if I brought a cameraman?"

"I didn't even say *you* could come, Mike," he reminded him.

"Oh, yeah, true." He didn't sound like he thought Jim was being serious.

Which he wasn't. Not completely. "But you'd be welcome, if I get a heads-up first. Even with a cameraman. I'm not nearly as photogenic since my stitches were taken out."

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“Those would have added some interest,” felt Mike. “Okay. Monday or Tuesday maybe. I’ll firm it up first.”

“Good enough. Bye.”

Mike. Probably an innocent—as much as anyone else—and certainly no one to fear. More so if he had a cameraman in tow to record everything. They’d want to go up to the caves, wouldn’t they?

If he’d thought of that he might have said no.

## THIRTY-NINE

BY NINE, THEY WERE HEADED north, toward the farm. The Fry Farm. He still sometimes answered the phone that way. On Fifty-six they traveled, the route he'd taken the night of the crash. Pam had arrived from the other direction last time.

"There are loads of parks down here we could visit," Jim told her.

"Are they better than your place?"

"No, but sometimes different is good."

"Sometimes the same is good."

"You won't get an argument on that. I'm the worst sort of homebody."

"I could see that. I think it's one of the things I like about you, Jim."

That could be no more the added maturity, the added stability, of having five years on her. And on guys her age.

Three Seventy-four. "There's the corner where I banged myself up," he said, no more than nodding toward the spot as they passed. A right on Hemlock Road. "The farm's boundary is somewhere up here. I'll have to figure out just where sometime."

"You don't know?"

"Not exactly. Okay, there's what we always called the hay field." He came to a stop beside the stretch of bottom land. "That's definitely mine."

"Not much hay."

"Lots of junk trees. I should sell them for pulp and maybe get it back into tillage." He put the Jeep in gear and continued up the road. "I've heard there are interesting spots back from the road on both sides down this way but never had the chance to explore them. Old cabins, hermits' caves."

"Like at the Hermit's Hollow park we passed."

"But better!"

"Oh, of course."

"Here's the corn field, with no corn."

"Another deceiving name."

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"And around this bend—" The barn appeared.

"The farm doesn't extend much beyond the house this way, does it?" Pam asked as they pulled in below the house.

"No. It becomes the Bone Farm a little bit up the road."

"Joan told me they were friends."

"Since I was a kid. Went to school together. Went to church together in Logan. German Catholics. Lots of those around."

"In Athens too. I should meet them," she declared.

"If you hang around here you're bound to, sooner or later."

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"Are you two going up to the caves?"

"There are other attractions on this farm," Jim stated. "Not even counting me."

"Yeah, sure, Jim." True to his word, Will Dundee was there in civvies. "Do you, um, know if Joan is coming?"

"The questions keep coming, don't they?" he asked Pam "I doubt it. She usually spends weekends at her studio."

"That's when she sells," Pam added. "Hey, you didn't say whether we're going to the caves."

"Do you want to? We can be lazy and just swim. We could climb to the cliffs up behind the house and watch the vultures land and take off. We could even walk down and visit the Bones."

"Oh, let's do that."

Why not? "If you had a bicycle we could ride over."

"You've been riding that English bike of yours?" asked Will.

"A little. These roads aren't so great for it."

"You should leave it in Athens so you could ride around the campus. And I could borrow it," said Pam.

"That's a pretty darn good idea." Though her legs would be a bit short for its frame.

"I have them sometimes. Let's go see the Bones."

Johnny and Abby would be back from mass. Nine in Logan. "I'll go part way," said Dundee. "Won't intrude on their Sunday morning."

"Shoot, you're as much their friend as I am."

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“Okay, then I’ll say I won’t be a third wheel.”

He was obviously set on it, so Jim didn’t argue. The unpaved road sloped gently to the turn. “This over here is mine too,” he told Pam, waving toward the marshy field at their right hand. “I’ve no idea where the line runs on the other side. Not as far as the Martinton Road, there.” He wasn’t completely positive of that. It rose steeply, cutting away from Hemlock Road just at the curve. “And the farm extends to the bridge ahead. On this side of the road. Again, not sure about the other side.” Jim suspected the road marked his boundary. But it could be a little beyond it.

The bridge crossed a narrow stream, flowing through the low field. “Bones on that side, Frys on this.”

“So that butternut tree is yours?” Will asked.

“Sure is. There’s a little spring right near it that flows into the stream here. An artesian well actually, from when there was some drilling for natural gas here.”

“You know almost as much local history as Marge Pell,” observed Will. “I’ll wait here. Maybe go look at your spring.”

A little way up the road, Pam said, “The deputy likes Joan Woodson, doesn’t he?”

“So it would seem. I wouldn’t hold out much hope for him.”

“He’s better than that dud she was with here.”

“They seem comfortable with their relationship.”

“But they’re not passionate. There should be passion, shouldn’t there?”

“Absolutely.” Jim turned and took her in his arms. Following a long kiss, he said, “Like that.”

“Yep.” But after a pensive pause she said, “They sleep together. Sometimes. Joan didn’t mind at all saying that. And she said they had an open relationship.”

Jim had heard none of this before but it did not surprise him in the least. “If it’s too open, they’ll both fall out. Here we are.”

“Gee, their yard is almost as steep as yours.”

“One doesn’t waste level ground on houses. That’s for crops.” There was a long stairway of rock slabs to ascend. It would have

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easier, maybe to go up the drive. A dog barked. He'd forgotten the Bones had a hound around the place. Johnny stepped onto the front porch.

"It's Jim and his girl," he called into the house. "'Bout time you brought her by."

"It was only because I insisted," said Pam, stepping up to his level. "It's awfully hard to get him to do *anything*."

"Once you do, folks just expect you to do something else," claimed Jim. "Where does it stop?"

"On the parlor sofa," said Abby, coming to the door. "Come on in."

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"The Bones are nice," Pam thought. "But I don't think I'd want to hang around with them much."

"Not if you want stimulating conversation. Your family has spoiled you, Miss Nossi."

"That's true. You fit right in with us!"

"I wouldn't want to be your brother."

"Not if we're going to do this." She pulled him down to her for another kiss.

And would they keep doing it? It might be a long time till either was ready for more. At least until Pam finished school. Maybe until he did the same.

"Let's see if Dundee is still here."

He was, sitting on the grass, arms crossed on his knees. His shoes and socks lay on the ground beside him. Someone was sketching up at the north end, much the same scene Jim had captured from the cliffs yesterday. Just a different angle. Things could always be seen from a different angle. There was a couple down on the gravel by the creek.

"Not as many visitors as last Sunday," the deputy observed.

"Nope. We're going in the water."

"Time I did too." Will rose, sliding off his trousers to expose swim trunks. Jim could see no evidence of a revolver. "Will there be a diving exhibition? I've heard it's a pretty good show."

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"You'd better not dive," scolded Pam. "Not unless we have a lifeguard standing by."

"I'm sure Deputy Dundee knows first aid." Will did not look like he wanted to get involved but gave a tentative nod.

"Not enough. I'm just going to wade. You behave yourself. And you watch him!" she told Will. She went to the projecting sandstone point and hopped down to the gravel.

Jim watched her a moment before saying, "Johnny mentioned a strange car cruising by my house. Slowing down, looking, coming back again an hour later."

"Maybe they wanted to use your toilet," conjectured Will.

"My outhouse is always open." He jumped off the rock into the shallow water. Will followed.

## FORTY

MIKE HAD CALLED BACK LAST night, after he'd taken Pam home. Chances were he'd tried to reach him earlier. Tuesday, Mike said. Okay, Jim said. He'd best run any errands today.

The first would be to stop at the sheriff's office. There wasn't much to add to what he'd said on the phone but Boyer had asked him to come. He might mention the suspicious car.

Roy Barley was there. That made sense; his agency had a particular interest in the Cook organization. Barley himself had a particular interest in Steve Cook's visit. "Steve, huh?" he said. "He's the one who favors shifting their organization to legitimate businesses. That's the general consensus. I'm afraid Eliot may be a gangster at heart."

"He enjoys playing at being one, I think."

The agent laughed at that. "All too true. His mother is the real thing. And Aaron Long."

"Is there a husband? A Mister Cook?"

"Divorced. He lives in Florida now."

"I hear she sends him a little money," said Deputy Boyer. "So we can assume the Cooks have nothing to do with what's going on now, whatever their involvement might have been at the beginning. You don't think they had anything to do with your sister's money, do you Jim?"

"Steve seemed to know nothing about all that. I sensed a sort of disapproval, I think."

"Doesn't surprise me. That sort of thing was never in their scope."

"At least in the old days," said Barley.

"Yeah. Times change and not for the better."

"You gonna drop that into a campaign speech, Larry?" The agent winked at Jim. "Boyer here is thinking of running for sheriff."

"Just thinking," claimed Boyer. "But I hope you're registered to vote, Jim. Things were quiet over the weekend?"

"They were. Deputy Dundee hung around off duty, for which I

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am grateful, but it was unneeded.” Then he told them of Johnny’s suspicious automobile.

The two seemed to take it more seriously than he did. “That was earlier in the week? Before someone tried to run you over. Okay.”

“Not a chance of knowing who was at the wheel of either car,” said Larry.

“Not with the description Jim gave us. Dark, I believe you said. I’d have to say the whole thing sounds a bit amateurish.”

“I’ve found criminals often are. That’s why we manage to catch them.”

Roy chuckled. “Even when we’re pretty amateurish ourselves.”

~ ~ ~

Jim had stopped at a hardware store while in Logan, the same one where he’d bought his mower, and looked at shotguns. He didn’t see one as being in any way for self protection; it just might be useful to have around the farm. He ended up walking out with a chainsaw instead.

As far as protection went, Boyer had again promised to keep watch. And, as before, Jim didn’t put a lot of faith in his assurances.

Could the car Johnny told him of have been the same as the one in Athens? He hadn’t put the two of them together until it was brought up in the meeting with Boyer and Barley. Yeah, ‘dark.’ That wasn’t much to go on. He tried to picture it again, as it had sped toward him. Not black. Dark gray maybe. And big, but that could have been an illusion of the moment, his sudden flash of alarm making it appear larger than it was.

Nothing more. He set to assembling his saw. Before lunch, he’d taken down some of the sumac and other brush down by creek and began dragging everything into a pile. What he would do with the pile, he didn’t know.

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"Are you going to watch the Big Event tonight?"

Jim had no idea what she was talking about. "Event?"

"Telstar! A live broadcast across the Atlantic via satellite. Can you imagine? The future has arrived!"

"I don't own a television."

"Oh." Angie looked puzzled by that one. She brightened. "Come by my place and watch mine." Then she snickered. "I'm not allowed to smoke dope here but we could share some there. It would heighten the experience!"

Jim was at a momentary loss for words. Angie didn't care. "Oh, I'm just teasing you, Jimbo. I know you aren't going to run off to Athens to watch a television show. Even with me! Maybe to smoke some pot but I don't know you well enough to say on that one."

"I've never tried it." He'd known those who had, in the service. Whether it ever been used in Connie's circle of friends, the ones she had hung around with back in Columbus, he didn't know. He didn't remember it being mentioned.

"It's not dangerous like pills. I'd never touch those!"

"Good for you." He took a look at the picture on her easel. She'd chosen his brush pile as a subject. More than one color this time but as formless as before. Or maybe it was a square brush pile. Jim could find nothing to say about it so he only gave it a noncommittal nod. "You've been visiting a lot," he said.

"Oh, that's just because I like you so much."

"That's understandable."

"Really, I know this summer is rushing by and I won't get as much opportunity to go places and paint then. Definitely not places as nice as this. Not as welcoming, either. We all appreciate you opening it to us, Jim. You should know that."

"Sure." Whoever 'all' was. Jim returned to his own easel. He was not painting the brush pile.

FORTY-ONE

A VEHICLE DOWN AT THE road? It was barely light out. Must be Mike, arrived early. Jim stepped out on the porch with his cup of coffee. That car could have sat there some time without him knowing it.

Hard to make out the color in this light. Must have spied him here. The front door was opening. Just the one door. No cameraman? The driver leaned in, stood again with something in his hand. A briefcase. That didn't look like Mike Gil.

It was Dan Folkes. The light of the rising sun gleamed on his balding head. Jim considered going down to him. No, let him climb the hill. Let this man come to him. He took another sip of coffee.

"What can I do for you, Folkes?" he asked when the man reached the house. Jim stood looking down at him from the elevation of the porch.

"I want to work out our misunderstandings," said the attorney. "Your people seem to think there have been irregularities."

Irregularities. That was a good word for it. "And there haven't?"

"I was just taking care of your sister," he claimed. "She wasn't always entirely capable of it herself."

There might have been just a small amount of truth in that mound of manure. "Come in and talk," said Jim. The man followed him to the kitchen. "Coffee?"

"Okay. Thanks."

Both settled at the big table. "So clear up our misunderstanding," Jim told him.

The man gathered himself. He'd probably planned out something to say. An opening statement. "It started with me helping Connie with the divorce and then getting settled after that. We became friends. Then we became lovers."

He knew Folkes had a wife. The married man Rick mentioned. "Well, that is a new bit of information."

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"And she, well, spiraled, you know? I took care of her as best I could and managed her assets."

"Used up her assets. I'm not buying this, Folkes. Not for a minute."

"I was afraid you wouldn't. Shit, I knew you wouldn't." He opened the briefcase he'd laid on the table and pulled out a hand gun. Some sort of auto.

"That was you that tried to run over me."

"I was told to clean up my mess." He leveled the automatic at Jim. "I'm doing that now. Let's go."

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Where they went was up the hill behind the house, Jim first, Folkes behind, holding the gun on him. "I know this hill up here. Went up it once with Connie to look at the buzzards."

The cliffs. That's where they were headed. "So how do you fit in with Jarodsky?" he asked.

"Blair? We met through Connie, of course. He was her supplier. And I introduced him to some friends of mine who were interested in doing business around here."

"The mob."

"You can call them that. I owed them."

Things fell together. "Which was why you needed Connie's money." Maybe other clients' too. If he were desperate, he wouldn't stop at just hers.

"I was in deep, Jim. The mob bailed me out. Now the mob owns me."

"You traded one debt for another."

"If you say so. This is where we turn aside, isn't it?" Jim wasn't about to tell him.

"Your sister got herself straightened out and started threatening all sorts of things. She was going to tell my wife about us. She was going to tell the police I'd stolen her money." A sharp little laugh. "I don't think she was at all sure of that but it didn't stop her."

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"Once her head was clear enough to see what had been going on."

"Right. Jarodsky was getting worried about her too. He kind of kept an eye on Connie for me. And he was having his own troubles with Myers. That damned Jew was the cause of everything going wrong."

"I'd say that was you, Folkes."

"If you want to. Nobody told Blair to kill Myers. He took that on himself after you showed up and started talking to him. Might have panicked. Probably after popping too many pills."

"But you killed my sister yourself."

"I did. I came down and told her I wanted to clear up our misunderstandings. Over that way."

They stood atop the cliffs. This was a longer drop than at the caves, but sloping dirt and trees at the bottom, not rock. He looked out toward the house. There were more cars there now, weren't there? Mike must have arrived. Too bad he was going to miss him.

He turned his eyes back to the man holding the gun. Folkes hadn't looked away from him, didn't know anyone else had arrived. "I think the only way you'll get me over the edge is to shoot me. And then, what was the point of bringing me up here?"

"Maybe just privacy. You might not be found for days."

"Except by the vultures. I wonder if they're down there waiting." Jim sidled to the edge as if he were going to look over. A bullet could come any moment, he knew. Give him a few seconds

—

He grabbed an exposed tree root hanging over the edge and swung down. He heard a curse behind him and the report of a gun. Nowhere near him, he was sure. A ledge there. He lowered himself, slid sideways to another hold. It wasn't so different from climbing the cliffs by the creek. Just a lot higher.

Another bullet. Close this time. He glanced up to see Folkes's head and arm sticking out over the top of the cliff. Lying down. There was a good place to go down a little further. Hello, Missus

## STEPHEN BROOKE

Vulture. Just passing through! With a harsh cry, the big bird launched from its ledge. That could help block another shot.

No more shots came. Another look up showed no Folkes. He's gone around, Jim told himself. He'll shoot from the bottom. His best hope was to get down and into the trees before that happened. Over there. Connie's murderer had found a place to attempt a shot from the side. The gun was pointed but no bullet came. Too much rock projecting between the two of them.

And there he was coming into an open spot directly below, glancing up, preparing for a shot, with nowhere for Jim to hide. A dozen feet? A long way but he saw no other choice. He let himself drop on the man. The last thing he remembered was Folkes's surprised face looking up at him.

~ ~ ~

"You're both going to survive," Dundee told him. "He has some broken bones but I reckon he cushioned your fall."

Folkes lay on the ground nearby. Perhaps unconscious. Will followed his eyes. "An ambulance is on the way for him."

"I'd as soon you leave him for the vultures." Jim looked past the deputy. Mike Gil and his cameraman stood there.

"This is a hell of a lot better than filming some caves," stated Mike. "We caught a lot of it on film."

"We woulda got more if someone hadn't put so damned many trees in our way," complained the man holding the camera.

"They're my trees. I guess you can complain to me." He turned his attention back to Will. "Convenient of you to come along."

"I was patrolling and saw the car out front. Them too," he said, nodding toward the news crew. "Seemed suspicious. We came around the house and I could see you perched up here. Or I could see *someone*. Guessed it was you."

Mike had come over and was looking down at Folkes. "This is the man who murdered Connie?"

"So it is, Mike."

He stared at him a long time. "Okay," he said to the

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cameraman. "Let's get down to the house and set up a shot of the ambulance arriving."

## FORTY-TWO

“LET US GET A SHOT of you hobbling into the emergency room and then we’ll head off to Columbus.” At pretty much everyone’s insistence, Jim had gone to the hospital. He had refused to ride in the ambulance with Folkes. It was Mike who drove him there.

It might be worth getting a television just to see it all on the screen.

Tuesday. He should have called Pam by now. He would, and let her know people were no longer trying to kill him. As far as he knew! Maybe call some others too, when he got home. Dundee was waiting in the emergency room, having followed the ambulance into town, both their sirens blaring, red lights and blue ones flashing.

“Let’s get you checked,” he said. Nothing broken; the deputy had been right about that. Sprained ankles. Yes, both of them.

“So what happened to you?” the doctor asked.

“I tried a new version of high diving. No water!”

He might remember to use that line sometime later. Joan would appreciate it more than this guy. “You’ll need to keep off your feet a while. I’d recommend a wheel chair.”

“Okay.” He had no intention of getting one.

But they stuck him in one to wheel him out to where Dundee waited. With Larry Boyer. “We’re going to have to put you on the force,” was the man’s greeting. “You solve more cases than any of our deputies.” He looked Jim over. Especially the swelling, discolored ankles. “I was going to ask you to come down to the office but I think it might be better if you go home and rest. Maybe we’ll come to you. You taking him home, Dundee?”

“It would be my pleasure.”

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He sat in a kitchen chair, feet propped in another, telephone cord stretching from the wall. “Yep, it’s all over,” he told his girlfriend—Pam was most definitely his girlfriend—and Folkes is sure to go to jail for it. If not the electric chair.”

“That’s pretty amazing, Jim.”

THESE REMEMBERED HILLS

"It is, isn't it? I can hardly believe it myself."

"If it were anyone else I'd just think they'd made it up. Wish I had time to come down and nurse you to health."

So do I, he thought. He'd like having Pam in the house. "The Bones are keeping tabs on me. Abby can fluff my pillow and give me sponge baths."

"She should just throw you in the creek. I am definitely coming down to give you TLC on Sunday. Whether you can drive me or not."

He doubted he would be able. "I await with bated breath."

"That's way too long to bate your breath. Gee, I'm happy that things can be normal now." She giggled. "Not that they're ever likely to be normal with you."

"I'll try to make them normal. Only paint happy pictures of smiling children. Spend my days whistling happy songs while I plow my fields. Only dive into bed."

"Maybe not *that* normal. Till Sunday. No, I'll call before then!"

"And I'll be here. Bye now."

~~~

It was mid-afternoon before the law showed up. Best to get it over with. Completely over? Not the lawmen he expected. No one from the sheriff's department, not ATF agent Barley. He wouldn't have expected Hennings to be there though they would probably talk someday.

No, it was the FBI. Agent Jay Sawtelle. He had a young man in a suit in tow. "This is Bernie Weeks. Assistant DA."

The man shook his hand. Jim didn't rise from his chair, of course. He was ensconced on the front porch. Johnny had shoved one of the over-stuffed chairs from the living room out there for him.

"We need to start working on this Folkes's prosecution," said Assistant DA Weeks. "The murder. It seems there may be a number of other charges." He looked at his notebook. "Embezzlement. Maybe drug trafficking. Forgery. Racketeering might work too."

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“And my attempted murder,” Jim reminded him.

Sawtelle broke in. “Um—the man knows things that interest us. We may make a deal, take the death penalty off the table, if he cooperates.”

“He might be willing to confess fully with a promise like that, too. It has to be admitted there is not a lot of direct evidence to tie him to your sister’s murder.”

That didn’t bother Jim. He didn’t even care whether Folkes was punished. Not really. What he had sought was resolution. Knowing what had happened.

“Do you know what got him started on his path in the first place? The debts?”

The agent shrugged. “Some bad habit or another. If he philandered with other women, he could have been paying blackmail. Maybe gambling or bad speculations. Whatever it was, he took mob money to pay it off, when stealing from his clients didn’t provide enough.”

“Consider this just a preliminary meeting,” said Weeks. “A full statement may be needed eventually. You might be called on to testify at a trial, as well.”

“Okay. Glad to cooperate any way I can.” He looked past the two, to a car pulling in. “More visitors. Oh, Father Malone. I hope he’s not here to administer Extreme Unction.”

“By any normal lights,” said Agent Sawtelle, “he should be.”

## FORTY-THREE

TAM HAD BROUGHT HER SISTER in the VW van. Not only that, they had arrived early and insisted on taking Jim into Logan for mass. At least they hadn't brought a wheel chair. Though it might have been nice to have one or the other push him up the aisle.

"We're having a party," Pam informed him. "We let everyone know."

"We can't quite say what we're celebrating but we we're celebrating something," Tam appended.

Many somethings, thought Jim. Maybe he couldn't name them all either. "I hope you told them to bring their own food. I'm pretty broke now after paying for attorneys and accountants and chain saws and ambulances."

"Oh," gasped Pam, dramatically, "I can't have a broke boyfriend!"

"Rice and Rice did tell me I could sue Folkes's law firm for damages. I'm not likely to see much from it."

"Okay, then. As long as you're not *completely* broke."

"We saw your dive on TV," said Tam, veering to another subject. "All the local news shows picked up on the story and aired it."

"How do you feel about a famous boyfriend?" he asked Pam.

"That I'll like him just as much tomorrow when he's not famous."

"Are these our first guests?" asked Tam. Someone came down the path from the road.

"Could be just an ordinary Sunday visitor," said Jim. People had been in and out all week. He'd watched from his front porch, not being able to do much else. Painters and acquaintances stopped by, set up easels, swam in the creek. Some didn't even know anything had happened.

A man and woman, a little boy and girl. "I understand it's safe now," called the man, raising a hand in greeting.

"So it seems. Stick around for the party. We're celebrating something."

STEPHEN BROOKE

"If I'd known that I would have brought a case of beer. We own a brewery, you know."

"A legal one?"

Steve laughed good-naturedly. "Yep. Everything above board." The family walked toward the north end of his picnic area, taking it all in.

"Who's that?" whispered Tam. Pam was curious too.

"Steve Cook. Famous gangster and family man."

"Oh." She obviously had nothing to say about that.

Neither did Pam.

~ ~ ~

"Good turnout for an impromptu party." Despite it being a Sunday, Joan had made her way to the farm. Howard had not. Maybe this was Will's chance. He would drop by, wouldn't he?

No neighbors, at least not yet. He didn't really know many neighbors. Jim couldn't even name the folks at the farm beyond the Bones. It might be on their mailbox. There were the Pells. They might stay home of a Sunday for much the same reason Joan stayed at her studio. Would they have any apples to sell at this time of year? He wasn't sure. Soon though, huh? There were early varieties.

"I still need to throw that cave party you suggested."

"Not until you can get around a heck of lot better."

"Then he's going to show them to me," said Pam.

Tam didn't say anything but she'd want to see them too. Jim was sure of that.

"Oh, I could get up and climb a cliff right now. And take a high dive into the creek."

"You two pin him down so he can't get into mischief," Joan said.

Each girl took an arm and pushed him down onto the grass. "Oh, you're into the rough stuff, are you?" someone asked. "And with two girls at a time."

Jim could see those two girls blush as they released him. He remained lying down, looking at Angela Pearce upside-down.

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"You've discovered my secret. There's a dungeon under the house, you know."

"A dank little cellar you mean," said Joan. "I've seen it."

"True. I only keep potatoes captive down there." He sat up. "Lame or not, I'm going to get down to the water and swim."

"And who will get you back up?"

"Maybe his criminal friend. The whole family is down there."

"He's not a criminal until he's arrested and convicted. Steve's just a businessman at the moment. And one with money to buy paintings and pots, I might add." He wasn't sure Cook had never been arrested but didn't let that bother him.

He wondered what Will Dundee would think of him being there.

And where the heck was Will anyway?

~~~

August was right around the corner. Next week. This summer would join other summers remembered. More eventful than most of them!

His friends were driving away, singly, in groups. He'd see them again, this summer, next summer. New friends too. The Nossis lingered; they'd see him safely up the hill to his house before leaving.

Jim could get up the hill fine on his own. There was some pain, sure, but he could move okay. He'd managed to climb down to Hemlock Creek. He'd managed to climb back up. That was something he'd be doing again too. Yes, this summer, next summer, many summers to come, he hoped. Here on this farm he loved, in these hills he loved. The hills Connie had loved.

He looked up past the house to the sandstone cliffs. Vultures hung in the sky above them, each to spiral down, to be lost in the deep shadows of late afternoon.

They were coming in to nest for the night, weren't they?

An Afterword

I HOPE YOU HAVE ENJOYED this little yarn of life and death in the Hocking Hills. As we authors are inclined to say, all the characters are fictional and any resemblance to actual persons is coincidental.

This does not mean I didn't draw from people I did know there, when I was a kid. Not that I claim any accuracy for my memories! The locales are a mix of actual places and invented ones, though the inventions, for the most part, draw from reality. There is a real model for the Fry Farm, for the 'seven caves,' but I made no attempt to stick to the facts of those places. I wrote what fitted the story.

It is quite likely I shall return to those hills in a sequel. We must find out if Pam and Jim stick together, mustn't we? And who knows, there might even be another crime.

Stephen Brooke

All of author Stephen Brooke's books are available through the Arachis Press. Visit <http://arachispress.com> for our catalog.