

THE  
CRAB POT CAFE

by  
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Bob Marvich asserts the moral right  
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## CHAPTER 1

### DWAYNE

Friday

Dwayne had seen the videotape often enough to know it by heart, but it still choked him up, seeing Dennis in his deathbed. They'd never been that close really, but Dwayne had always liked him.

The scene might have affected him more, if the person in that hospital bed even remotely resembled Dennis. But his hair had long since fallen out, and he'd lost so much weight that his face was almost unrecognizable. As his symptoms multiplied, and steadily worsened, Dennis had gradually acquired the merciful anonymity of a skeleton.

He spoke directly to the camera, as he delivered his testimonial.

"My name is Dennis, and I'm dying of AIDS," he began, speaking distinctly, despite the tubes in his nostrils. "I want to explain what this man - my friend, Dwayne - has done for me."

The scene expanded to include Dwayne, himself, seated on the edge of the bed. Dennis reached over and put a hand on his shoulder.

"When I first contacted Dwayne, I had already exhausted my savings," he went on. "Although we'd been friends in college, we hadn't seen each other in years. So he didn't know that I was dying. I'm not

sure what I expected from him. But I'd just been evicted from my apartment. I had nowhere to go."

Dennis was briefly overcome with emotion, and looked away from the camera until he'd regained his composure. He coughed a few times. He had been battling pneumonia for weeks. Dwayne helped him get comfortable, propped against the pillow. The camera shifted back to Dennis' face.

"I'd never heard of the viatical market before. So it hadn't occurred to me that I could convert my life insurance into cash. Since I had already been diagnosed as terminally ill, Dwayne was able to find willing investors in a matter of..."

Dennis started coughing again. A deep, racking cough that convulsed his whole body.

Dwayne found it painful to listen to, and switched off the sound. He continued watching, though, and focused on his own image, on screen.

Ten years had elapsed since they made the tape. He wore his hair shorter now, but other than that, his appearance hadn't changed all that much. His hairline had probably receded a little. He'd added some weight. But not a lot. That light gray suit would still fit. He looked sharp in it, he thought.

Some graphics appeared on screen at the end of the segment.  
Dwayne paused the tape.

VIATOR: Dennis Bean, San Francisco CA

Settled 1/17/89

Deceased 3/27/89

CARRIER: Metropolitan Life

POLICY: 15 Year Term, \$250K

VIATICAL SETTLEMENT: \$165K

ANNUALIZED YIELD: 273%

He shook his head. Christ. Two hundred and seventy-three percent. He'd never see returns like that again.

Dwayne could remember when a solitary ad, placed in one of the gay singles magazines, would yield at least a dozen, desperate inquiries. Policies could often be purchased for sixty-five cents on the dollar, even when the prognosis was as short as six months. They'd run closer to eighty cents, now.

He had largely lost interest in viaticals after the shake out in the market, following the arrival of the predators. It was inevitable, really, considering the low-risk, high-yield returns, and the lack of regulation.

Compassion hardly entered into it anymore. And compassion had always been one of his strengths.

Policies were being bundled together in portfolios, and sold off to small investors in shares, as if they were securities. He wasn't about to get involved in any of that. It was all paperwork.

He resumed watching the tape.

The second segment had been filmed right in the office. George Garlick was seated on the black leather couch, while Dwayne, himself, was leaning on the arm. The tape showed him handing George the cheque. George looked at it, smiled briefly, and faced the camera.

“My name is George Garlick, and I have a year left to live. Just one. And my final year was looking pretty damn grim, until Dwayne got me this.” He held up the cheque for the camera. Then looked at Dwayne. “Dwayne...I mean it, man. You're truly a saint.”

George went on to discuss the details of his plight, Dwayne knew, but he couldn't bring himself to watch it, and ejected the tape. He swiveled his chair around to face his desk, then called his secretary.

“Cindy? Don't we have any better copies of this promo tape?”

“Viaticals?”

“Yeah. This one's scratched, or something.”

“Dwayne! Come on! Watch something else, for crying out loud! Maybe there’s another baseball game. How about that?”

Dwayne sighed.

Cindy had teased him for weeks about the office smelling like popcorn. She knew the baseball season was over. He’d watched quite a few games, though. Especially during the playoffs. But he had little else to do. All of his deals were stalled, for one reason or another.

“That’s good, Cindy. Very funny.”

“Look. I know you’re worried. So I won’t try to convince you that you’re overreacting. Just relax, all right? Get a grip.”

He grimaced. As it happened, he was trying to avoid ‘getting a grip’, because he worried that it might lead him to strangle himself. He’d broken one of his most fundamental rules: he had reached into his own pocket to finance a viatical deal. The deal was done. The cheque had already cleared.

The finality of it was hard to accept.

The cardboard box containing the old viatical files was sitting open on the floor. Dwayne tossed the video cassette into it, and sat back dejectedly at his desk.

Why couldn’t he have just left it alone?

That cardboard file had been stored in the closet for...what? Four, maybe five years? Hell. It had taken half that time, just to break himself of the habit of waking up the morning, wondering if one of his clients had died. Or going to bed at night, wishing they had.

Yet, here he was, back in the viatical business again.

Advances in drug therapy and medical technology had dramatically increased the risks, for investors. A diagnosis of 'terminally' ill meant nothing, really. Everything alive qualified for that. What mattered was the length of the 'term'. Viatical service providers were obliged to pay the premiums on policies they purchased, so an accurate diagnosis was crucial. And the trend seemed clear. Policyholders were no longer dying in such a timely manner.

But this latest deal had seemed too good to pass up.

In the past, Dwayne had always been approached by the terminally-ill patients, themselves. People like Dennis Bean, or George Garlick. But in this instance he had been contacted by a doctor, who offered to put up several hundred thousand dollars of his own money, in support of a diagnosis on one of his very own patients.

Dwayne couldn't resist hearing him out. A little inside information could radically alter the odds in any market.

He recalled their first meeting. It had taken place on the second day of the World Series, and he'd missed the first few innings.

Dr. Eisberg was a heart surgeon. His first name was Bernard.

"Please. Call me Bernie. To be honest with you, Dwayne, I would never have gotten involved in this, if the guy hadn't owed me twenty thousand. Mr. Cayle can be difficult at times. His life is a mess."

Dwayne took down the particulars. Dan Cayle. Aged 43. Recently divorced. His coverage was substantial, \$2.4M. Dwayne needed to clarify a few points, and began by asking about the diagnosis.

"He has an inoperable aneurysm," Bernie explained. "Several, in fact, combined with congestive cardiomyopathy. Simply put, his heart has bulged out in places, like an over-inflated tire that's worn down to the threads. Mr. Cayle needs a new heart."

Dwayne considered it a moment. Organ transplants were becoming almost routine. Kidneys, anyway. He didn't know about hearts. "Can't he get one?"

Doctor Eisberg dismissed it out of hand.

"There's a shortage of organs, so the guidelines are very strict. He's an obese man, more than a hundred pounds overweight. And, if that weren't enough to disqualify him, he has a long history of substance abuse. He has three priors for methamphetamine possession. One with intent to distribute."

“So. Twelve to eighteen months on his ‘term’. That right?”

“Well, I told him that, yes. But only to err on the side of safety. A more accurate figure might be, say...two months? Perhaps three. I’ve made it quite clear to Mr. Cayle that his heart could fail at any moment.”

“Oh. I see. Three months, then.”

Dwayne was impressed. The doctor had done his homework. For a term of three months, the going market rate for the policy was eighty-five percent of face value. By inflating the term to eighteen months, they could buy it for sixty.

Bernie was ready to put up \$300K, and wanted to know if Dwayne could find the rest, by the end of the week. Dwayne assured him he could. Bernie said he’d sign the deal with Cayle.

But Dwayne came up \$100K short.

Investors were prone to follow fashion, same as everyone else, and viaticals had clearly gone out of style. People had stopped returning his calls. When he met Bernie on Friday, he had asked for a little more time.

Bernie resisted. “How can I? Cayle’s heart doesn’t have any time to give. I thought I was quite clear on that point.”

Dwayne was quick to notice the doctor’s unwavering commitment to his diagnosis.

“We’re not talking about a lot of time, Bernie. Wednesday, say. Thursday, at the latest.”

“Monday. I need the money first thing, Monday morning.”

“Well...Monday it is, then. We’ll manage with that. I’ll have a firm commitment for you, say...Monday afternoon, at the latest.”

Bernie scoffed. “I can’t go to escrow with commitments! I’ll need the money.”

Dwayne hedged a little.

Trouble was, he really didn’t have the money. Cindy had offered to kick in a few thousand, based on her conviction that Cayle’s meth habit had tipped the scales in their favor, but that was largely moral support. No. He was seriously short, even when he figured in a second mortgage.

Bernie took a long look at him. “Tell me. Honestly. Are you really prepared to walk away from this?”

Truth was, he wasn’t.

Dwayne simply couldn’t allow a trophy catch like this to slip off his hook, not when he was so close to landing it. But he needed help in order to bring it aboard.

So he’d called his brother, Malcolm.

It was Malcolm who’d taught him the rule, in the first place: never put your hand in your own pocket. So, naturally, Dwayne had been

forced to beg for the money. But his older brother had been doing pretty well, of late, in his plush new office in Manhattan, with its fashionable zip code. When he finally persuaded him to dip into that pocket, at least there was some money in it.

Dwayne called his secretary once again.

“Cindy? What were Dr. Eisberg’s exact words? Do you recall?”

“Dwayne! I already told you.”

“Come on. Don’t start.”

Cindy sighed. “Oh, all right. Let’s see. He phoned just after nine. Said it was urgent, and that he needed to see you. I tried to press him, but he was unwilling to discuss the matter over the phone. All he said was, ‘There have been some unsettling new developments with regard to Mr. Cayle’s heart condition’. That’s it.”

“Nothing else?”

“No. Only that he’d be here at noon.”

Christ.

The deal was done. There weren’t supposed to be any unsettling *new* developments.

Dwayne had no idea what he’d say to Malcolm, if the deal turned sour. It wasn’t just the money. There was more at stake.

They had already landed a few big fish together, the two of them.

Dwayne had never forgotten their first, a five-pound walleyed pike, which they caught when he was six years old, on a small lake in northern Wisconsin. Technically, it would have been tallied as his fish, since he'd been the one who hooked it. But he'd panicked just as he about to haul it aboard. The fight had gone out of it, he thought, but the pike began thrashing wildly when it came close enough to see the boat. And much to his regret, he froze when he saw the size of its teeth.

Yet Malcolm stayed cool as could be, and snared it with the landing net on his first try, before the fish could shake the hook.

As luck would have it, Dwayne redeemed himself the following summer, when he landed an even bigger muskellunge, all on his own. Malcolm hardly caught anything, the whole trip. It was brilliant.

Then, the big fish must have moved north. Their father tried chasing after them, and drove a little further every year, but they never caught anything rivaling that muskie again. Usually just crappies and bluegills. Well, maybe a decent channel catfish, now and then. But pulling in one of those was about as exciting as landing a clump of weeds.

Catching panfish wasn't too thrilling either. They would spend the better part of the day bent over in the boat, worming hooks, and the fish

they brought back were so small it took half a dozen for a decent dinner. Even then, there was nothing you could sink your teeth into. They were full of bones.

One summer they hardly caught any, at all. The rain never stopped. Some days they didn't even bother to rent a boat. The mood was sullen during their long drive home, which no doubt prompted his father to stop, when he spotted a sign on the highway advertising trout fishing.

Dwayne was dubious, since it was a pitiful excuse for a lake. It was square, to begin with. More like a pond, in fact, which had been excavated in the middle of a pasture. There were hardly any trees, just a couple of scrawny maples, which shaded the picnic area next to the snack bar. But lots of people were catching fish. One family was posing for photographs on the grass berm, holding a string of meaty trout.

The water was silty brown, though, and too cloudy even for bullheads. He tossed in a couple of peanuts - not expecting that anything would happen, but just because they were stale - and the surface instantly swarmed with trout, surrounding the spot where the nuts had entered the water. It was incredible. Trout were fighting over salted-in-the-shell peanuts. He sat down on the grass, and began shelling the rest.

The fish were starving.

But it didn't seem as if anyone else had caught on. They were all buying it - hook, line, and sinker - even the adults. He watched a man cast his line toward the center of the pond, so clumsily that he lost his bait, but the lack of a worm made no difference. The trout were so crazed with hunger they struck the bare hook. The man hadn't noticed the bait fly off his hook, and was grinning proudly, reeling in his catch. Dwayne couldn't begin to make sense of it. Whatever these people were doing, it certainly wasn't *fishing*.

Then, he noticed Malcolm walking unsuspectingly toward the lake, assembling his two-piece, fiberglass rod. Dwayne hurried over to warn him, before he embarrassed himself.

That's when he learned that even the lakes up north were regularly stocked with fish. Dwayne never went back. He was an idealist, even then.

Dwayne glanced at the clock. He still had half an hour. He remembered Cindy's comment, about trying to relax, and it suddenly seemed like sound advice. He'd fish for awhile.

He kept a miniature spinning rig behind his desk. A toy, really, but the rod was graphite, and had a really nice action. Besides, it fit the room. Someday, he'd be able to afford an office with a higher ceiling.

He had attached a small disc magnet to weight the line, and cast it toward a sterling silver champagne bucket, which he kept in the corner, next to the window. The magnet hit the wall, wide to the right. He quickly reeled back in, bouncing the little weight across the carpet, and tried again. His fifth attempt found the mark, with a satisfying metallic clink.

He raised the tip of the rod toward the ceiling, and carefully took out the slack. Then gently pulled back, easing a small, sheet metal fish up and over the edge of the bucket. It fell to the carpet. He hauled it in.

Marlin. Not bad.

Dr. Eisberg arrived fifteen minutes early. As soon as Dwayne heard him enter the outer office, he quietly set down the fishing rod, and tiptoed over to door, where he could eavesdrop on his conversation with Cindy.

She firmly resisted his request for an immediate audience, and asked him to take a seat. Cindy was good like that.

Dwayne always wanted to appear busy.

He made a few more casts, but missed the bucket badly on his last few attempts, and was forced to admit that he'd lost his focus. He managed to kill a few more minutes, putting away the fishing rod and the little enameled fish, then arranging his desk...but he grew increasingly

restless about what Bernie Eisberg had to say, and opened the door to him shortly after the fifteen minutes were up.

“I received this two days ago,” Bernie said, handing Dwayne a fax as he walked in. “It’s a request for a copy of Cayle’s medical records. Seems he’s checked himself into a private clinic in Mexico. There’s no explanation for it, and nothing from Cayle, but I checked, and it’s definitely his signature.”

Dwayne looked it over. The clinic was located in Ensenada. The fax bore the letterhead, Ensenada Coast Clinic. Bernie appeared to be waiting for a response. Dwayne simply shrugged his shoulders.

Bernie continued. “As you can see, there’s nothing to go on, just the fax number and the name of the clinic. So I made some professional inquiries. It’s a private practice. Small place, just six beds. The doctor’s a cardiologist. Charlie Xong.”

“Chinese?”

“Yeah. I have no idea how he got out of China. Hong Kong, I suppose. All I know is, he set up shop in Mexico about five years ago. With his credentials, he wouldn’t have had any trouble getting in. They need surgeons.”

“But why is Cayle down there, Bernie?”

“I believe that Dr. Xong is planning to give him a new heart.”

Dwayne almost fainted. He gripped the arms of his desk chair to steady himself. “A heart transplant? In some little clinic in Mexico?”

Bernie nodded. “He’s performed the procedure. Pretty often, I’d guess. In China. They’re sourcing executed criminals, for their organs. The young males, most likely. What I read was, they get them prepped for a respirator before putting a bullet in their head. Seems a little primitive. But it’s required by law.”

“Required? What?”

“The bullet. The law says condemned criminals must be shot first. You know. Executed. Any decent surgeon would insist on a small caliber bullet, though. And a benign trajectory. You’d want to avoid any unnecessary trauma to the brain stem. Then, stop the bleeding, of course. Put pressure on the wound. If you did all that, I expect you’d find a beating heart when you went in.”

Bernie seemed satisfied with his analysis, then thought of something further. “You could have a rubber stopper handy. That would do, nicely.”

“Do...what?”

“Stem the blood loss. A tapered rubber stopper would plug a bullethole perfectly.”

Dwayne had the misfortune of visualizing Dr. Eisberg actually testing the fit, looking quite pleased with himself. He closed his eyes, and looked away. Then, stared out the office window, wishing he'd left the viatical files in the closet, where they belonged.

He tried to recall his last trip to Mexico.

It hadn't been that long ago. Ten months or so. He'd driven down the coast highway to Baja just after Christmas, for a weekend of deep-sea fishing off Cabo San Quintín. Driven through Ensenada, in fact.

He remembered being impressed by the changes, and how the country seemed to be modernizing rapidly. Mexico was still pretty rough, of course, but it wasn't China.

“But, the *heart*, Bernie. Where's he going to find the heart? Mexico's a Catholic country.”

“Well, naturally, I asked myself the same question. So I searched for anything I could find about this Dr. Xong. I found a few citations in the journals. Then, just out of curiosity, I tried the Internet, and linked his name with a few key words. And guess what comes out? A doctor named Charles Xong is listed on the board of directors of a genetic engineering research company, called Xenogenics.

“Charlie Xong has no intention of transplanting a human heart into Mr. Cayle. He's going to put in a heart from a pig.”



## CHAPTER 2

### HELEN

Six Days Later / Thursday

Helen hated rowing to work in the dark.

The river seemed so desolate, before dawn, shrouded in drizzle. The only useful light came from a mercury lamp in the restaurant parking lot, on the opposite bank. It lit up the small circle of trees, which surrounded the building, and cast a wide arc of bleak, bluish light out over the water.

The lights downstream were obscured by the fog, except for the neon sign in front of the motel, at the edge of town. The word VACANCY blinked on and off, in muted pink. Too blurred to actually read, through the fog, but she could tell the NO was missing.

Neither light added any color, really. Or warmth. All of the trees were black.

The pervasive gloom had a way of seeping into her, she thought, and affecting her mood. She couldn't simply block it out, any more than she could prevent the rain from penetrating her parka.

Helen was mystified how it managed to get inside. Osmosis, maybe.

Most days, she slept in, and rowed to work after the sunrise had added color to the river. And life. She'd see cormorants out on the water, and herons wading along the bank. Plus all the pelicans, who regularly perched atop the pile moorings, downstream from the restaurant. But the days had shortened markedly with the approach of winter, and she could no longer afford to wait. Not on a Thursday.

The chickens came on Thursday.

Butchering all the birds and putting up the stock took most of the morning, so she absolutely needed an early start. The restaurant was only open for dinner, four days a week, and Thursday was her first day. A sixteen-hour day, usually, and the start of her week.

She would have preferred dealing with the chickens earlier in the week, when the restaurant was closed, but the poultry wholesaler in Portland sent only a single truck to the coast, so she had no choice about the day. Or the time.

Five in the morning.

Helen sighed. She'd already missed the truck.

She braced her feet firmly against the transom, which allowed her to put more power into the oars, and quickened her stroke. She hoped the raccoons hadn't gotten into the eggs.

It would be her first winter, living on her acreage, across the river from the restaurant. She'd spent several summers over there already, working on her cabin, and now that it was finally winterized, she was ready to make the move.

It was long overdue, really. She had lived in that dreary upstairs office for twelve years. Almost fifteen, if she counted the years with her old boyfriend.

She didn't, usually.

Living right over the kitchen had been convenient, of course. But she hardly ever went outside. The living quarters had a separate entrance - a wooden staircase attached to the side of the building, facing the river - but even that was fully enclosed, because of all the rain. She could cover the distance between the kitchen door and the stairs in a few, short steps. It wasn't the same as going outside. Not really.

It could rain - rain for days and days on end - and she'd never once feel it on her face. She didn't want to live like that again. It seemed like the life of a prisoner, now, compared to her new life, out on the river.

She glanced briefly over her shoulder, and sought out the light in the parking lot, which served as a useful landmark in compensating for the current. According to the tide tables, the current would be approaching maximum flood, but the incoming stream was barely perceptible. It was about what she would have predicted, with the river swollen with runoff from all the rain earlier in the week. Soon, there would be no flood stream at all.

The river widened after leaving the coastal hills, and claimed close to a quarter mile at its mouth, about a mile downstream. It was almost that wide, here. She could row across in five minutes when the tide was slack. It might take ten, if she had to angle upstream against a stiff current. Longer still into a fresh southwest wind.

Helen knew the river as well as anyone, but even she had no idea of what to expect once the winter rains began in earnest, and the river was in spate.

She'd seen cows come down. And whole trees. The roof of a barn, once. She knew there would be some stormy days, when the current would prove impossible to cross, and many more when she'd be forced to wait for hours, until the tide was just right.

It didn't matter, really. She was willing to spend an occasional night on the cot, upstairs. But she couldn't make a habit of it, anymore. Not since she had taken on a new responsibility across the river.

Who would feed Nutmeg, her kitten?

The driver had left the order stacked outside the kitchen door.

Helen noticed a few muddy paw prints on the steps - her neighbor Clinton's dog, she suspected - but the cartons were intact. The dog never touched chicken. Clinton kept a few laying hens at his place, a little further out of town, and he'd instilled a healthy aversion to poultry in his pets.

There were five of the heavy cardboard boxes, with a dozen birds in each, and a couple lightweight ones, which held the egg trays. Helen puzzled over the unexpected inclusion of another, unusually long and bulky box, until she realized that it must be her fresh ducks, back-ordered from the week before.

She had to squeeze past them all to unlock the door. The invoice was wedged into the crack between two of the boxes, and she plucked it out as she stepped inside.

Nigel hadn't mopped the floor, she noticed.

She could remember a time when the delivery man would have driven off with the order still inside the truck, unless someone had been there to meet him, with a cheque in hand. That was years ago, though. Business continued to get better. In fact, she had never ordered so many

chickens before. Not at one time. Helen wasn't sure what to do about it. She didn't *want* her business to get any better. She wanted it to stay the same.

But it was hardly the same sleepy, fishing town that she moved to fifteen years ago, when she and her friend, Rosalind, bought the business. There was still a tackle shop on the waterfront, which specialized in surf-casting gear, but all the other stores catering to the fishery had closed, and been converted into antiques and accessories stores. Or art galleries.

Now, she sometimes heard people refer to the town as an 'enclave' for artists. Helen knew a few local artists, in fact. But, in truth, there were more bed-and-breakfasts than anything else.

Helen usually went upstairs and shed her rubber boots before going to work, but on Thursday mornings she wore them in the kitchen. She started dragging the cartons inside, across the tile floor, over to the sink.

The chickens came packed in crushed ice, even in the winter.

Hardly any of it had melted. The first carton she opened was filled almost to the top. A cold fog hovered over the exposed ice, dense enough to flow down the opened cardboard flaps, and fall to the floor in a smooth rippling sheet.

Cold like that could be intimidating, first thing in the morning. She kept her hands out of it, for the most part.

The ice tended to solidify on the truck, so she kicked the carton a few times to break it up. Once the chickens had broken free, she could lift them out with a protruding drumstick, or a wing, and shake off the residual ice into the sink. But, inevitably, the last few birds on the bottom refused to surface, despite some well-placed kicks.

At this point, the carton was light enough to lift, and she usually overturned it into the sink. But she didn't have that option anymore. Not with this many chickens. She needed both bowls of the large stainless sink to hold the body parts, and couldn't afford to fill them up with ice.

Still she resisted raking through it blindly with her fingers. The cold wasn't the only consideration. The ice was also sharp. So she dragged the box outside and dumped the lot, right onto the lawn. The grass was lush. There were only a couple of chickens left on the bottom, and they didn't get dirty.

She carried them back inside, and started on the second box. After she had accumulated a sizable pyramid of chickens on the big butcher block table, she stopped, and held her hands under warm water. They were almost the color of chicken skin.

She had butchered just a few, when she heard someone come in the kitchen door. She looked up, briefly, but continued working. It was Clinton's daughter, Caroline.

"You're up early," Helen remarked cheerfully. The first hint of daylight had barely lightened the windows in the kitchen.

"You know. School."

Helen hadn't got used to it yet. Caroline was in high school now, and caught the school bus every morning. Their farm was about a half mile upstream.

"And how's that going? All right?"

Caroline shrugged. "I guess."

Helen wondered why she was walking into town. Caroline didn't have to leave home to catch the school bus. Her mother drove the vehicle.

Caroline was carrying a potted plant. She walked over, and set it on the serving counter, opposite. Then shed her rucksack, and let it drop to the floor. It landed heavily, full of books. She hopped up on the counter, next to her plant, and sat down. She seemed a little preoccupied.

Helen puzzled over the potted plant. It looked somewhat like an herb, but none that she was familiar with. Caroline was taking freshman biology, she knew. So, part of a science project, perhaps.

“What’s with the plant?” Helen asked.

Caroline proudly held it up. “Catnip. I started it from a cutting. Nutmeg should love it. Her mom sure does. I thought you could plant it across the river.”

Helen smiled. Caroline had lobbied for weeks before convincing her to adopt one of the kittens, and had given her pick of the litter. Caroline raised all sorts of animals, not just cats. Lately, it was exotic rabbits. And her pigs, of course.

“Thanks, Caroline. That’s sweet.”

“I’d put some wire mesh over it,” Caroline advised. “A little cage, like. She’ll roll around in it otherwise. It’s pretty hard on the plant.”

Helen suddenly realized that she’d set aside her butcher knife. Although she welcomed visitors into her kitchen, and even provided a stool for the purpose, she couldn’t afford to stop working every time someone strolled in, wanting to chat. So she flopped another chicken onto the cutting board, and resumed her work.

Caroline understood, and paid no notice.

She sat staring at the floor, swinging her legs slowly back and forth underneath the countertop. She clearly had something on her mind. When she finally came out with it, she tried to sound cheerful.

“Guess what! Daddy sold another pig.”

“Hey! That’s good news!”

Helen liked Clinton, and felt pleased for him. He bred very valuable pigs, used for medical research, but he hadn’t sold one in months.

Caroline sighed. “Well...sure. Good news, I guess.”

Helen gasped. “Oh, no! Caroline, is it...?”

“Xenia? Yeah. It’s Xenia.”

Helen had watched the pair of them compete at the State Fair, just a few months ago, when Caroline won the blue medal for swine showmanship.

The event had left quite an impression. The last time Helen had attended a State Fair, she was just eight years old, and spending the summer on her grandparent’s farm in central Illinois. Even then, all she could remember of that day were the carnival rides, the enormous stuffed animals, and the strawberry rhubarb pie that her grandmother baked, which won a gold ribbon.

With Caroline, of course, the focus was on the animals. She had also entered some rabbits, which were to be judged several hours earlier than the pigs, so the trip became an all-day affair. Helen had the chance to see all sorts of show animals. She particularly enjoyed the goats.

She recalled the scene. The ten finalists entered the enclosure single file, each of them leading an impeccably-groomed goat, on a short leash. They paraded the animals around the perimeter a few times. Then turned, and circled back. Stopped still. Backed up. Circled, yet again. All the while a judge scrutinized their every move, clipboard in hand. Helen hadn't a clue how it all worked, but it had been marvelous to watch.

She was expecting to see something similar when it came time for the pigs. The equipment seemed slightly different. Each of the handlers carried a bentwood cane, and the pigs weren't leashed. Yet Helen still imagined they'd march around in circle when the judge opened the gate, and allowed the pigs to enter the enclosure.

But it was chaos.

The pigs began running in all directions, dodging and squealing, while their owners comically chased after them. Except for Xenia, who followed Caroline around like a pet dog. Or, perhaps a pet elephant, since Caroline was small for her age, and seemed even more diminutive leading Xenia, who was a massive animal.

Clinton had been keeping hogs for as long as Helen could remember. Before Caroline got involved in 4-H, it was usually just three or four, which he bought as weanlings each spring. Their pen was open,

on the side facing the river, and Helen often saw them snuffling around in the blackberry bushes when she was out rowing.

Most of his land was in ryegrass - the farms along the tidal reach were too wet for anything else - but he cultivated a sizable garden, and could always count on some surplus zucchini and watermelons for the animals. Besides, the bagged feed was pretty cheap. Clinton figured the pork cost him half of what he'd have to pay in town.

He had a small smokehouse, which he fired up in the fall, a couple weeks into deer season. Clinton had a way with bacon. Hams, too. His family had one every year for Christmas.

When Caroline had to come up with an animal husbandry project for 4-H, pigs were the obvious choice. Clinton adamantly refused to feed his animals hormones or body-building steroids, however. Caroline knew how it worked. She couldn't hope to be competitive, raising her pigs on commercial bagged feed, and an occasional watermelon. She needed something richer, and approached Helen about recycling the restaurant's food scraps.

Caroline was only twelve at the time. She promised to bring some bacon.

She won 'Best of Category' at the County Fair, with a pig from her second litter. Then 'Best of Show' at the State Fair, the following year.

Shortly afterward, Clinton was approached by a team of doctors, and offered the job of breeding their research pigs.

Clinton could hardly refuse. He hadn't found any steady work to speak of, since he lost his fishing boat to the bank, years ago, when Caroline was just starting school. He couldn't make much money off his land. It was meant for living on, more than anything else. The taxes were the worst of it.

The doctors paid for a modern breeding shed, cement slab, and everything. They provided the breeding pair, and Clinton was paid a salary, plus a handsome bonus whenever a pig was sold.

Helen found the whole business a bit mysterious. They didn't sell many pigs. In fact, Clinton was running out of room. He had butchered one of the doctors' surplus animals several weeks back, and dropped off a whole pork loin at the restaurant.

It was lovely, remarkably lean meat, she thought.

The research was sensitive, as well as confidential, and Clinton was reluctant to talk about it. But Caroline finally told her everything. The pigs were being raised for their organs. The experiments called for organs of varying sizes, however, so Clinton had to have animals continually available in various stages of development.

The doctors were confident that they would sell a large number of pigs, eventually. So far, they'd sold only two. Well, three, if you counted the latest one. Several had been sacrificed for in-house research purposes, but Clinton received nothing for those, except his salary. And the pork, of course. The doctors were only interested in the internal organs, and left it to him to safely dispose of the carcasses.

He had some nice hams in his smokehouse.

Xenia had been sold for her heart.

Helen had surmised that Caroline was quite attached to the animal, having watched them together at the State Fair. Fondness develops over time, of course, and Xenia was one of her oldest pigs. The bond was even more apparent when Helen witnessed the pair of them going through their paces again, just last month. Caroline had invited her over to watch Xenia's daily cardio workout.

It was such a comical sight that Helen could recall it vividly. Caroline looked just like a football coach, wearing her sweats, with a stopwatch around her neck...a heart rate monitor in her hand...shouting encouragement to a four hundred pound pig, running on a treadmill.

Caroline seemed able to shrug it off.

“Oh, it was just a bit sudden, is all. It had to happen, sooner or later. She’s awfully big.”

Helen nodded.

Caroline spotted the school bus coming. She hopped off the counter, and grabbed her pack. Her mother wouldn’t leave without her, so she took a moment to survey all the chickens.

“Looks like I’ve got my work cut out for me, huh? Five cases?”

Helen nodded.

“Wow. Is that a record, or what? Hope it all fits. Well, gotta run. See ya!”

She skipped out the door.

Even though the doctors were now paying the feed bill, Caroline had kept up the practice of feeding the restaurant’s food scraps to her pigs. She relished any opportunity to drive her father’s truck, and always picked them up, herself. Thursday was a feast day, of course, enriched with the skin and bones that Helen strained from the stock. A hundred pounds, at least.

Helen called after her.

“Thanks for the catnip!”

A pool of pinkish, bloodied water had collected under the mound of chickens. A stream of it dribbled onto the floor, and a few drops landed on her boot. She moved over, a little.

The chicken breasts were easier to fillet cold, when the flesh was firm, so she started on those first. The menu changed daily, but she included an entrée with the boneless, skinless breasts every night. Even though her own low-fat phase was behind her, Helen still felt a certain loyalty to it, and an obligation to provide the alternative.

Besides, she liked to experiment, and the delicate, white meat was impressionable. It wouldn't overwhelm the more subtle seasonings, like leeks and oyster mushrooms, or crab meat and coconut milk. Yet it retained its identity, when combined with more intense flavors, like mussels and garlic, or her curry peanut sauce.

She portioned the fillets as they came off the knife, into four stainless steel trays. She'd decide later, what to do with them. But she still had to do the math.

Thursday and Friday were about the same, say twenty-four each. Then, maybe thirty-two on Saturday. That left forty for Sunday. Seemed about right.

The telephone rang out front.

She braced herself for bad news. No one would call the restaurant at this hour, except one of her employees. And they had no reason to call, either, unless they weren't coming in. She hoped it wasn't Janice, her head waitress.

Helen could cope without one of the assistant cooks. Caroline was always eager to fill in on short notice - she was saving up to buy a pickup truck - but only in the kitchen. Helen couldn't allow her to deal with the customers. Not yet. She was only a year shy of being legal, but too small to pass for sixteen.

She hurried to the phone.

"Janice...?"

But it wasn't Janice.

"Uh...hello? Is this the Crab Pot Cafe?"

"Sorry. Yes. Yes, it is." Helen hated the feel of the chicken fat on the phone, and searched underneath the waitress station for a napkin.

"I'd like to make some reservations, please."

"Sure. Just a second."

Incredible. It was seven o'clock, in the morning. Helen wiped her hands a second time, before picking up the reservation book.

"Okay. Shoot."

"The name is Parcelli. Paul and Paula Parcelli. We'd like to reserve a table..."

“Paula! Hi! It’s Helen.”

They were university people, and loyal customers. The sort of customers whom Helen gladly invited into her kitchen, for a peek inside the oven, if they were having trouble deciding what to order for dinner. They spent a weekend on the coast three or four times a year, and always ate at the restaurant.

“Helen! Shame! Are you already working? At this hour?”

Helen took their booking, table for two, both Friday and Saturday.

She was surprised how many reservations had already been taken for the week. She seldom took the bookings herself. Janice had devised some sort of system, which seemed to work, and Helen knew better than to mess with it. Janice could get rather tetchy, when there was an overbooking. Even a party of two could trigger a domino effect, apparently.

The chickens had scattered while she was on the phone, and were threatening to take over the kitchen.

They were free-range chickens, supposedly.

Helen had no idea how wide a ‘range’ they had, or how ‘free’ it was, but they were excellent birds, and well worth the premium she paid for them. The customers seemed to like them. Certainly, the idea of them.

Helen liked to think they'd been given the chance to roam outside, at least, and feel the rain.

She broke out the baking pans, and set about regaining control over the counter space. The bulk of the dark meat went into chicken salad, for an espresso cafe on the oceanfront. Helen reserved a sizable portion of the thighs - thinking she'd use slices of the meat in a lasagna on Sunday - and put the rest of the leg quarters in the oven. The breast bones still had plenty of meat on them. She baked those, as well.

The espresso cafe was owned by Rick Pepper, the treasurer of the Town Council. Helen served on the Council, herself. She also served them lunch.

The Town Council held their monthly meeting in the dining room of the restaurant - a casual buffet luncheon, first Monday of the month. Nothing fancy. Leftovers, for the most part. Not that anyone ever complained. Far from it. The condition of the leftovers was the overriding consideration when the Council voted to amend the schedule, and start convening on a Monday, when everything would still be nice.

She made a chicken salad, once, with some surplus dark meat. Rick had pestered her to cater for him ever since. As it happened, Helen was delighted to unload the drumsticks, but she never let on.

Helen decided to get the stock started, and give her hands a rest from the cold. She liked to brown the parts, in a heavy roasting pan, which spanned two big burners on the stovetop. The skin went in first, along with the clumps of fat that she stripped from the body cavity, either side of the tail. She let it render down, until the skin was crisp, then began throwing in the chicken necks.

She took a precautionary step away from the stove, as the bits of ice still clinging to them exploded in the hot fat. It took several hours to brown all the chicken. She could ill afford to spend that much time just standing around, watching it fry, so she turned down the heat and resumed filleting out the breast meat.

She could already feel a film of grease accumulating underfoot.

Helen sometimes wondered if she had a genetic predisposition toward menial work. She didn't really mind doing the chickens. Once she found her rhythm, the knife virtually acted on its own, and took over the tedious, repetitive part of the task, which left her to deal with just the mindless part.

Hey. That was the easy part. Far easier than dealing with all the chicken fat. Once she slipped into that mindless, meditative state, even the most menial work became mechanical, almost pleasant, in a way.

She thought it might be what attracted people to chanting mantras, or running marathons.

Still, she couldn't fathom why anyone would go to such extremes to achieve that state during their time off. Mindlessness had its place - at work, at least - but she wasn't about to spend her precious, *free* time that way. Not her *own* time.

Mindfulness seemed by far the better option, for that. It made everything so much more interesting.

Of course, she did far less of the mindless work, now that she had such a large staff. She didn't make the salads, or chop onions, anymore. She never washed dishes. Hardly ever baked the dinner rolls. But she had done almost everything herself, for years. Especially the first few, after the partnership collapsed, and she was left to run the business on her own.

The break-up had been inevitable, really.

Rosalind simply wasn't suited to menial work. Her old boyfriend Dwayne, either.

Helen still wondered about herself. There was nothing in her background that would have indicated an aptitude for menial work. She vaguely recalled taking a course in Home Economics in high school, and

had probably even earned high marks. But it hardly stood out as a watershed event. Far less than her National Merit Scholarship, at any rate.

She had always done extremely well in school, so her guidance counselors had routinely steered her away from menial jobs. There was never any suggestion that she should consider becoming a cook, for instance, or a butcher. Neither was she deemed a suitable candidate for secretarial work, or cosmetology. And no one had ever advised her to become a housewife.

Rather, everyone had consistently encouraged her to become a scholar. Advised her to apply to prestigious universities. Urged her to attend graduate school.

So her career choice remained an enigma.

An accident, really.

Although she had amply demonstrated her capacity for mindless work, over the years, what if there were a genetic component to it? What if her 'work' genes simply switched off, someday? She'd never been healthier, really, so they weren't the sort of genes that affected her *ability* to work. Rather, they reduced her ability to *want* to.

It was bit of a worry. Helen had counted on keeping her 'work' genes, at least until her acreage was paid off. But the warning signs

were impossible to ignore. She would have to face it. She was beginning to resent rowing in to work.

It was probably just the chickens. Five dozen was pushing the limit. She couldn't conceive doing many more of them. Yet, the numbers kept increasing. Helen wasn't sure what she could do reverse the trend.

She couldn't shorten the hours any further.

Talk about resentment. Janice was still complaining about the decision to drop Wednesdays, a full year after the fact. Helen wasn't about to ask her employees to give up yet another chunk of their income. Having a mutiny on her hands would be far worse than the chicken fat.

So. Five cases it was, then.

She had to draw the line, somewhere. Even if it meant running out of food occasionally, on the busier nights, and having to turn a few people away. She preferred that option over raising her prices, again. Helen imagined that she would resent working in the restaurant even more, if her neighbors could never afford to eat there.

It seemed more egalitarian, somehow.

Just running out.

Besides, her last price hike hadn't kept down the numbers. Now that the Crab Pot Cafe had been discovered, her customers expected to pay a lot.

Originally, Rosalind claimed that she'd discovered the restaurant, since she was the one who noticed the sign, and insisted they stop.

The painted plywood signboard was still stored upstairs.

**CATCH A CRAB  
FOR LUNCH**  
Crab Pots for Rent  
Salad Bar

Helen hadn't seen it, since she was driving at the time, and watching the road. It was late in the summer. September, she recalled. And just the two of them in the car.

Dwayne had backed out, at the last minute. He had been assigned three sections for the upcoming fall semester, and hadn't finished the syllabus for any of them. Helen had only a part-time, adjunct position herself, teaching basic English composition at the community college. Advance preparation was hardly necessary for that.

Rosalind hadn't let her down. She was always ready for an adventure, especially that particular autumn. She had completed all the course work for her doctorate earlier that summer, and had virtually nothing to do, since she hadn't found a topic for her thesis.

Neither of them was willing to accept the arrival of winter without another trip to the coast. The University was only sixty miles from the

ocean, but the road snaked its way through the mountains, so the drive had taken several hours.

They'd been looking for a place to have lunch.

"It's not much of a restaurant," Helen observed, peeking through the window.

"I think it's out back. I saw some picnic tables, along the riverbank," Rosalind said, trying to sound optimistic. She had her heart set on fresh crab.

A second advertisement for the crab pot rentals was taped inside the window, next to the front door, which made it appear as if they were supposed to go inside to make the arrangements. There were several signs, in fact - SOUVENIRS, SANDWICHES, NAUTICAL ITEMS - all of them written in black felt pen, on scraps of brown cardboard.

"I don't know, Roz. Maybe we should keep looking."

"Oh, come on. So it's a bit tacky. We're only in it for the crabs."

They went inside.

It wasn't a restaurant at all. The establishment had an old-fashioned sign, which had been painted directly onto the plastered wall, behind the cash counter.

Geo. Pease & Son  
**FISHERIES SUPPLY**  
Established 1937

It was obviously a failing business. Many of the shelves stood empty.

Only a portion of the premises was currently in use. It was partitioned off by a lovely, glass-topped display case, which more closely resembled a piece of fine furniture than any kind of commercial fixture. It was made of cherrywood. The shelf was lined with green felt.

They both admired it. The quality of the case led them to believe that it would have once held delicate navigation instruments, or expensive binoculars. Even polished brass telescopes. But now it was filled with plastic sunglasses, curios, and cartons of candy bars. The cheap consumer goods seemed strikingly out of place, inside the lovely antique case.

There was a snack bar, of sorts. They sold soft drinks, snack cakes, and an assortment of cellophane wrapped sandwiches, which could be reheated to order, in a little microwave oven.

The interior of the old wooden building was rather somber, with its dark, heavy timbers and exposed beams, while the sort of merchandise they were selling seemed to require the glare of fluorescent light, and a surrounding of off-white formica.

The bulk of the floor space was filled with second-hand, commercial fishing gear, which seemed more suited to the building. Pallets of used netting. Coils of wire rope. Partially dismantled diesel engines. And hundreds of cardboard boxes, filled with everything from fishing floats to hydraulic pumps.

The decorative, nautical brass had been sorted out, and heaped together on a table near the entrance. Some heavier bronze items were lined up on the floor. Rosalind wandered over, always the consummate shopper.

“Oh, look! Here’s a brass toilet!” she said, gaily pointing it out. The bowl was made of porcelain, but the rest, including the heavy pedestal and lever-action pump, were solid brass castings. Even the long pump handle. They had recently been polished, albeit half-heartedly. The hard-to-reach places were still green.

Rosalind laughed. “Can you imagine? You know...what it would feel like? Pumping it? God. Do you think it still works?”

Helen had no idea.

The woman tending the counter invited them to have a look around. She switched on the overhead lights - a couple bare bulbs - and walked over to join them. Not to sell anything. She just wanted to chat.

Her name was Blanche Pease. She had been running the family business by herself, for several years, ever since her husband took their fishing trawler to Alaska and decided not to come back. The divorce settlement had been straightforward. Blanche got the business. George Jr. got the boat.

“Don’t get me wrong. Junior was real sweet, once. But the poor man up and turned sour, once the fishery went bust. He soured on the business. Then, he soured on the town. People, in general, I suppose. Lord knows, he surely soured on me.”

The business was for sale. Blanche had largely abandoned her efforts to keep it profitable. Yet she continued to go through the motions, on the advice of her real estate agent, who thought they’d have to lower the asking price even further, if the business actually closed its doors.

Blanche escorted them back outside, and around to the back of the building, to set them up with a crab pot. There was a stainless-topped work station underneath the enclosed stairwell, opposite the wharf.

“This is where we used to process our fish,” Blanche said. “Most years, we’d have fish buyers crowding around out here almost every day. When the salmon was running real good, we’d auction the catch right on the wharf. Lord, that was years ago, though.”

The crab pots were stacked against the building. Blanche started digging through them, looking for one that wasn't too rusty.

"What do we use for bait?" Helen asked.

Blanche produced a little tin from one of the deep pockets in her apron. She held it up so Helen could read the label. It was cat food. Tuna Feast.

"Does the job," Blanche said.

She pulled an icepick from another pocket, and proceeded to punch a series of holes through the lid, before fastening the cat food tin to the bottom of the trap with a short length of wire.

"Here's the deal," she explained. "You catch 'em. You clean 'em. You cook 'em. I'll fire up the steamer for ya."

Helen discounted their chances of catching any crabs, so close to the wharf, and thought it might be premature to heat up the huge pot. "Maybe we should wait to see if we catch anything."

Blanche chuckled. "Suit yourself. Steamer's ready. Just turn on the gas."

Blanche's optimism was justified. They found four in the trap, the first time they pulled it up. Unfortunately, neither of them knew how to identify the males. Rosalind located a copy of the fishing regulations posted on a bulletin board, with detailed illustrations of both sexes. Six

inches was the legal minimum, measured across the carapace. Two of them appeared larger than that.

But not much. They couldn't be certain.

"Maybe I can borrow a ruler from Blanche," Rosalind suggested.

"Perfect. I'll turn on the steamer."

Helen still used that big pot. Every Thursday, in fact. With the steamer insert removed, it was simply a large stock pot. It held twenty-five gallons, and was the only one large enough to hold the chicken stock. It stood right next to the stove, on a cast iron base of its own. The burner was big enough to fire a furnace.

She realized that she'd better turn it on.

The chicken necks which she'd left frying on the stove had begun to crackle rather insistently, sending spatters of grease a little further out into the room. She could tell without even looking that it was time to brown the next batch.

Backs this time.

Once she got them started, she went back to boning out the breasts.

Although Helen was willing to concede that Rosalind discovered the CRAB POT sign, neither of them could remember who had first

brought up the idea of turning the fisheries supply building into a restaurant.

They started talking about it on the drive home. Oddly enough, the notion seemed incredibly romantic, at the time. They had spent an idyllic afternoon on the wharf, eating their crab, feeding the gulls, and watching the fishing boats bobbing around on the river. The location provided a perfect setting for a restaurant. Every window in the building afforded a lovely view.

They returned the following weekend, and brought a bottle of wine.

And dragged along Dwayne, as well, who now appeared to have plenty of free time on his hands. The grades for the summer semester had been posted in the middle of the week, and the news hadn't been good. He had failed a remedial course in Business Ethics, which cost him his graduate teaching assistantship, so he wouldn't be teaching after all.

Needless to say, Blanche Pease was pleased to see them. Once she learned of their intention of converting the premises into a restaurant, she tailored her sales pitch accordingly.

As it happened, the building had some fixtures which they could use. Some rather expensive, commercial equipment, actually, whose value they didn't fully appreciate, at the time. The big steamer pot, for

instance. Plus stainless steel sinks and filleting tables from the fish processing station. Booster water heaters. A steam generator, and pressure washer. But, most importantly, a cavernous walk-in refrigerator and freezer.

Helen certainly hadn't found the latter too impressive. The refrigerated portion had been turned off, and smelled unbearably rank, like seaweed mixed with rotting fish. The freezer side was working, however, and stacked with five-pound boxes of commercial squid bait, which hadn't been touched for years.

"Lord knows, I should have shut down the whole unit, years ago," Blanche said. "But everyone in town knew I had extra freezer space...and they started bringing in all this meat..."

Blanche motioned toward the packages on the shelves, wrapped in white freezer paper, with various names written on them, in crayon or felt pen.

The memory made Helen laugh.

She allowed people to store their meat in that freezer, herself. Neighbors who bought a whole side of beef when they couldn't resist a bargain, and discovered the packages wouldn't fit in their home freezer. Or people who bagged a deer during the hunting season, and hadn't considered what they would do with the venison.

Clinton's pork, of course.

Helen was mystified about what he planned to do with all of it. She could only use the loin cuts on the menu. So the rest of the pork was piling up. Maybe they could donate it to the high school. Or 4-H. Make barbecued pork sandwiches, or something. She'd ask Caroline.

Helen hadn't thought about Blanche Pease, in years.

She rarely reminisced about the past. The daily demands of the restaurant forced her to live in the present. And, now that she'd moved across the river, she felt herself increasingly drawn toward thinking about the future.

The past had come back with a vengeance in the last few days, however, since she learned that Rosalind was coming to visit.

Helen fished inside her apron, and pulled out the note.

*Hi Helen,*

*Thanks for having me.*

*I'll probably head up there on Wednesday. Medford seems like the most logical stop, so I'll find a motel, there, and drive over to the coast Thursday morning.*

*Helga - she's my new therapist, perhaps I told you - well, Helga thinks motel rooms might be bad for me, right now - you know, because of Floyd - but it's been four months since we broke it off, and you'd think I'd be able to deal with it.*

*So I'm going to risk it. Hah! I mean, it's only one night! What's the big deal, right?*

*Wish me luck!*

*I've finally had an offer on the house. My agent says it's unlikely we'll get a better one, so I'll probably just let it go at a loss. Par for the course. I just hate living here, now. I keep dreading that I'll run into Floyd, or one of the faculty from the Business School who voted against me - there's fifteen of them, so the chance of it happening seems likely - and the fear just ruins everything. The only time I feel safe going out is late at night. I haven't been sleeping all that well, anyway.*

*Still, I don't see why I should be the one who has to move. It wasn't my fault. So it seems really unfair. But there you have it. Damn men!*

*All in all, though, I'm feeling a whole lot better. Like a new woman, actually, ever since I started working with Helga, cleansing my spirit. I'm finally in control, again! Hah! So there!*

*I can hardly wait to see you.*

*Love,*

*Rosalind*

Helen sighed.

Poor Rosalind had been out of control for years. It appeared as if nothing had changed. From the sound of it, even the briefest change of venue would do her a world of good.

Rosalind was still her full partner in the restaurant. An absentee partner, to be sure. Helen hadn't seen her in four years. Yet they were constantly in touch. Rosalind kept the books for the business, and had continued to take care of the taxes, even though she was perpetually in therapy.

Helga was only the latest, in a long string.

Ditto for Floyd.

Helen would hear all the gruesome details soon enough. Meanwhile, however, the chicken backs had begun to crackle, and were more demanding of her attention. She folded up the note and slipped it back into her apron.

Gizzards next, she thought.

CHAPTER 3  
XENOGENICS

Thursday

When Dwayne arrived at the office Thursday morning, Cindy seemed a little distant. She stopped typing long enough to hand him the mail, but continued staring at her computer screen.

He wondered what she could be typing. He hadn't given her anything. He had been preoccupied with Cayle's impending surgery, and largely abandoned his routine at the office.

"What are you working on?"

"My resumé. Thought I'd bring it up to date."

Dwayne winced. He hated it when Cindy threatened to quit. She did it all the time.

"Bernie Eisberg was trying to reach you all day, yesterday," she announced wearily, while watching the monitor. "Your brother, as well. I can't keep them at bay much longer. I've run out of excuses."

Cindy wasn't actually typing, he noticed. Merely moving the mouse. He leaned over the top of the monitor, and checked the image on the screen. She was playing a computer game. *Riven*, it looked like.

He used his sweetest voice.

"Cindy? Don't start. I hardly got any sleep last night."

She wouldn't respond.

"Come on. Be a pal. It's not as if I haven't been working hard on this. Honest. I stayed up 'til four in the morning, wading through this stuff. I could sure use some help."

He deposited his briefcase on top of her desk. It landed heavily.

Bernie Eisberg had managed to obtain a wealth of information about Xenogenics, and had sent over a stack of documents, including a copy of a confidential private memorandum, which offered limited partnership interests in a proposed, new breeding facility.

Dwayne had been surprised by the inclusion of the private offering. Such documents were usually closely guarded. They were issued to attract investors, and divulged what was essentially inside information regarding the company's strengths and strategies. Unlike public offerings, which could be freely advertised, and consigned to brokers, private offers like the one from Xenogenics were never widely distributed. Bernie refused to say how he'd gotten hold of it.

It seemed unlikely that he would have risked approaching the company directly, because of his association with Cayle. Most of their investors would be doctors, though. So perhaps he approached a colleague.

The document ran close to three hundred pages, and included an up-to-date synopsis of the developments in the medical biotechnology industry as a whole. Dwayne found it fascinating. He had no idea that it was possible to patent a pig.

Cindy had continued to ignore him, while he stood next to her desk, idly shuffling through the mail. Bills, mainly.

“Can you work through lunch?” he asked.

She slowly drew out the corners of her mouth, and eyed him coldly. Either outraged, or offended. He couldn't tell which.

“I brought some sushi,” he added, resorting to bribery. He unlatched his briefcase, and presented her with the artfully-arranged, take-out tray. Sashimi salmon. Her favorite.

She made a little show of it, and forced him to wait, while she held the packaged sushi up to better light, and examined it from several angles, eventually snapping open the lid, and poking around inside with her finger.

“Where's the wasabi?” she asked.

“Here.”

He produced a second tray, which held an attractive sesame seed salad, in addition to an assortment of condiments, including the hot horseradish mustard. It seemed to do the trick.

“Oh, all right. What do you want me to do?”

“Find me a body. Someone who needs a new heart.”

“A transplant?”

“Yeah. I want to be in a position to offer Xenogenics an alternative to Cayle. Hopefully, someone a little more...deserving.”

Cayle’s bad habits went beyond methamphetamines. He had a history of violent behavior, and both of his ex-wives had been granted restraining orders against him. The court records were in the public domain. Anyone could access them, if they were curious enough.

Bernie had hired a private investigator to conduct a search, Dwayne suspected. But it wouldn’t take a trained detective. Any tabloid journalist could do it.

He could already see the headlines.

#### WIFE-BEATER GETS PIG’S HEART.

Cindy was still sitting with her pen poised over a blank legal pad, clearly at a loss as to how to proceed.

“Here. I’ve got something to get you started.”

He rummaged through the papers in his briefcase, and found an article which he had torn out of a magazine in the library, about the critical shortage of donated organs. An ever-increasing number of people

were languishing on waiting lists apparently, with little chance of being matched with a suitable donor.

Dwayne knew what he'd do, if he were in that position. He wouldn't sit back stoically, and hope for the best. He'd advertise.

"There's several websites quoted here," he explained, handing her the clipping. "Support groups, and so on. See what else you can come up with. I'd be surprised if there weren't some public hand-wringing going on over this issue."

Cindy briefly scanned through it. "What sort of person should I look for?"

"Oh, someone with kids, I'd say. Yeah. A loving mother, with a couple of cute kids. Maybe a cocker spaniel. That would do nicely."

Dwayne started toward his inner office, then paused, realizing he should add some clarification. "Don't contact anyone, you understand. We wouldn't want to get anybody's hopes up. Not at this stage. Just get me a name."

Dwayne still hadn't decided what tack to take, dealing with Dr. Eisberg. The man was becoming irrational. He was convinced that Xenogenics was out to ruin him.

Like most of the doctors whom Dwayne was acquainted with, Bernie believed himself infallible. But, now, he had begun to doubt

himself. He had declared Cayle as good as dead. In fact, he would have staked his reputation on it. Instead, he had only put up \$300K, but it was really the same thing, as far as Bernie was concerned.

He simply couldn't cope with the possibility - however remote - that Xenogenics might prove him wrong. And that his trusted diagnosis might soon be trumped, by a more powerful, new technology. Having access to the latest medical technology had always provided Bernie's bread and butter, so he couldn't help feeling vulnerable. He no longer had the best.

His specialty was laser angioplasty, and he had established an immensely profitable private practice, largely as a result of his willingness to invest in the most advanced surgical tools available. Simply by possessing them, he had greatly enhanced his reputation as a surgeon.

His income, as well. People were willing to pay a premium for non-invasive surgical procedures. An operation employing the new technology might require only a small incision in one of his patient's wrists, for example, and spare them the trauma of open heart surgery.

The sophisticated surgical equipment was expensive, but with it, Bernie had bought his independence. He seldom required the services of a hospital, or needed to employ an anesthetist, since the technology enabled him to operate in his private office, using localized anesthesia.

He faced competition in his field, of course, but not enough to prevent him from setting his own fees.

Bernie had a lengthy waiting list for his services. It was a source of pride.

But Xenogenics possessed technology of a wholly different order. They had forged an alliance of forces, against which he was powerless to compete. On the one hand, the inherent power of the genetic code. On the other, the formidable capability of computer code. The two were natural allies. By bringing both to bear, Xenogenics had gained an unassailable technological advantage.

Confronted with forces like that, Bernie felt diminished. He was nothing more than a humble repairman, when it came right down to it. He could scrape out a clogged artery. Or patch up a worn-out heart. But once there were brand new, genetically-engineered replacement parts available, who would bother?

Well. The poor, maybe. But Bernie had no interest in operating on them.

So Bernie had begun searching for ammunition. Anything at all, really, which might prove embarrassing, or potentially damaging to

Xenogenics, and give them reason to reconsider their decision to experiment on Cayle.

And, clearly, it was an experiment. As far as he could determine, no transgenic organ had ever been successfully transplanted into a human patient. Cayle's chances were almost nil, Dwayne thought. But he couldn't convince Bernie of that. Oh, no. The man was convinced that Xenogenics' new technology could perform miracles. He kept insisting that they had to *do* something.

As far as Dwayne was concerned, their best option was to do nothing.

Perhaps he might have felt differently, if he were more exposed. Fortunately, he'd taken the precaution of inflating his need somewhat, when he first called Malcolm about the shortfall. In the end, he had convinced his brother to put up the full \$100K. So Dwayne wasn't out of pocket at all. He stood to lose only his standard ten percent commission for underwriting the deal if Cayle somehow survived.

Not that he didn't need the money.

Yet the insurance payoff seemed assured, if they'd just give it a little time. The odds of Cayle outliving the 15-year term of his life insurance policy were extremely remote.

Needless to say, Dwayne had hoped to avoid enlisting in Bernie's guerrilla campaign against Xenogenics. But he was left with little choice, given the man's mental state. Bernie had barged into his office unannounced, documents in hand, and practically demanded that he scrutinize them. The request was reasonable, albeit rather brusque. They were financial documents, after all.

Refusing to cooperate would have been tantamount to desertion, under the circumstances. So Dwayne opted to play along. Maintaining a position of trust would allow him to keep an eye on Bernie, at least. And hopefully, dissuade him from doing anything illegal, which might leave them facing charges of insurance fraud.

Dwayne spent a few minutes at his desk, organizing his notes, before calling Bernie with his report. Most of it was based on the private offering memorandum.

As a standard feature of such documents, the memorandum contained a list of 'risk factors'. These were included for legal reasons, to forestall any claim that potential shareholders had not been warned about the risks relating to the investment. If you knew how to read them, the risk factors provided a remarkably candid summary of a company's weaknesses.

Exactly what Bernie had in mind. Chinks in their armor.

“Bernie? Sorry I’m late getting back to you. It took longer than I thought to digest all these documents. The prose is a bit thick.”

“Well, I hope some of it sunk in,” Bernie replied, testily. “We’re wasting precious time. Have you come up with anything?”

“Maybe. The simple fact that they’ve started to conduct human experiments could cause them legal problems.”

“Where? Surely not in Mexico.”

“That’s not what I mean. It relates to disclosure. Let me read you a quote from the risk factors. *Xenogenics has not conducted clinical feasibility trials with human patients, and cannot do so, until various restrictions are rescinded by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that such trials will prove fruitful.* Seems pretty unambiguous to me.”

“Huh? I don’t get it.”

“They’re obliged to make a full disclosure of any significant risks. One of those risks, obviously, is that their organs might not work. Has it occurred to you that Cayle might not be their first try? What if they’ve been experimenting all along? And had a few failures, say? If they’re hiding that fact from investors, it would constitute fraud.”

“What makes you think they’ve had failures?” Bernie sounded quite concerned.

“Seems plausible, doesn’t it? How long have they been breeding pigs at their farm in Oregon? Must be two years, at least.”

Bernie was slow to respond. “I can’t see how this helps us.”

Dwayne couldn’t either.

But, clearly, they were in possession of some sensitive inside information. Few people outside the inner circle at Xenogenics would know about Cayle. Secrets of that sort could often be exploited, given some thought.

He’d leave that to Bernie. With any luck, it would keep him occupied.

“Well, let’s move on,” Dwayne suggested, quite content to leave things a bit muddled. “Their patent position is an obvious weakness. Let me run through that. But, bear with me. It’s a little complicated.”

Xenogenics had no real assets. Although they maintained a small research laboratory, in addition to their breeding farm in Oregon, both facilities were leased. The company owned nothing, really, other than their proprietary intellectual property rights to their genetically engineered pigs. As a result, the value of those rights became a key issue for investors, since they would be buying shares in little else.

The private offering sought to reassure investors of the potential worth of those shares. With an unlimited number of organs available,

transplants were expected to increase markedly. According to Xenogenics' projections, demand would soon surpass 200,000 organs per year. Multiply that by an estimated market value of \$10,000 per pig organ. Then double it, since they expected to harvest at least two transplantable organs per pig.

They weren't small numbers.

In Dwayne's experience, such projections were often grossly inflated. In this instance, however, the figures seemed plausible. More than 75,000 people were already on waiting lists for donated human organs, and the number was steadily increasing. If Xenogenics' organs indeed proved successful, shareholders in their intellectual property rights would be assured of a slice of an enormously profitable market.

Such rights were best secured by patent claims. Mindful that prospective investors would expect such protection, the memorandum devoted thirty-five pages to that issue alone. As presented, the evidence seemed to substantiate Xenogenics' contention that their pigs were eminently patentable. A contention based, in large part, on the fact that they weren't entirely pigs.

They were transgenic animals, and carried four human genes.

Dwayne had difficulty deciphering the science, but the details of the complex genetic transformation hardly mattered. The end result was a pig whose organs produced essentially human proteins. Unlike normal

pig tissue, which was foreign inside the human body, and rejected within minutes, Xenogenics believed that their genetically altered organs would be far less likely to trigger an immune response.

Numerous patents had already been issued for transgenic animals. A cancer-prone mouse, and malaria-resistant mosquitoes. Sheep which grew moth-proof wool. If the examples listed in the memorandum were any indication, a veritable zoo of transgenic animals had gathered at the gates of the Patent Office, seeking protection.

The pigs had joined the queue.

They'd been waiting three years, in fact. Yet the patent still hadn't been issued. Dwayne found it odd. The waiting period was typically closer to eighteen months.

The pigs clearly met the vital criteria embodied by a utility patent. One of the requirements was novelty - a patentable invention had to be 'new'. With regard to transgenic animals, this attribute seemed beyond dispute. All of them were new.

The novelty of biotechnology, itself, almost insured patentability of its initial products. Their techniques of precise genetic manipulation was unprecedented. There was no prior art. And, therefore, no previous patents against which the biological inventions could be compared, and found lacking.

A further requirement was utility - a patentable invention must have a useful purpose. Utility is found in the hands of the user, however, so the standard applied by the Patent Office was very low. Xenogenics was under no obligation to demonstrate that their organs would function inside the human body before a patent on their pigs could be issued.

No explanation was given for the delay. So Dwayne sought one out. The first place he looked was the risk factors.

*The US Patent and Trademark Office[PTO] currently considers all nonhuman, multicellular organisms to be patentable, which would, by definition, include transgenic animals that incorporate human germplasm.*

*However, patent law, as applied to medical biotechnology, is new and evolving. Therefore, the merits of the claim notwithstanding, there can be no assurance that a patent for the donor animals will be granted by the PTO.*

At first reading, the statement seemed straightforward. Nothing more than a disclaimer, reminding investors that favorable rulings from regulatory agencies were never a sure thing.

After a second and third reading, however, something else stood out. The 'nonhuman/human germplasm' bits seemed superfluous. If

Xenogenics simply wanted to include a disclaimer, the second paragraph alone would have sufficed.

Although the private offering was not strictly a legal document, most of it had been drafted by lawyers. Most certainly the risk factors. And lawyers tended to choose their words carefully when issues of possible misrepresentation and fraud were at stake. Dwayne felt certain that they had included those extra words for a reason.

A rather worrisome reason, as it turned out, which hadn't proved difficult to find. A moratorium had been placed upon the granting of patents for transgenic animals that incorporated human genetic material. A legislative review was pending, including hearings before the House Ethics Committee.

“What does any of this have to do with Cayle?” Bernie asked.

“Well...think about it. Why would Xenogenics risk experimenting on a known drug pusher, like Cayle? My guess is, they're desperate.”

“What makes you think that?”

“They're mired in red tape. It's all those government regulations. They'll do it every time. Investors tend to be a little leery, spending their money on legal bills. But there's another piece to their patent puzzle. Let me finish with that.”

Xenogenics hadn't started from scratch, when they set out to genetically engineer their pigs. Rather, they built upon a broad foundation of previous research, pioneered by others. Techniques for identifying and isolating specific genes. Methods for inserting genes which encode specific characteristics. Some of these technologies were proprietary, and had already been issued patents. In several cases, the ownership of the technology that Xenogenics relied upon was uncertain, with competing and overlapping claims pending before the courts.

It was far from certain whether Xenogenics would be able to gain legal access to the technology it needed, and obtain freedom to operate through licensing agreements. Nor was it clear if the company could afford to do so, given the legal costs.

"It happens, all the time," Dwayne observed. "Somebody gets their hands on a promising idea for a patent, and they start to believe they're holding a winning lottery ticket. So, they form a little company. Sell some shares. Wait for their marvelous patent to come through. Eventually, they discover they're not holding the winning ticket, after all. End of story."

"So, what are you telling me? You think Xenogenics is about to go under?"

"Inevitable, isn't it? They have no income."

“You’re forgetting about Cayle.”

“Well...yeah,” Dwayne conceded. “But that’s just one lousy pig. They’ll have to sell a whole lot more than that, if they...”

“What do I have to do?” Bernie snapped back, angrily. “Hit you over the head with it? You just don’t get it. I handed Cayle a check for almost a million and a half. Isn’t that the winning ticket you’ve been talking about?”

Dwayne was stunned.

After reading the figure quoted in the private offering - about the pigs having a market value of \$10K apiece - he had somehow lulled himself into thinking that a market for such organs actually existed. Naturally, he assumed that Cayle would get gouged, going down to Mexico for it. Thirty-five. Fifty thousand, maybe. But he had never considered the possibility that the man might have paid a fortune.

It suddenly became obvious why Xenogenics had chosen Cayle.

“If you’ve got it all figured out, then tell me,” Bernie insisted. “How much would you pay? A hundred grand? Five hundred? Come on, I’m curious. How much? How much is your life worth, Dwayne?”

He was at a loss for words.

“Well, I know what I’d pay,” Bernie said. “I’d give Charlie Xong everything I had. Wouldn’t you?”

The conversation had taken a worrisome turn, Dwayne felt. He needed to regain the initiative, and hurriedly leafed through his notes, trying to find some ammunition live enough to mollify Bernie.

So far, Xenogenics had managed to operate in relative obscurity. Given the controversial nature of their research, and the secrecy surrounding Cayle, the company evidently hoped to keep it that way. At least until they achieved a degree of success with their pigs, which was sufficient to warrant attracting some publicity.

The potential for controversy went beyond their ill-advised choice of Cayle. The patenting of animals, for example, was vehemently opposed by animal rights groups. With regard to other issues, the opposition was even more widespread. Some objected to the manipulation of human genes, for instance. Or, abhorred the experimental use of aborted human fetuses, which were the source of Xenogenics' genetic raw material.

So, it appeared that a few well-placed phone calls could cause the company some real headaches.

But Dwayne wasn't about to make them. Nor was he enthused about the prospect of Bernie making them. Dwayne was beginning to think that the man might be dangerous. If Bernie embarked upon a campaign of dirty tricks against Xenogenics, there was no telling where it might lead.

Bernie spoke up before he could say anything.

“I can’t get out of my mind what you mentioned, earlier, about Cayle not being their first transplant. If that’s the case, the threat might be even more serious than I thought.”

Dwayne couldn’t see why. “I don’t know, Bernie. Seems to me, if they’ve already failed a few times, we could both sleep a little easier.”

“It really hasn’t sunk in, has it? With an experimental procedure like this, Xenogenics expects failures. That’s why they want to conduct clinical trials. To learn from them. For all we know, they might have already learned a great deal.”

“Well, I was only speculating about...”

Bernie interrupted, yet again. “I think we’d better have a look around their breeding farm.”

“What for?”

“We’ll learn how many pigs they’re raising, if nothing else. I should be able to arrange an invitation on short notice. How about Saturday morning?”

“And, I’m supposed to go with you? That it?”

“No. There’s no reason for both of us to go. I’ve got surgery scheduled anyway.”

“Oh. I’m, uh...little busy myself, actually.”

“Come to think of it, I’ve got someone we can send up there. The guy designed my security system. He knows his stuff. Maybe he can spot something.”

Christ. The detective.

Dwayne sensed that the situation would soon escalate out of control, if Bernie began employing mercenaries in his war against Xenogenics.

The soundness of the conventional wisdom seemed inescapable, under the circumstances. Bernie clearly fit the category of those with diminished mental capacity, who should be denied access to weapons.

Especially hired guns, who would do whatever he said.

“No. No need for that, Bernie. I should be able to juggle my schedule to fit it in. Sure. Why not. I’m kinda curious to see these pigs. I’ll need directions to find the place. Where is it, anyway?”

“Near the coast. I’ll fax you a map. How’s that?”

“That would be great,” he sighed. “Just great.”

After hanging up the phone, Dwayne began to think that a weekend on the Oregon coast might not be such a bad idea, after all. He hadn’t been deep-sea fishing in years. He could put in an appearance at

the breeding farm - maybe shoot some film, just to satisfy Bernie - and still have plenty of time for a day charter, before driving back home.

He might even come back with a salmon, or two. Depending on the weather, of course.

After placing several calls he finally reached a recording, which cycled through the marine weather forecasts for the entire coast. He joined it at the Canadian border, where the weather sounded promising.

But it soon deteriorated.

*Cape Lookout to Cape Blanco, and out sixty miles: Winds variable, 10 knots, becoming southwest overnight, and freshening. Visibility 5 miles in drizzle. Sea slight.*

*Extended outlook: Southwest winds, 20 to 25 knots, increasing to gale force by Saturday. Visibility less than 1 mile, in heavy rain.*

*Cape Blanco to Point St. George, and out sixty miles: Small-craft advisory. Southwest winds, 25 to 30 knots, increasing to...*

Damn. Salmon fishing was out, obviously.

He hung up the phone.

Then, picked it right back up again, thinking that he'd call his brother, while he was in a suitably foul mood.

“I expect better from you, Malcolm. Just because you’re upset, that doesn’t give you the right to abuse my secretary. That was really low of you, man.”

“The woman wouldn’t give me a straight answer.”

“Christ! What do you expect? She’s not *supposed* to give you a straight answer! That’s her job, for chrissakes!”

“Well...when you put it like that. Hell. Tell her I’m sorry. I’ll send her some roses. How’s that?”

“Fine. But send food. Cindy hates roses.”

“All right. Maybe I was a little out of line. But damn it, Dwayne, this whole pig business has put me under a lot of stress. I hate being out of pocket. Haven’t I told you that?”

“Quite recently, as I recall. Yesterday, in fact.”

“No kidding? *Yesterday*? Well, that just goes to show, doesn’t it?”

“Nothing’s changed, since. So why the urgent calls?”

“This guy, Cayle. He’s still alive, then?”

“As far as I know.”

“Excellent. We don’t want to lose him just yet. Turns out our man Cayle might prove to be a pretty big fish.”

Malcolm had talked to an agent.

He had mentioned Cayle at a one of his business meetings - not in a serious way, but simply as an anecdote - just to illustrate the bizarre and unexpected twists which fate could take, with a supposedly risk-free investment. One of his associates had pointed out the potential, if Cayle could somehow manage to survive his historic surgery, and tour the talk-show circuit.

“If he lives long enough to make all the prime time slots, we should recover our losses, at least. Of course, if he croaks, he won’t be worth all that much. But then we’ll collect on the viatical.”

Dwayne couldn’t help feeling envious. Malcolm had an amazing talent for hedging his bets.

“I suppose you even have a contract.”

“Of course. So, how about it? Ready to go down to Mexico, and sign him up?”

“Me? Why me?”

“Because I’m very busy. And you’re not. Besides, you’re the obvious choice. The guy’s in a hospital.”

“It’s a clinic. What’s that got to do with it?”

“Hey. Dealing with the diseased and dying is practically your specialty. You’ve got the bedside manner for it. Don’t worry. You’ll sign him up.”

Dwayne considered the implications. Xenogenics would have Cayle under wraps, he imagined. Which meant he'd have to deal with Dr. Xong. Beyond that, he drew a blank. The only thing that came to mind was Bernie's brutal description of the execution of Chinese prisoners.

"Actually, I'd rather not."

"What! What kind of answer is that? I'd *rather not*? Hell. As I recall, I didn't say anything like that to you, last time you called, begging for money."

"I wasn't begging."

"Whatever. But it's a great line, little brother. I'd *rather not*. Yeah. I like the sound of that. Worth remembering I'd say."

Dwayne tried to be conciliatory.

"Come on. Trust me, I'd go down there, if I thought it would do the slightest good. But this is crazy. Cayle's as good as dead. So it's like you said. There's not much in it, for us. Certainly not for me."

"Sure, there is. Think of it this way. It's insurance. Insurance that I won't lose my shirt, on this. And insurance that I'll keep sending you some of my valued clients. How's that?"

"Oh. I see."

Given the choice, Dwayne decided he'd rather risk a visit to the infamous Dr. Xong, than risk losing his office. The investors that Malcolm steered his way were literally paying the rent.

“All, right. I’ll do it. But you know, this is really starting to get to me. No matter what I’m selling, I always wind up dealing with doctors. Christ. They give me the creeps.”

“Well, your viatical business...”

“Oh, it’s not only that!” Dwayne shot back. “Even with the windmills. Remember? How many shares did I sell to doctors? More than half, wasn’t it?”

“Probably.”

“So, why is that do you think? Do I attract them or something?”

“You, personally? No, it’s not you, Dwayne. It’s your investments. They only seem like different schemes on the surface. They share a feature which doctors find attractive.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“They always lose money.”

His brother had regained his sense of humor, at least. Dwayne held the phone away from his ear, while he waited for Malcolm to stop cackling, following his flawless delivery of the punchline.

“Oh, that’s good, Malcolm. Very funny.”

“Think of it this way,” Malcolm observed, having barely recovered his breath. “Maybe you’ve found your niche.”

“Oh, come on...”

“Seriously. Why the sudden aversion to doctors? You’ve been making a steady diet of them for years. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Who said anything about being...”

“There’s bigger fish in the sea. I know that. But hell, Dwayne! Don’t let it get you down! It’s not as if you’ve been dipping for little feeder goldfish, or anything.”

Unfortunately, Dwayne had to begrudge him the point. As a class of investors, medical practitioners tended to be rather predictable, which made them ridiculously easy to catch.

More often than not, doctors were drowning in their own cash flow. When you combined that with the weight of a heavy tax burden, it understandably made them a little desperate.

Pitching them an investment was similar to throwing them a life preserver. It wasn’t necessary to hit them over the head with it. You merely had to get it close. The investment could even have a few holes in it. As long as it stayed afloat for awhile, and looked promising, they’d usually grab hold.

“You’ll take care of Cayle real soon, I hope?” Malcolm reminded him.

“I said I’d try. Don’t push it, all right?”

“Hey. No problem. I’ll email the contract to Cindy this afternoon, just in case you decide to go down over the weekend. And there’s one other thing. Could you take your videocamera?”

“What for?”

“Well, I kinda promised the agent we’d get him some footage. He won’t need much. A few sound bites. Some shots of the patient awaiting his big day. That sort of thing. Just enough so he can cover his expenses if Cayle doesn’t make it.”

“What expenses? I’m the one who’ll be out of pocket on this.”

“Oh. I guess I forgot to mention it. The guy gave me a cash advance. A signing bonus, I suppose you’d call it.”

“Yeah? How much?”

“Few thousand.”

Dwayne waited patiently for a more precise figure. It wasn’t long in coming.

“Ten, actually. I’ll send you half. How’s that?” Malcolm gave a little laugh. “Or would you rather I sent food?”

“Cut the jokes, all right? This isn’t going to be so easy, you know.”

Dwayne had no idea how he was going to get past Charlie Xong. Obviously, he couldn’t just show up, carrying cameras and lighting

equipment, and expect a warm welcome. Malcolm was probably right. The weekend would be the best time. Dr. Xong might not be there.

“I suppose I’ll have to check the flights,” Dwayne announced, starting to think aloud, about the arrangements he’d have to make.

“What’s to check? Just take the first flight to San Diego.”

Malcolm misunderstood. Dwayne was thinking about the inconvenience of flying into Oregon.

“Damn it! There’s no airport. Not on the coast. Now I’ll have to rent a car, and drive halfway across the state.”

“Why? Rent the car in San Diego, for chrissakes.”

“No, I’m talking about Oregon. I have to go up to there tomorrow. I’ll be flying from there.”

“Oregon? What the hell for?”

“See the pigs.”

Cindy cracked open the door to his office, and held up the fax from Bernie Eisberg. The map. Dwayne motioned her in, and used the interruption as an excuse to sign off on his brother. He added a little flourish, at the end.

“And remember what I said. Quit bothering my secretary!”

Cindy smiled appreciatively, as she set the fax on his desk.

Dwayne was anxious to find out where he was going, and immediately examined the map. Bernie had drawn it by hand, but he'd done a neat job of it. The breeding farm was marked with a small cross. He stared at it for awhile, then dropped the fax on his desk, and slumped back in his chair.

"I can't believe this."

Cindy glanced at the map. "Why? What's wrong?"

"See this? This spot he's marked?" Dwayne reached out, and stabbed a finger at it. "It's right on top of the restaurant. I couldn't locate it any better, myself."

It took Cindy a moment to make the connection. After the restaurant had become successful, Dwayne naturally wanted to include it in his resumé, and had assigned her the task of rewriting it.

"You mean Helen's place?" Cindy looked worriedly at him. "She's not the one raising the pigs, is she?"

He waved his hand dismissively. "No! Christ. She's busy with the restaurant. Helen hardly ever leaves the building. No, there's a few small farms just down the road. They're probably raising them there."

Cindy seemed delighted. She also couldn't resist teasing him. "Well, then. The old flame. Now you've got the perfect excuse to see her again."

"Come on, I've had a really bad day. So, don't start, all right?"

Dwayne leaned back, and stared at the ceiling.

“Don’t you dare sneak up there without seeing her,” Cindy admonished.

Actually, Helen scared him a whole lot more than Dr. Xong.

Helen was magical woman. Unfortunately, the sort of magic she practiced was similar to voodoo. Toward him, at any rate. She had cast a spell on him, he thought, and the effects were still with him, some fifteen years after the fact.

Dwayne had no idea how she’d done it. He had felt nothing, at the time. So, perhaps she made a doll, which looked like him. Or, knowing Helen, she might have made do with just a potato. But, whatever charm she’d used - to stick in her pins - she had inserted them with such skill that those places still hurt.

Dwayne sighed.

“Helen thinks I’m a fraud.”

Cindy tried to think of something encouraging to say. But, in the end, all she could offer was a comforting smile.

“Come on. There’s worse things.”

## CHAPTER 4

### ROSALIND

Thursday

Rosalind felt as if she'd finally turned the corner. She hadn't slept so well in weeks. She set her room key on the dresser, and took a last look around, to satisfy herself she hadn't left anything.

God. A motel bed, of all places.

Considering her recent history in a succession of similar, sad little rooms - with her ex-boyfriend Floyd - the irony in it was inescapable. Laughable, really.

She was tempted to call her therapist. Helga loved a good joke. Rosalind was dying to hear her reaction anyway. She had forgotten where she'd put her cell phone, and started rummaging through her big mesh purse. The bag was even more cluttered than usual, on the road, so she dumped the entire contents onto the bed. A couple prescription vials rolled off the mattress onto the floor. The phone wasn't there.

Her overnight bag, then.

She had already carried it out to the car. She started gathering the things off the bed, and noticed the postcard from Floyd. A whimsical, friendship card, sent while he was off on vacation with his

wife, rediscovering their commitment to each other. It must have been buried in the purse for months. Rosalind tore it in half, and tossed it in the trash.

She reconsidered her decision to call Helga. Rosalind thought that she'd acquitted herself well, under the circumstances. But Helga might think her a little childish, asking for praise.

Besides, it was barely past seven in the morning.

The coffee shop had opened, she noticed. She withdrew her journal, and locked the overnight bag in the car. Then headed across the parking lot, thinking she'd write down the details over breakfast, while they were still fresh in her mind.

Rosalind had sensed the masculine presence the moment she entered the room. Even though she had prepared herself for it, her first impulse had been to flee, and try another motel.

But she knew it would be even worse at the others. She'd driven several miles out of her way, and cruised past three or four, before specifically choosing the newest one. Helga had been quite specific, on that point. Modern buildings were better for her, right now. The newer rooms contained fewer male auras.

They accumulated over time apparently, and permeated the furniture and carpeting. Like tobacco smoke.

Rosalind tried to sniff them out. She fought off her vertigo, and proceeded methodically. She checked the bathroom first. Inspected the sink for shaving residue. Then lifted the toilet seat and checked the porcelain rim for drops of urine, or pubic hair. But the bathroom was spotless.

Next, she opened all the drawers. The dresser was empty, but in the nightstand she found a Bible. Helga discounted the significance of the book - the Holy Father's auras were stale, she felt, and had lost their power to dominate - but Rosalind removed it anyway, just to be on the safe side.

Or, maybe, out of habit.

Rosalind would be the first to admit that she held a grudge against the religion. Her liaisons with married men had caused her more than enough anguish as it was. She could have done without the guilt.

But she wasn't a spiteful person. She tucked the book inside a plastic bag, before setting it outside the door. The cement porch was dry. The precious Bible wouldn't get wet.

There was little else to examine inside the room. The closet was clean, and the rest of the furnishings looked almost new. It seemed implausible that they could have already absorbed a detectable level of auras. Yet, she felt as if the whole room were filled with men,

watching her every move. She really wanted to take a shower, but couldn't possibly strip off her clothes. And certainly couldn't risk going to sleep.

She simply wasn't attuned enough to be able to pinpoint the source of the auramones. She was only a novice. Unlike Helga.

Helga had coined the term, herself.

Evolution had deprived women of their ability to smell 'pheromones', and not yet provided them with the ability to see 'auras'. So direct sensory perception of the auramones was impossible. It required intuition.

The term 'auramones' suggested a synthesis, combining the scientific aspects of the phenomenon, with the spiritual. The pheromones were a paradigm of the scientific method, while the aura represented the various manifestations of the spirit. The two approaches had hopelessly diverged, precluding the possibility of any meaningful collaboration between them.

Helga advocated the middle way. The Two-Fold Path.

She encouraged novices to begin by following the scientific path, which demanded rigorous observation of the effects of auramones on human behavior. Rosalind had made steady progress. So much seemed

clear to her now. It was no longer a mystery why women felt so intimidated in the traditional bastions of power.

They reeked of auramones.

Considering the history of those buildings, and the sheer numbers of men who had moved through them over the years, marking their territory, it could hardly be otherwise.

While such high levels of auramones were always divisive, for women, they encouraged men to bond together, in packs. Especially when they controlled something. They'd light cigars, and join in boisterous, boastful support of each other. If they were gathered in a corporate boardroom, there might be promotions, or salary increases on the table. Or, if they happened to be in a bar, it might be just the peanuts. Asking politely was never enough. If a woman wanted some scraps off their table, she had to perform a few tricks.

Act like a pet.

In Rosalind's case, it had been her tenure on the table. She had fully expected to get it, and take her well-deserved seat on the faculty. But there were nineteen men on the voting committee of the Business School, and only one woman. A pet, really. Rosalind never had a chance. The vote wasn't even close.

At first, she blamed herself. Perhaps her research hadn't been up to par. Or, maybe the journals which had published the articles were just too obscure. Then, she began to think that the opposite might be the case. That she'd devoted too much time to the obligatory research, and neglected her teaching duties.

Admittedly, there had been a few incidents. Like falling asleep in class. Or crying.

Wearing a coat inside out.

All the car accidents.

But those things happened while she was having an allergic reaction to one of her anti-depressants. She couldn't be held accountable for that. And the period when she carried the Bible around all the time - that was one of her psychoanalyst's bright ideas. Not hers.

It wasn't her fault. None of it.

Rosalind knew that, now.

Her progress along the spiritual path had been far less encouraging. She had barely moved past the preliminary cleansing stage.

During their initial therapy session, Helga had been quite blunt about it, and compared Rosalind's spiritual condition to a filthy ashtray.

Her habitual, submissive relationships with men had left her coated with a sticky residue of male auramones, like tobacco tar.

Helga told her that she had to get herself out from underneath men. Cleanse herself. Obviously that meant minimizing her exposure to male auramones.

Helga always selected a 'spirit' name for each of her patients, to give them guidance along their spiritual path. Rosalind was rather disheartened by the name Helga picked out for her. The Tar Woman. Seemed so unattractive.

But her revelation in the motel room had given her some hope.

As she sat forlornly in the motel armchair, facing another sleepless night, she realized that she'd neglected to thoroughly examine the bed. Although men released their auramones randomly, throughout the day, the emissions were most effective during the sexual act, when they could deposit them directly on top of women.

So she stripped all the linen from the bed, and discovered their source - a series of ugly semen stains on the mattress pad.

The auramone level inside the room dropped dramatically, once she had folded up the pad and put it on the porch, underneath the Bible. She even considered taking a shower, but decided she was just too

exhausted, and used the clean bath towels to cover the mattress, instead.

Then promptly fell fast asleep.

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The highway over to the coast was as scenic as she remembered it. Although the sky overhead was uniformly gray, the morning sun shone through a narrow blue slit in the clouds, off to east, low in the sky. The sunlight found gaps in the trees, and dappled the road. Steam rose from the asphalt in places.

Although the highest peaks were lost in the clouds, she could see that the mountains had received their first dusting of snow.

After cresting the summit, the road straightened for a few miles. She pulled over at the first turnout, thinking she'd hike in, and see the falls. There were a series of waterfalls along the upper stretch of the river, but she recollected that this had been her favorite.

It was only a short walk. The sound of the river carried all the way to the parking area. She wouldn't even need boots. The trail was covered with a thick layer of bark, and neatly bordered with staked timbers, like a footpath in a woodland park.

The river entered the canyon through a cleft in the granite, with remarkable violence. The whole of it was white. A hewn timber had been erected across the end of the trail as a barrier, but it hadn't discouraged people from climbing down into the gorge. The track led toward a deep pool, at the base of the falls.

It was inviting, she had to admit. The mist thrown up by the falls drifted high aloft, and through the trees. All of the branches were covered with moss. The water in the pool was a lovely emerald green.

Rosalind couldn't resist taking a closer look, and stepped beyond the barrier herself. She ventured only a few steps, before losing one of her shoes in some sticky mud. As she went to retrieve it, her bare foot squished down through the moss, and sank in almost to the ankle. She hadn't expected the footing to be so soft, or the rocks so slippery. She decided to turn back.

The bank was steeper than she realized, and she really had to scramble in order to get back up. By the time she regained solid ground, her hands and feet were covered with black, putrescent muck. She felt as if she'd just emerged from a swamp, and instinctively looked around for a tap.

And suddenly remembered why she hated camping.

It seemed so *unfair*. The whole forest was dripping wet. The ferns were laden with dew. The trees bathed in mist. Even the clouds were drizzling. But there was no water at all for her.

She folded up several fern fronds, and used them like tissues to wipe off the worst of it, but she ultimately needed something more absorbent, and headed back to the car, hoping to find a rag.

On the way, she passed some large puddles at the edge of the parking area. Tires had left ruts in the gravel, in places, and the deeper ones held several inches. The water was already muddy. But it was a nicer, sandy-brown sort of mud. She waded right in, and started sluicing it over her legs, to wash off the slime.

The water was freezing.

Rosalind hadn't realized how wet she'd gotten, standing in the spray from the falls. She started shivering. The fine, black sludge adhered tenaciously, and filled every pore and wrinkle, like the grease on the hands of an auto mechanic. The water was too cold to deal with it. She soon abandoned the attempt, and hurried over, got the car started, and turned on the heater.

She drove on.

The car warmed up quickly. After a few miles, the road began following every twist in the river, and she occasionally caught a glimpse

of white water. She began to feel a bit better. When she spotted another turnout, with an unobstructed view of the rapids, she decided to stop. She hadn't been in the mountains for years. Seemed silly to rush through, and not enjoy the scenery.

Her hair was still wet, but she was adequately prepared to deal with that. She kept a blow dryer in the glove compartment. Helga's compact discs were in there as well. Rosalind shuffled through them, while she dried her hair.

Helga had recorded the natural, cleansing sounds, herself. Rosalind had just listened to WHALES, yesterday, driving on the freeway, so she wasn't in the mood for DOLPHINS. The FOREST SUITE seemed apt. She decided on that.

The additional moisture was causing the windshield to fog over, threatening to spoil the view. She switched on the defroster.

Rosalind had forgotten how much she loved being up in the mountains, breathing the clean air, and smelling the forest. Everything was so...natural.

The whirring fan motor seemed a little intrusive, though. So she turned up the music.

An owl.

Perfect.

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The highway twisted and turned even more once she reached the reservoir. The shoreline was very irregular, and dotted with numerous inlets and bays, where the impounded water extended back into the valleys, which had formerly drained into the river. The road wound its way in, and around, each one of them.

The route was highlighted in green on the road map. A scenic route, supposedly.

Rosalind usually avoided roads marked like that. Scenic routes, or not, she couldn't enjoy the scenery when there wasn't any room to pass.

She soon found herself stuck behind an old flatbed truck. It was overloaded with hay, stacked nine or ten bales high. The bales extended beyond the width of the truck bed, making the load wide enough to fill the whole lane, stripe to stripe. Although the hay itself seemed well-secured, the entire truck tilted precariously at every turn. The driver seemed alert to the danger, and often crossed over the centerline to cut a corner, and smooth out a turn.

Rosalind had tail-gated the truck, initially, waiting for an opportunity to pass. But after a few sharp turns, when she feared that

the whole, top-heavy load might topple over right in front of her, she decided to keep a safe distance.

Of course, that meant she could never pass.

The driver in the pickup truck immediately behind her started honking his horn. Then another did the same, a few cars further back. She felt obliged to try again. She accelerated, and closed some ground, but the huge wall of hay obscured her view of the oncoming traffic. She felt petrified, venturing blindly across the stripe.

She sped up several times, thinking that she might risk overtaking the truck, but braked and dropped back, each time.

The pickup honked more insistently.

Rosalind spotted a possible turnout, a short distance ahead. She prayed that the hay truck would pull over, and let her pass. But the driver didn't even slow down. At the last second, she decided to turn off, herself. She braked sharply, after veering off onto the shoulder, and skidded on the loose gravel. The car came to rest almost facing the road.

One of the boys riding in the pickup stuck his head out the passenger window, and shouted in passing. "Stupid woman! You drive like shit!"

Rosalind remained frozen behind the wheel, gripping it tightly, trying to stop herself from shaking. She could have been killed. The way

they'd hounded her - constantly blaring their horns, and following so close - they had practically forced her off the road.

It seemed so *unfair*. She had tried her best.

She suddenly felt a flush of vertigo, and wondered if she ought to take something. She dumped the contents of her purse onto the passenger seat, and began fumbling through the vials of pills, trying to decide. She ruled out one of the tranquilizers, as well as an anti-depressant, because both made her drowsy, and she needed to stay alert enough to drive.

Then she remembered that she didn't have any water.

That meant she couldn't take any of her medications. Not even the slippery gelatin capsules. She couldn't swallow them. Never could. Not without water. She had a bottle of tequila, however. That would work.

Or, perhaps not.

Some of the drugs could cause severe side effects, even seizures, when combined with alcohol. But she couldn't recall which ones. Prozac...Zantac...Ziploc...all those technical tradenames sounded exactly alike to her. The labels weren't much help. Most of them simply said, 'TAKE AS DIRECTED'.

Hell. How could they possibly expect her to remember?

Rosalind suddenly felt helpless. And reached for her cell phone.

One of Helga's interns answered the call.

"This is Rosalind. Can I speak with Helga?"

"I'll have to check. She's in the sauna, I think. Can I have your full name, please, Rosalind?"

Rosalind sighed. "The Tar Woman."

"Okay, Tar Woman. It might be a few minutes. Hold, please."

Rosalind heard an odd, chirping noise suddenly come over the line. She worried that she might be losing her connection - cellular coverage in the mountains was spotty, at best - and she shifted the phone to her left ear, closer to the window. Then, she heard a sound she recognized. Another owl.

It was DESERT NOCTURNE. She wasn't in the mood, and lowered the phone to her lap.

Helga soon came on the line. "Hi, Rosalind. What seems to be the problem?"

"Men. What else. I'm thinking that I should start taking the drugs, again. I'm sorry. I know I'm not supposed to. With the cleansing, and all. But I feel so...*desperate*. You said I should call. You know. Before taking them. So I did."

"I'm glad you did. Can you tell me what happened?"

“Oh, some jerk leaned out his car window, and called me a stupid woman.”

“I see. Is, uh...that all?”

“Yeah. A stupid woman. He emphasized the word, *woman*. You know. As if it were an epithet, or something. Rotten little punk.”

“Well...we’ve both been called far worse things, haven’t we? Have I missed something? Is your cleansing going badly?”

“Oh, no. The cleansing’s going great. I really wish I’d taken a shower, though. I’m covered with this dreadful mud. I think I ruined my shoes.”

Helga was a little slow to respond. “Where are you, anyway?”

“In my car.”

“And where is that?”

“Oregon. I’m driving over to coast.”

“Oh, of course. Your week in the woods. I’d forgotten all about it. Nice there, isn’t it?”

“Lovely. The river has all this positive energy. There are waterfalls everywhere, and wild, white-water rapids.”

Rosalind glanced toward the water.

She hadn’t noticed that she’d already driven past the dam. The river had been released, and allowed to resume its journey to the sea, but it was hardly the same majestic, wild river she’d witnessed, just a few

miles before. It seemed terribly sluggish, now. The water was turbid, and brown.

Incarceration had apparently broken its spirit. The energy had been sapped from the river, and shipped elsewhere, along the rows of electrical wires, suspended from towering crosses of steel.

God.

They'd crucified it.

The dam...those damn power-hungry *men*...they had done exactly the same thing to her. Held her back. Held her up to ridicule, in fact. Then, once they'd sapped her spirit, they had thrown open the gate and sent her on her way, like so much muddied sewerage. Yeah. She could see that now. It was a crucifixion.

"You should see it, Helga. The poor river. They've crucified it."

Helga sighed. "You haven't started lugging that Bible around again, have you?"

Rosalind thought back to the motel. "Oh, no. I got rid of that. First thing."

"Well, that's a relief. You're carrying too much emotional baggage, Rosalind. It acts like ballast, and burdens down your spirit."

Rosalind pictured herself passing through a gauntlet of jeering men, staggering under the load. Wearing a dunce cap, instead of a crown of thorns.

“We all have our crosses to bear, don’t we?”

“Of course. It can be hard letting go, sometimes. I know that. That’s the whole point of the cleansing. To help you lighten the load.”

“I’m not sure if I can forgive them, Helga.”

“Trust me. You can rise above this, without resorting to drugs. They’ll only numb your spirit, and weigh it down, in the end.”

Rosalind thought it over. She dreaded becoming dependent on the drugs, again. Taking them was like riding a Ferris wheel. Going up. Then coming down. Over and over, continually going around that vicious circle, and never getting anywhere.

Helga continued. “Try to focus, for a moment. Think back to our last session, when we talked about your friend, Helen. You said you felt anxious about seeing her again. Do you remember?”

“Sure.”

“Could this current episode possibly have anything to do with that? With Helen?”

## CHAPTER 5

### OLD FRIENDS

Thursday

Helen decided against doing the ducks.

She was already running behind, and would need an hour to butcher them properly. Besides, she'd already had her fill of boning poultry for one day. She hadn't planned to put mango duck on the menu until Friday, anyway.

She dragged the unopened case into the walk-in refrigerator, and left it in the middle of the floor, where the ice would melt into the drain.

As she was about leave the fridge, she glanced at the stainless trays of filleted breasts, which she'd just arranged on the shelf. With duck on the menu, she'd probably sell a little less chicken. It was an inexact science, to be sure. But, she went with her intuition, and removed a few fillets from the Friday and Saturday trays, and redistributed them to the other two nights.

Now, she could finally begin preparations for dinner.

Helen had just finished scraping the chicken viscera off the butcher block table, and was about to douse the surface with bleach,

when she heard a gurgle coming from the plumbing. She instinctively checked the sink. Then she heard a few loud splashes - water hitting cement, it sounded like - and realized that someone had turned on the outside tap.

She felt constrained to continue working, and poured a few hefty dollops of bleach onto the table, but her curiosity was piqued, and after brushing the disinfectant around a bit, she cracked open the kitchen door and peeked outside.

Rosalind was sitting on the steps, scrubbing one of her shoes. When she looked up, Helen saw that her face was streaked with mud.

“Rosalind! My God! What happened to you?”

“Oh, some punks ran me off the road. In a pickup truck.”

Rosalind dropped the shoe to the pavement, and wiggled her foot into it. Then turned off the water. Helen briefly examined Rosalind’s car, which appeared undamaged.

“Did you get stuck?” she asked, wondering about the mud.

“Yeah. Sort of.”

Rosalind had been crying, apparently. She’d always had a heavy hand with her make-up, and some of the black smudges on her face were mascara. Helen walked over to give her a hug.

A hot shower seemed to be the most hospitable thing she could offer, under the circumstances, so Helen hustled her straight upstairs. Although she'd cleaned out the attic room over the weekend - moved the cases of olive oil and vinegar off the bed, and neatened up the sacks of flour - she hadn't been up since. She regretted it as soon as she opened the door.

Her employees sometimes used the washing machine, and a heavily-laden clothesline was strung across the room, back and forth, at eye level. Rosalind ducked her head, and pushed her way through.

“What are all these? Napkins?”

Helen had to laugh. For all her sophistication, Rosalind could be incredibly clueless at times.

“Don't be silly. I couldn't give customers napkins like this. They're diapers!”

“Oh, yecch...”

Rosalind stopped abruptly, confronting the last line of diapers, suddenly averse to having any more of them brush against her skin. Two were uncomfortably close to her face. She moved them, in turn, taking the precaution of pinching each diaper by the extreme corner, as if it were soiled, and folding it back over the clothesline, out of the way.

“Helen...? Surely...they're not...”

“Mine? Don't be ridiculous.”

Neither of them had ever had the slightest inclination toward having children. Helen recalled how Rosalind would playfully puff out her cheeks, and roll her eyes in mock horror, whenever the two of them happened to encounter a woman who was in the latter stages of pregnancy. They had always considered it a kind of a bond between them that they'd both been born without biological clocks.

Helen had never understood why Rosalind had taken up teaching. She hated children. Her undergraduate students were no longer considered children, of course. But there were similarities. Rosalind would have been happier working as an interior decorator, Helen thought. Or a fashion designer.

"They're Sophie's," Helen explained. "She lives on a sailboat, out on the pile moorings. Started working here last spring."

"Single, huh?"

"No. She's got a partner. Nigel. It's his boat actually. He works here, too."

"They're not married?"

"Well. Sort of."

Rosalind was amused. "How does that work?"

“They got married on some little island in the Indian Ocean. But it wasn’t a legal sort of thing. Just a shipboard ceremony, officiated by the harbormaster. They don’t have any papers.”

Helen suddenly found it annoying, trying to hold a conversation through gaps in the diapers. It seemed rather silly, since they were already dry. So she began taking them down. Sophie had done them late last night, she imagined, while Nigel was mopping the floor.

“She usually hangs them outside, on her boat,” Helen explained. “But, now, with all this rain, I suppose they might become a regular feature. I don’t mind, really. I hardly ever come up here anymore, except to use the shower. Hope you don’t mind sharing. Sophie and Nigel use it, too.”

Rosalind bit her lip. She hadn’t expected a coed shower.

“Oh, no. No...that’s fine.”

Surprisingly enough, it seemed to be the truth. She wasn’t apprehensive about using the shower, at all. The room had a safe, sisterly feel to it, like a sanctuary. A few auramones inside the shower stall wouldn’t worry her. They had made no impact. Helen had cloistered herself in the room for years, and her spirit was indomitable.

“You should spend at least one night across the river, while you’re here,” Helen suggested. “I’m sure it would do you a world of good.”

Really. When was the last time you woke up in the morning, right in the middle of the forest?”

Rosalind couldn't remember, which was just as well, considering how much she hated waking up in the woods, surrounded by ants, covered with pine needles, knowing full well that she couldn't take a shower. She glanced at her fingernails, which still bore traces of the black mud.

“I think my camping days are over, actually.”

“Rosalind! Honestly. It's not like *camping*. The cabin's really cozy with the new woodstove.”

Rosalind smiled.

She had already learned a good deal about the place, from the letters she'd received from Helen. She knew, for instance, that the cabin had only one light bulb, which ran off a solar panel. And no plumbing at all. She had also heard about the mud, and the mosquitoes. That she'd have to chop firewood. All things considered, it sounded a lot like camping, to her.

“I'm dying to see it.”

“I laid a layer of bark chips over the footpath to the outhouse,” Helen offered, as encouragement. “There's a lot less mud now. Really. I even have a rug.”

The attic room had only a single window, which overlooked the river. Rosalind wandered over and reacquainted herself with the view, while Helen finished gathering up the diapers.

The landscape across the river hadn't changed. There was nothing to indicate that anyone inhabited the northern bank, at all. She couldn't spot Helen's cabin. There were no other buildings. No fences, or pastureland. Only forest.

Helen's acreage had become quite valuable, Rosalind imagined, considering how rapidly the southern side of the river was being developed. She had noticed how the new businesses had revitalized the oceanfront, and driven past scores of newly completed homes on her way into town. They weren't tract houses, either. Land prices in the whole area had risen dramatically, and the up-scale trend of the new development seemed to reflect it.

The disparity between the two banks of the river had a simple explanation. Helen had no land access to her property.

The width of the river had made it impractical to build a bridge at its mouth. In addition, a steep ridge of rock, almost a hundred feet high, ran parallel to the river on the northern side, just behind Helen's acreage. As a result, the main coastal highway veered inland around ten miles south, and crossed the river several miles upstream, where there was a natural site for a bridge, across a relatively narrow gorge.

“Which is Sophie’s boat?”

“The sailboat,” Helen said, as she began coiling up the clothesline.

The pile moorings had gradually filled up with pleasure craft over the last few years. The Department of Fish and Game had begun dredging the channel, in response to lobbying by the Town Council, which hoped to promote the town as a sport-fishing center. It seemed to be working, as many of the people moving into the area were coming equipped with boats. But there was only one sailing boat on the river.

“Where they from?” Rosalind asked.

“Sophie’s from New York. But Nigel’s a proper Kiwi. He built the boat, himself. In New Zealand. They’ve sailed it around the world.”

“No kidding....?”

“Sophie wanted Noah - that’s their son - she wanted him to be born in America, so they sailed back last winter. All the way from Patagonia. She was eight months pregnant when they arrived. Can you imagine?”

Rosalind looked mortified.

“Well, I’d better let you take your shower,” Helen said, somewhat anxious to get back to work, herself. “There’s some scouring powder under the sink, if you have trouble with the mud.”

Rosalind undressed in front of the washing machine, and dropped her muddy clothes directly into the tub. The whole room could do with a good scrubbing, she thought. The bare wooden floor was overlaid with an accumulation of muddy footprints. Especially the most commonly trodden route, which led directly from the stairwell to the shower. The alcove just inside the door was littered with dried waffles of dirt, which had fallen from the lug soles on Helen's logging boots.

The shower enclosure looked spotless, by comparison. The shelf inside it was already crowded with bottles of shampoo and conditioners, so she left her own toiletries on top of the washing machine, where she could reach them through the vinyl shower curtain.

The attic was unheated, and cold enough that she could see her breath. When she reached in, and turned on the hot water, the enclosure instantly filled with steam. She hurried inside.

Steam was just what she needed. She drank it in.

There were three different brands of shampoo on the shelf, but Rosalind could guess which one belonged to Helen. It would be the bargain-brand, baby shampoo, sitting on the end.

No frills, for her. Not frugal Helen.

But the cheap, generic shampoo was hardly a bargain. It was little better than dishwashing detergent, and left her hair looking like

weathered straw. Rosalind decided that she'd leave her own cleansing shampoo inside the shower stall when she was finished, just in case Helen might like to try something nice. Helga imported it herself, from Sweden.

Rosalind began consolidating the things on the shelf, to make room for it. When she shifted one of the bottles aside she discovered a small ceramic crock. A shaving mug. Nigel's, she imagined. His shaving brush was propped against it.

The brush was quite distinctive. An antique, she thought. She picked it up to have a closer look.

The handle was made of ivory, which had yellowed with age. A whale tooth, perhaps, since it tapered to a naturally rounded point. The surface was decorated with delicate scrimshaw - an island scene, with some palm trees, and a two-masted sailing ship. The bristles were rather worn, and held in place by a bronze ferrule cast in the shape of a Turk's head knot. The metal had taken on a lovely blue-green patina.

The mug held a small disc of shaving soap.

Rosalind was surprised they still made such a thing.

It seemed exotic. She inserted the brush, and worked up a little lather in the bottom of the cup. Then brushed some on her upper lip. She adored the smell of it. Masculine, she thought, but not the least bit

overbearing. She brushed a dab on her cheek. It felt a bit cold. Tingled a little. Some menthol in it, maybe.

Nigel was old-fashioned, obviously. None of those trendy shaving gels, for him. She pictured him using one of those long straight razors, and honing it first, on a big leather strop.

A traditionalist, then.

But which traditions?

The nautical ones, she thought. Traditions of duty, like standing one's watch, and assisting those in distress. And traditions of honor, like allowing women and children first. Then going down with the ship.

Or not.

Few sea captains went down anymore, she suspected. The act seemed less noble, somehow, now that their ships were fitted with emergency radios, so they could readily summon air-sea rescue. Seemed a bit pointless, going down. Melodramatic, even.

Mariners were no different than other men. Their traditions had a way of changing, once they acquired a few power tools.

She laughed.

Clinging to those romantic traditions suddenly seemed rather quaint. Childlike, almost, considering the more ruthless practices she had grown accustomed to, inside the traditional bastions of power, where a more pragmatic code of ethics prevailed. It was lifeboat ethics, really.

Every man for himself.

There was never any question of whether women and children went first. All of the available places were reserved for men.

Her faculty tenure had seemed like a lifeboat, of sorts. It offered security, and the promise of a guaranteed place. She had spent years clinging to the notion. Treading water, for the most part, while she waited to be invited aboard, and offered a seat.

God. She wondered what could have possibly possessed her.

Why had she wanted so badly to join them? The men who sat on her tenure committee weren't the sort of people she'd feel comfortable sharing a lifeboat with.

She knew that, now.

But she had been devastated, at the time, when they'd cut her adrift. In large part, because she simply hadn't seen it coming. In fact, she had come to believe that they enjoyed having her around. But it was the sort of affection that one accords a pet.

And there was really no place for pets. Not aboard a lifeboat.

Of course, Nigel lived outside of all that, living the sailing life. After all those sunsets at sea, he was bound to be a romantic at heart.

Just like her.

She could hardly wait to meet him.

The fresh produce must have arrived while Rosalind was taking her shower. When she entered the kitchen, Helen was checking through the order, unpacking the crates of fruit and vegetables as if they were Christmas presents. She seemed delighted.

“Wow! Check this out!” Helen held up a huge, ripe mango. She spun it around in her hand. “Isn’t that something?”

Rosalind smiled. “Lovely.”

She wondered why Helen was wearing rubber boots in the kitchen. She’d gone a little feral, no doubt, living in her cabin the woods. She looked like a logger, actually, with her heavy lug-sole boots, checked flannel shirt, and baggy brown denim pants.

The outfit didn’t even match.

“Probably from Brazil...” Helen gently eased the mango back into its nest, inside the wooden box.

Helen adored mangoes. The growth of the business had proved a blessing in that respect, at least. Now, she could order whatever she wanted from the best gourmet greengrocer in Portland.

It hadn’t been that easy, in the beginning.

Anything beyond leaf lettuce seemed to require a trip over the mountains, to one of the supermarkets near the university. Dwayne

invariably made the run. And he was hopeless. He'd take the day off, basically, and then forget half of the items on the list. He'd come back with collard greens instead of spinach. Or, mint instead of basil. Hard green pineapples.

It drove her crazy.

Out of sheer desperation, she began cultivating her own sources of local produce. None of the foggy, coastal farms could grow vegetables commercially. Many had handsome gardens, however, which produced far larger crops of certain vegetables than their owners could consume. So everyone was constantly trading. Tomatoes for baby lima beans. Spinach for red chard. Almost anything for Clinton's pork.

Helen had gradually worked her way into the loop.

It was an informal thing. One woman grew a variety of heirloom tomatoes, and brought in several boxes a week during the season. Another brought Italian romano green beans, endive, and leeks. Her neighbors came to know what she could use over the years. Alas, the growing season was short, and supplies always uncertain.

Unlike now.

She resisted the urge to take another peek at the mangoes, and set down her invoice.

"I bet you could do with a nice, big latté," Helen offered.

Rosalind sighed. “Could I ever.”

“Let’s go out front. It’ll just take a minute to heat up the machine.”

Helen started toward the dining room. “There’s something I’m dying to show you.”

Rosalind followed after her. “What...?”

“I resurrected your herb garden. Come look.”

The dining room was fitted with two large picture windows, facing the highway, which the fisheries supply had once used to showcase merchandise. A wide display shelf ran their full-length, raised a foot above the floor. It was partitioned off on the inside by a series of beveled-glass doors, capped with an ornate cherrywood railing.

From the beginning, they had been divided over what to do with it. Dwayne once proposed ripping all of it out, and using the added floor space to fit in a few more tables. Needless to say, Helen had vetoed that option out of hand. But she could come up with nothing better than benign neglect, herself.

Then Rosalind came up with the brilliant idea of turning it into an herb garden. Not merely as decoration for the window, but an actual working garden, which would grow the herbs used in the kitchen. Rosalind envisioned it becoming one of the signatures of the restaurant. She particularly liked the idea from a marketing standpoint, since the

herbs offered a highly visible, yet understated way of emphasizing that the restaurant was committed to using as many fresh ingredients as possible.

But the plants hadn't done very well.

Even though the windows faced south - what with foggy days in the summer, and all the cloudy ones in the winter - the herbs never really got enough light. They grew so grudgingly that Helen always felt guilty, depriving them of their hard-won foliage. After Rosalind returned to the university, Helen had more pressing tasks to tend to, and all of the plants died.

Except for the rosemary.

Helen put in a few philodendrons, plus a few nautical items that Blanche Pease had left behind - some old bait netting, a few fishing floats - and let it go at that. Still, that stubborn little rosemary plant managed to survive, somehow, despite years of neglect. And, in doing so, it kept the idea of the herb garden alive.

It was shortly after Rosalind's last visit, almost four years ago, that Helen decided to try again. She couldn't defend her window display. It was undeniably tacky.

The menu was beginning to demand more fresh herbs, anyway.

On the advice of one of her customers, she tried using some high-intensity discharge lamps to augment the natural sunlight. The metal

halide bulbs were identical to those installed in commercial greenhouses, and the herb garden flourished under them. Rosalind's rosemary had grown into a gnarled bonsai tree, almost three feet high.

Rosalind seemed quite taken by it.

"God. Look at it. It's perfect!"

"The lights made all the difference," Helen explained. "We harvest basil, thyme...almost everything, really. Even in the winter."

Helen had originally favored perennials - tarragon, thyme, sage, mint, three kinds of oregano - but she soon discovered that many supposedly annual plants behaved exactly like perennials, under the influence of the lights. As long as she maintained a constant photoperiod - by burning the lamps progressively longer, as winter approached - the plants never bolted. One of her basil plants was three years old.

"I've started harvesting them at night, in front of the customers," Helen continued. "It's become part of the show. We take a little wicker basket, out front. Snip off a few sprigs of this. A few of that. Then, carry them back to the kitchen, past all the tables."

Rosalind thought it seemed a little out of character. Helen was not the theatrical type.

"You do this, yourself?"

“Me? Well, sure...sometimes. Janice usually does it, though. Most of the customers think she owns the place, anyway.”

Helen went to make their latté.

The espresso machine was a relatively recent addition. Although Rosalind hadn't visited the restaurant in ages, she hadn't stopped buying things for it. The antique copper coffeemaker had simply arrived one day, in a sturdy olivewood crate, shipped all the way from Italy. The big food processor had come the same way, only shipped from France.

Helen understood. For Rosalind, shopping was therapy.

Usually, she bought wine. She'd sometimes spend a weekend in the California vineyard country, and buy twenty or thirty cases, just to cheer herself up. Helen certainly didn't object. The restaurant was going through more wine than ever, and Rosalind had excellent taste. But she hadn't sent any wine for several months. So maybe she really was starting to feel better.

Helen hoped so. The cases had arrived by the truckload, she recalled, around the time Rosalind lost her tenure. She had taken it pretty hard. Helen imagined that she'd hear all about it, soon enough.

“Heard from Dwayne?” Rosalind asked.

Helen had heard nothing for years, other than Christmas cards. Dwayne never wrote anything on the bottom. She wrote less and less, herself.

She shook her head.

“You?”

“Not really,” Rosalind replied. “He left a message on my answering machine, maybe...six months ago? Something about tax credits on solar-powered desalinization plants. God. In Peru, all of places. I never called back.”

Helen was amused. Rosalind would be the last person to invest in another one of Dwayne’s schemes. He must have been desperate.

“He actually approached you? For money?”

“Well, only indirectly. You know what he’s like. He could never be as straightforward as that. I think he wanted to chat more than anything else. He sounded pretty depressed. I doubt he has many friends.”

Helen sighed.

She wasn’t about to start feeling sorry for Dwayne. Of course, he didn’t have any friends. He’d used them up. Like an addict, she thought, who needed to finance a never-ending succession of shady deals, and resorted to hustling family and friends, when he didn’t have the cash to score on his own.

Only Dwayne's habit was insatiable. Unlike an alcoholic, who could consume only so many bottles of booze, or a junkie, who could shoot up only so many milligrams of heroin, Dwayne could never have enough money. Making more of it only got him in deeper. Those other addictions had finite limits, at least. Even the heaviest user would ultimately top out, at some point, which at least kept open the possibility of achieving some kind of stasis.

"I drove past his wind farm, on the way up," Rosalind related, her face suddenly animated. She gave a little laugh. "What's left of it, anyway."

The windmills had been Dwayne's first, grand venture, after he quit the restaurant. Helen had almost forgotten. Rosalind had actually bought one.

"I thought they repossessed everything," Helen said.

"Only the top bits. Nobody in their right mind would consider salvaging the poles. Dwayne didn't skimp on the cement. Those babies are really in there. He got that part of the engineering right, at least."

There had been eighty windmills in all.

Helen had only seen photos. Rosalind had tried to convince her to drive down for the start-up ceremony - Dwayne even sent her a formal invitation, suitable for framing - but neither of them could appreciate

how hard she had to work that first year, running the business on her own, trying to keep the doors open.

It was a twelve-hour trip, at least. What was she supposed to do? Close the restaurant?

She hadn't missed much, apparently. The wind failed to materialize on the gala occasion, so nothing happened when they cut the ribbon, and released the brake. The ceremonial windmill just sat there. As did the investors, who had hoped to see it start turning, and begin earning them a return. Eventually, they gave up, and simply walked away. A portent of what was to come, perhaps, when the windmills failed to produce much power.

Although not for lack of wind. The wind projections for the site proved perfectly reliable, in the end. While the turbines did not. Most of the rotors failed within the first few months - some of them rather dramatically - when vibration from the poorly balanced blades caused the main thrust bearings to disintegrate, and the generators literally ground to a halt.

To be fair, the endless technical problems were hardly Dwayne's fault. The technology was new, and he knew little about it. His older brother, Malcolm, had chosen suppliers for the machinery several months before Dwayne joined the partnership. As it turned out, Malcolm

knew nothing about wind turbines, either. But he knew an attractive tax shelter when he saw one.

“God. You should see it,” Rosalind continued. “All the poles are starting to rust. You can’t help but notice them from the freeway. There’s no trees, or anything, so they really stand out. Especially, early in the morning, when they cast shadows on the grass. Rows of them. Like shadows off tombstones, in a hilltop cemetery.”

“You’d think there would’ve been something in the lease about cleaning up the site,” Helen said.

Rosalind shrugged. “Probably was.”

Dwayne never could clean up after himself, Helen recalled.

“I suppose the only thing that will get rid of them now, is rust,” Rosalind added, resignedly. “How long do you think it will take?”

“What? Before they rust away completely?”

“Sure. It should eat through them pretty fast, don’t you think? Now that it’s gotten started?”

The poles would rust as rapidly as Helen’s old Honda, Rosalind thought. Several years ago, when she’d last seen it, there had only been a few pits in the paint. Now, the whole car was riddled with holes, many of them big enough to put a finger through.

Helen loved the decrepit little car, apparently. She always parked it in exactly the same space. The gravel surrounding it was streaked with rust.

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up,” Helen said. “The climate’s bone dry down there. I doubt they’ll disappear anytime soon.”

Rosalind sighed.

Helen would understand how rust worked, she imagined. Especially, the part that moisture played in it, having spent the last fifteen years living on the coast, paddling around on the river, and mucking about in the mud, and all.

But the poles were Dwayne’s responsibility. Not hers. She couldn’t remove the one that supposedly belonged to her, even if she wanted to. She had no idea which one it was.

“I visited the site once, when they were still installing the turbines,” Rosalind related. “For no particular reason, really. I just thought I’d walk around, see how things were going. After awhile, I began to wonder which machine was mine. But, of course, they all looked exactly alike.

“So later, I asked Dwayne if he was going to number them, or something. You know what he said? That it was small-minded of me to

dwell on individual windmills. That they were mere brushstrokes, once you focused on the big picture.”

Helen grinned. “He said virtually the same thing to me, once.”

“You’re kidding! When?”

“Oh, a couple weeks after I kicked him out. When he was staying over at your place. He’d prepared a little speech, about his reasons for leaving. He said the restaurant wasn’t *big* enough for him. And that he needed a larger canvas.”

“It’s perfect,” Roz said, clearly delighted.

“What?”

“Think about it. A larger canvas...? The big picture...?”

Helen couldn’t see the connection.

“Don’t you see? Dwayne fancied himself an artist! And, since he liked to think big, he chose landscapes. God. I love it. With his windfarm, he actually set out to transform *landscapes*.”

Helen had to laugh. “I guess he picked the wrong art teacher, then, didn’t he? Malcolm taught him how to be an artist, all right. A damn *con artist*.”

Surprisingly enough, Rosalind hadn’t lost any money. Malcolm had structured the shares in such a way that investors would never be out of pocket.

The windmills cost \$80K apiece. Rosalind had put down 25%, or \$20K, and signed a non-recourse promissory note for the balance. Then, she immediately recovered her initial outlay by claiming a series of special investment tax credits, which were meant to encourage the development of the solar energy sector. Not coincidentally, these credits totaled 25% of the total investment, or \$20K. The end result was that she became the proud owner of an eighty thousand dollar windmill, without paying a cent for it.

And she would never be required to make another payment.

As soon as the windmills began generating electricity, they would also generate revenue. According to Dwayne's projections, the income would be sufficient to service the debt on the machinery, cover necessary maintenance costs, state and local taxes...everything, really.

Malcolm had a guaranteed contract to sell the power. Under the provisions of the new legislation, public utilities were required to purchase any available solar power, before investing in any new coal, or oil-fired power plants. The rates were set by statute, and linked to the utilities' replacement costs, which, in turn, reflected the cost of conventional sources of energy.

Hence, oil prices.

Contrary to all of the analyst's estimates, the price of oil slumped drastically, soon after the windmills came on line. From \$35 per barrel,

down to \$18. With a reduced rate of return, and recurring problems with the rotors, the income generated by the windmills didn't come close to covering the costs.

Malcolm's investors weren't prepared to cover them. A free ride was one thing, but going out of pocket...well, that was another matter entirely.

So all of the them walked.

Rosalind had no choice but to do the same, and default on her note. The foreclosure left a blemish on her credit record, which had been spotless - as pristine as those rolling California hills - until Dwayne and Malcolm came along. She was distraught over it for weeks, afterward. However, since it was a non-recourse note, the only real consequence was that she lost her windmill. She'd never known which one it was, anyway. So it wasn't as if she'd grown attached to it, or anything.

Still.

When they repossessed it, she wished they would have taken the pole.

"Any idea what Dwayne's been up to?" Helen asked.

Rosalind shook her head. "Last I heard, it was fish farming. Something about growing tilapia in sewage treatment ponds. In the desert, somewhere. Arizona, I think."

They heard footsteps ascending the stairs, then the sound of the attic door opening overhead. Sophie fetching her diapers, no doubt.

“When do you usually start working?” Rosalind asked, having failed to notice the chicken stock simmering in the kitchen.

“Oh, anytime now,” Helen sighed.

“Well, just so you know. I’m planning on earning my keep.”

“Okay...”

They once again heard footsteps on the stairs, descending this time, followed by the sound of the door opening in the kitchen.

“Out here,” Helen called.

“Sorry about the nappies,” Sophie said, joining them at the table. She seemed a little haggard. “I couldn’t drag myself out of the bunk.”

Helen waved it aside. “How’d it go last night?”

“Terrific. We sold close to thirty pizzas.”

“That’s not bad.”

Rosalind was puzzled. “I thought you were closed on Wednesday.”

“Well, we are. Sort of.”

When Helen decided to drop Wednesdays, she had offered the evening to her employees as compensation. They had formed a cooperative venture to keep the business open, as a kind of coffeehouse,

and a venue for people to play music. It had proven popular over the summer. Sophie's New York deli-style pizza had a lot to do with it.

Sophie was still apologetic. "I suppose you noticed, we didn't mop the kitchen floor."

Helen nodded.

One of the stipulations she'd placed on the venture was that she would find the kitchen spotless in the morning. Admittedly, the exercise was a bit pointless when it came to the floor. On Thursdays, she promptly spattered it with chicken grease, anyway. They always mopped the kitchen again, just before dinner.

"Don't worry about it," she said.

"Makes me so mad!" Sophie growled. "Nigel promised he'd do it. But he smoked dope, instead, and wound up playing his Maori drum all night. I had to mop the dining room, myself."

In addition to her Wednesday stint, Sophie had been taking all the overtime she could get. She and Nigel planned to leave for French Polynesia in the spring. They were saving money for the trip.

Sophie was earning most of it. Her parents owned a delicatessen in New York City, so Sophie had the business in her blood. As a result, Helen had her working both ends of the restaurant. In the afternoon, she baked the rolls and most of the desserts. Then she shed her apron, and waited tables at night.

“I’ve been working really hard,” Sophie added. “You’d think Nigel would be a little more considerate.”

Helen had little work to offer Nigel, other than mopping the floor. She’d found a few odd jobs for him, over the summer, which had brought in a little extra. He had rebuilt her outboard motor, for instance, and done some long overdue maintenance on the pile moorings. He had also been supplying her with fresh crab, after resurrecting a few of the old crabpots that were stored upstairs.

That income was almost at an end, however. The crabs were sensitive to salinity, and most of them migrated out to sea during the winter, when the river became swollen with runoff. The market price would plummet in a few weeks, anyway, once the commercial crab harvest got underway.

Lately, Nigel had been spending most of his time just looking after Noah, and working on their boat.

Plus smoking dope, apparently.

“Feel up to starting a few hours early?” Helen asked.

Sophie grinned, and rubbed her hands together. “You bet. That’d be great.”

Helen already had a few tasks in mind. Processing twenty-five pounds of onions. Adding the peelings to the stock. Starting on the

chicken salad for Rick Pepper. She spent a minute going over the details with Sophie.

“I’ll get started myself, as soon as I finish the menu.”

When Sophie arose from the table, Rosalind couldn’t help noticing that her outfit virtually matched Helen’s. Heavyweight plaid flannel shirt, and identical camel-brown canvas pants. Rubber boots. Sophie had accessorized, however, and added a pair of bright red elastic suspenders. She was a tall strong-looking woman. Obviously an outdoorsy sort. Rosalind could picture her handling a chainsaw with ease. Or handling a sailboat during a storm.

She could understand what Nigel might see in a woman like that.

Still.

“Sounds as if they’re not getting along too well,” Rosalind said.

“Oh...I wouldn’t say that.”

Living together aboard a small sailboat would strain even the closest relationship, Helen imagined. Not to mention having to share the confined space with a bawling infant. “I think Noah’s colic might have something to do with it,” she suggested. “From what I gather, he’s been a pretty unhappy camper the last few days.”

“But Nigel’s working too, isn’t he?”

“Sure. He’s my janitor.”

Helen felt obliged to begin working herself. She walked over to the waitress station and fetched the notebook computer, which she used to compose the menus. A thick stack of old menus was stored underneath it. She grabbed those as well, thinking that Rosalind might enjoy looking through them. She carried everything back to the table.

The last time Rosalind visited the restaurant, four years ago, Helen had still been writing the menu by hand, with an india ink calligraphy pen. Just the master, which she'd then have xeroxed in town. On one of her better days, they almost looked professional. Yet, more often than not, she'd have to hurry the job, and would mess up the spacing on one of the entrées, smudge something, or allow the lines to droop noticeably as she worked her way across the page.

By then, the menu had already grown more elaborate. Many of the new dishes called for more description, which forced her to use a finer hand in order to fit the extra words onto the page. Even with reading glasses, the task had become a strain. Rosalind had noticed, apparently. Shortly after her departure, the computer arrived unsolicited, like the espresso maker, only shipped from Texas.

The computer-generated menus were rather industrial, Helen thought. Yet, the customers seemed to like them. In fact, they had begun taking them home as souvenirs.

Rosalind began leafing through the stack.

The computer had proven to be one of Rosalind's better purchases. Helen had little use for recipes, but the menu descriptions were another matter. Even though they were always brief, they took forever to write. As Rosalind liked to point out, the menu was essentially advertising copy. So the words had to be chosen with care, or the entrée would go unsold. Some things, of course, were best left unsaid. Phrases like 'tender' beef, for instance. Or 'fresh' broccoli.

With several thousand menu descriptions already stored in the computer, it was seldom necessary to write anything completely original. Even when she tried something 'new', Helen would often find that the entrée had already made an appearance, in one guise or another. She could usually scroll through the 'hits', which the computer kindly selected from the database, and find something similar to what she had in mind. Then, with a few minor changes, taking into account the ingredients on hand, she could assemble the evening's menu in remarkably short order.

She printed one out, and handed it to Rosalind.

Thursday November 10  
AT THE  
**CRAB POT CAFE**

Smoked Salmon Soup  
or  
French Garlic Soup  
with chanterelles en croûte and shaved parmesan cheese

Green Salad of the Day  
with radicchio, asiago, and thyme vinaigrette

Roast Smoked Loin of Venison  
with braised red cabbage and cranberries  
over wild rice and pine nuts  
or  
Dungeness Crab Flan  
with shallots, spinach, and pink oyster mushrooms  
on crisp russet potato croquette  
or

Grilled Lime Chicken  
with leeks and white chanterelle mushrooms  
over lime-infused linguine and mixed mesclun greens

Roast Pork Loin in Pastry  
in morel mushroom sauce  
with Northern Spy apples, wilted red chard, and hickory nuts  
or

Crab Pot Paella  
casserole-style, spicy saffron risotto  
with chorizo, prawns, black mussels, and Alaskan king crab  
or

Halibut-Wrapped Yaquina Bay Oysters  
lightly broiled, with heirloom tomatoes  
marinated red onions, asiago, and pecorino romano cheese

Baked Forelle Pears  
with hickory nut brittle and crème brûlée  
or

Hazelnut Cheesecake  
with dark espresso chocolate sauce

PRIX FIXE \$60 - SERVICE NOT INCLUDED

“Where’s the beef?” Rosalind asked, jokingly.

“We’ve got venison. Same difference.” Having two red meat dishes made the menu too heavy, Helen thought. Besides, beef was boring. No matter what she did with it, it always seemed to taste the same.

“Halibut-wrapped oysters. That’s what I’d pick,” Rosalind said.

“You know, Roz, to tell you the truth, I’ve been thinking that maybe we shouldn’t be serving so much fish. I ordered five whole salmon for the weekend. Seems like too much.”

“Why? As long as you sell all of it. What’s...”

“But there’s hardly any fish left! Remember when we first started out? How we’d barbecue all that coho salmon, every weekend? Well, now they’re on the endangered species list. Doesn’t that bother you? I mean, it’s partly our fault, isn’t it? We sure went through a lot of them.”

Rosalind recalled how the alderwood smoke would always get in her eyes, while she tended the outdoor barbecue grill, brushing the coho salmon fillets with honey and lemon sauce. How her hair would always smell like smoked fish, afterward.

She pleaded innocence. “How’s it our fault? All we did was cook them.”

Rosalind could think of lots of reasons why the salmon were in trouble. But she didn't feel particularly well-qualified to assign blame.

Most of the rivers had been crucified before she had even been born. So, who could she blame for that? Her parents? And who had silted up the spawning streams? Or polluted them with pesticides? Or fertilizers, road sludge, sewage, herbicides, and God knows what else?

Everyone, really.

"People have to eat, Helen. It's simply a fact. Not anyone's 'fault'."

"But we encouraged overconsumption! Just think of the aroma of our barbecued salmon...it's almost irresistible, isn't it? If it weren't for that, how many of our customers might have gladly stayed home, watched football, and boiled hot dogs for dinner? We could have saved a lot of fish, Roz. Even a few hundred might have made a difference. Each one lays a lot of eggs, you know."

Rosalind sighed. "So, you'd actually take fish off the menu?"

"Of course, not! I don't want to take fish off the menu! They're some our best entrées. I just want people to order a little less of them, that's all."

Rosalind was beginning to get frustrated. "This is silly. When people come over to the coast for dinner, they think 'fish'. There's not

much you can do about that. If there's seafood on the menu, they'll continue to order it."

"But...there's no fish here! They're all gone! We serve salmon shipped in from Alaska. Tuna from Hawaii. Sea bass from Chile. Our prawns come from Thailand, and our mussels from New Zealand. All of which we happen to order out of Portland."

Helen hadn't served any locally-caught seafood in months. Only a handful of regional wholesalers had survived the collapse of the fishery. Unfortunately, all of them were trucking their fish directly to Portland since the supply was too erratic to warrant regular, local delivery service.

An increasing percentage of the catch was being sold right off the boat. The nicest fish, usually, and obviously fresher than anything shipped back from the city. But she couldn't spare the time to drive down to the all-weather harbor at Coos Bay. The round trip took almost two hours. Even then, she couldn't be assured of coming back with any fish.

The dramatic depletion of the fishery had been widely publicized for years. Yet, the news hadn't registered, apparently. Rosalind was right. The customers still expected to find fresh seafood when they came to the coast.

Helen chalked it up to wishful thinking.

Such people would be encouraged, no doubt, every time they visited the seafood section in the supermarket, and saw a reassuring bounty of fish, artfully arrayed atop a bed of crushed ice. “The ocean must not be in such bad shape, after all,” they’d think, wistfully.

They’d forget that half of it was farmed fish, raised in crowded pens like feedlot cattle, with all the attendant pollution. And forget how such fish had to be fed, with lots and lots of little baby fish, dredged from the sea.

“There was a terrific article about ocean overfishing in my NRDC newsletter,” she recalled. “Maybe we could use that. We could make copies, and insert them...”

Rosalind rudely cut her off. “Helen! Forget it! You can’t put something like that in the menu!”

Helen was a little taken aback by the vehemence of Rosalind’s response. She replied timidly.

“Why not...?”

“Because it’s rude! People come here to enjoy a lovely dinner. They shouldn’t be subjected to lectures about what they should, or shouldn’t eat. What? You want them to feel guilty?”

“I only meant it as a little reminder...”

“No, it’s crazy! It’s cholesterol, all over again. Remember that scheme? Back then, as I recall, you wanted to encourage people to eat *more fish.*”

Helen had forgotten that she’d lobbied for putting inserts in the menus, once before. But that was ages ago, during the onset of her low-fat phase. Rosalind was mistaken about the cholesterol, though. It was saturated fat.

Bacon grease, in fact.

Dwayne loved bacon. So he’d taken it personally, when she decided to stop using it, as an ingredient in her clam chowder.

They had kept the restaurant open six days a week, in the beginning, and served lunch, as well as dinner. Although their luncheon menu might have been well-received in a university town, it got mixed reviews, on the coast.

They’d barely been open a month, when she had her first big argument with Dwayne, over hamburgers. He had been fielding most of the complaints, since he generally worked out front, dealing with the customers.

“I don’t see that we have any choice,” he’d insisted. We have to give people what they want.”

The customers seemed to expect them. Helen couldn't deny it. They would scan down the lunch menu, looking over the list of deli sandwiches and homemade soups on offer, and then stare blankly at it, looking a little disappointed. Or, they'd merely push the menu aside, declaring that they already knew what they wanted, and then proceed to order a cheeseburger and fries.

Helen had strong feelings on the subject, however.

"Forget it. I'm not frying burgers, every day. End of story."

"How about fries? Can't we at least do that?"

Actually, they couldn't.

Helen was under the impression that the issue had already been settled, months before. Before they'd even opened the doors, in fact. The fire and safety regulations were strict when it came to grease. So they had decided against installing a deep-fryer, which would have required an expensive grease hood with fireproof double-walled ducting, and an automatic fire extinguisher system. Yet, somehow, Dwayne had failed to make the connection between french fries, and a deep-fat fryer.

Helen had no use for either, herself.

Retrofitting the kitchen was out of the question. Rosalind wasn't prepared to pay for it. The remodeling had gone way over budget, as it was.

As Helen continued to experiment, and make further changes in the menu - substituting yogurt for heavy cream, for example, or stripping the fatty skin from the raw chickens - Dwayne began to complain bitterly about the direction in which the menu was moving.

But they'd been moving in different directions long before bacon fat became an issue. So Helen basically stopped listening. Which unfortunately left Rosalind in the position of having to hear Dwayne's complaints, and endure their arguments. She pleaded for a compromise.

Helen had offered to restore the bacon in her clam chowder, on the condition that a warning label was placed in the menu, informing customers about the health risks associated with saturated fat.

She hadn't meant it seriously.

"I don't know, Roz. I guess after living so close to ocean, and rowing on the river all the time...I feel bad about the fish, that's all. Once they're all gone, what are the pelicans going to eat?"

"Maybe you can teach them to eat bread," Rosalind suggested.

Helen threw up her hands. "Maybe it's time we went to work," she said, sliding back her chair.

Rosalind didn't think her suggestion was that unreasonable. The gulls had learned to eat bread. Why not the pelicans? That's how evolution worked, she thought. Species either adapted, or they died out.

Granted, the rules had changed somewhat.

Survival of the 'fittest' now included 'fitting in' with humans. There was no way around it. The animals had to be prepared to make compromises.

"Honestly, though...it doesn't seem fair to single out the fish," Rosalind said.

Helen had started walking toward the kitchen, and answered over her shoulder. "I don't know what you mean."

Rosalind trailed after her. "Lots of dead animals pass through the doors of this place. What about them? The deer, for instance. I mean...you've still got venison on the menu."

Helen stopped, and gawked at her in disbelief. "The *deer!* Are you kidding? They're bloody pests!"

Rosalind sighed.

She felt a little guilty about offering the venison. But Helen was right. If the deer didn't have enough sense to stop eating lettuce, and everyone's flowers, they'd simply have to face the consequences.

There was no stopping evolution.

Rosalind wound up wrapping the oysters, with little sheets of halibut. All one hundred and fifty of them. They looked marvelous, she thought. The thinly sliced fish was translucent, and revealed the green sprigs of chervil she'd tucked underneath.

Helen came up and peeked over her shoulder.

"Are they done, yet?"

Rosalind tilted up one of the trays to show off her handiwork.  
"Just finished."

"Could you make a quick run into town?"

"Sure. What for?"

"Coffee. I'll ask Nigel to give you a hand. There's a tub of chicken salad, too."

"Oh...is Nigel here?" Rosalind wondered how she could have missed him.

"I saw him rowing in," Helen explained. "He's probably tying up the dinghy."

Rosalind hurriedly stripped off her apron, and went to freshen up. She didn't want to meet Nigel smelling like a fishmonger.

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As it turned out, they only had to make one stop. The espresso cafe roasted their coffee right on the premises, and Helen's order was ready and waiting when they arrived. The beans were still warm.

The copy shop shared the same building on the waterfront. Rosalind took the menu next door to be xeroxed while Nigel unloaded the chicken salad.

Nigel seemed somewhat despondent, and had said little during the drive into town. He'd ferried Noah ashore, along with a bounceable baby chair, and installed him in the dining room before they left. The kid seemed awfully crabby. Nigel and Sophie had barely spoken two words to each other.

Rosalind learned that there would be a twenty minute wait for the menus. It made no sense to leave without them. She returned to the espresso side, and asked Nigel if he was in a hurry to get back.

He shrugged. "Reckon not."

"Why don't we get some coffee? Then go for a walk on the beach," she proposed. "I haven't been by the ocean in ages."

Nigel seemed reluctant.

"Or we could drink it here, if you'd rather."

“No, it’s not that,” he said. “It’s just...I don’t have any folding with me...” He dug both hands into the pockets of his pants, and managed to find only a few coins. “Nah. Just shrapnel.”

Rosalind smiled. Nigel was on a tight budget, she realized. She fished inside her big mesh purse, and pulled out a credit card. Then grasped him lightly by one wrist, and led him in the direction of the pastry case.

She proceeded to order a non-fat decaf latté, and a pine nut biscotti. Nigel remained true to his colonial roots, and opted for Earl Grey tea - with milk - and a powdered-sugar encrusted, fresh blackberry scone.

“Looks brilliant, eh?” he said.

Rosalind adored his accent.

She wasn’t quite sure what to make of him. Outwardly, he resembled a hippie, which naturally put her off a bit. He had a full beard, which was bushier and a darker red than the hair on his head. She found facial hair attractive, though. What really bothered her was that Nigel was wearing baggy woolen pants - military surplus, she thought - which were four or five inches too short.

To make matters worse, his boots were several sizes too large. They were old-fashioned, black rubber galoshes, with a row of collapsible

wire clasps down the front. None of the metal clips were fastened, and they jangled noisily as he walked ahead of her on the trail to the beach.

The abbreviated pantlegs were practical, she had to admit. The narrow path through the sand dunes was flanked by mounds of beach grass, and the long fronds were still dripping wet, even though the drizzle had stopped. The cuffs of her linen slacks soon soaked through, from brushing against them.

“It must be quite an adjustment, having little Noah on the boat,” Rosalind said, coming up to walk alongside him, as the path opened out onto a deserted sand beach.

Nigel laughed. “Reckon you got that right.”

“With Sophie working such long hours, you must be looking after him yourself most of the time.”

“I s’pose. But I’m all right with it. It’s starting to bother Sophie, though. The little bloke’s gotten used to me, and seems like every time she picks him up, he just starts bawling.”

“She did sound a bit upset this morning,” Rosalind related, curious to see his reaction.

Nigel furrowed his brow. “What’d she say?”

“Well, she was talking with Helen. Something about mopping the floor...”

“Aww, bloody hell,” Nigel groaned. “I was gonna do it, once we got Noah tucked in. But Sophie took off with the dinghy. I couldn’t get ashore.”

“She left you? Out on the boat?”

“Yeah. We’d run out of nappies. She got all huffy about it, and went in to use the washing machine.” He sighed, and dejectedly kicked the sand. “I reckon she mopped the dining room just so I’d feel guilty.”

Rosalind was thrilled by Nigel’s willingness to confide in her. Yet she was reluctant to dwell on the intimate details of his relationship with Sophie. Past experience had taught her the futility of holding lengthy discussions about the ‘other woman’. She reached out and gently squeezed Nigel’s arm. Then continued strolling along the beach.

When she came upon a comfortable-looking driftwood log, half buried in the sand, she sat down and began sipping her latté. Nigel soon joined her, and they sat in silence watching the sea. The ocean was almost as gray as the sky, and water looked cold and uninviting. There was a gloomy grandeur to it, of course. But the horizon was desolate.

Rosalind couldn’t see the attraction.

“Don’t you get scared, sailing such a small boat out there?” she asked.

“Sure. Sometimes. But it’s safer than driving the motorway, I reckon. There’s not so much traffic, eh? ‘Course, you need a seaworthy boat.”

Rosalind wasn’t very knowledgeable about boats. She couldn’t really ask him any intelligent questions about it, and was afraid she’d say something stupid, so she changed the subject.

“Helen happened to mention that you’re headed for French Polynesia this spring.”

“Yeah. Well, it’s on the way.”

Nigel didn’t seem too excited. “Aren’t you looking forward to it? I’d love to see Tahiti.”

“You’d be disappointed, I reckon.”

“Oh. How come?”

“Aw, the bloody frogs have trashed the place. Reckon it’s even worse, now. You know, after the riots.”

Riots? On Tahiti?

Rosalind hadn’t heard anything. Then again, she didn’t follow international politics all that closely. She always found the news stories too depressing, in the end. If people were rioting in paradise, she’d really rather not know about it.

“So. You’re not going there, I take it?”

“Nah. We’ll head south, and stop at Isles Gambier. The locals are a lot friendlier, I reckon. Even so, French Customs might not let me in. They arrested me, the last time I was down there. Useless sods.”

Rosalind was afraid to ask.

But rather curious.

“God. Whatever for?”

Nigel chuckled, recalling the event. “Man. Must be six or seven years, now. We sailed a small flotilla over from New Zealand. Fifteen boats, I reckon. A couple of mates actually made it ashore, and unfurled the banner on the atoll. IF YOUR NUKES ARE SO FUCKING SAFE, THEN TEST THEM IN FRANCE. It was brilliant. But naturally, they took offense.”

Rosalind couldn’t think of anything to say.

“What d’ya reckon? ‘Bout time to head back, eh?” Nigel suggested. “I’d better fetch Noah before the kitchen gets too hectic.”

As they were walking out to the car with the menus, Nigel suddenly thought of something. “Awright if I make a quick run to the chemists?”

Rosalind puzzled over it.

He pointed across the street. “The drugstore. Only take a second.”

“Oh. Sure.”

Nigel rummaged through his pockets again, and added up his change. He looked up sheepishly. "Reckon I could borrow a couple bucks? Just 'til we get back?"

She found him a five-dollar bill.

Rosalind delayed unlocking her car, and stood by the door, watching Nigel sprint across the highway. She loved the way he moved. He took long loping strides, with the assurance of an athlete. With grace, she might have said, if it weren't for his clumsy over-sized galoshes.

Nigel completed his purchase in less than a minute. On his return, he deposited it on dashboard - an aerosol can of shaving gel.

Rosalind stared at it.

Nigel noticed, and protectively stroked his beard. "Oh, it's not for me, eh? Never touch the stuff, myself. I hate all that aerosol crap."

"Oh..."

"Sophie uses it, though," he sighed sadly. "She's still a bit miffed that I gave her a hard time about buying some, a few days back. So she's been using my scrimshaw shaving brush, instead. I know, I shouldn't let it bother me, but, crap...it's a bloody nice brush! Real badger hair, eh? Just rankles me, her using it to shave her pits."

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Caroline seldom worked on Thursday, since it was a school night. Helen had Rosalind fill in for her, arranging salads, and assembling the entrées.

“Don’t worry about finding plates that match,” Helen said. “Caroline usually goes by color.”

Rosalind briefly surveyed the china, which was stacked on a massive wall-mounted rack that ran the full length of the serving counter. The plates were hopelessly jumbled together - a myriad of blues, yellows, and floral patterns in every conceivable shade of pink and green.

“By color...? How?”

“Well...this green one, for instance...” Helen pulled down a delicate, bone white porcelain plate rimmed with a band of dark green. “It would be perfect for the lime chicken.”

“Oh...”

“While this one...” Helen tilted up an ornate, pink and orange flowered plate from the adjacent stack. “This one has ‘Crab Flan’ written all over it. A perfect crab-claw pink wouldn’t you say? Of course, you couldn’t possibly use a plate like this with the venison. It would clash with the cranberries.”

Rosalind wondered if she should start taking notes. The green-edged plate was still sitting on the counter. Rosalind casually turned it over, and examined the back. Fabrique en Suisse, it said.

“What a lovely plate. Where’d you find it?”

Helen grinned. “One of those crates you sent.”

“No kidding...?”

Helen nodded.

Rosalind seemed pleased with herself. “Remember when?”

“Hard to say. There were so many of them.”

The restaurant had several thousand plates. Many of them dated back to the beginning, when they had decided against using institutional china, and began buying stacks of plates at estate and garage sales. It practically became a ritual. They’d pore over the classifieds and the local Penny Saver on Friday, and plan out the route. Then, set off at first light on Saturday, so they could make it back in time to open the restaurant for lunch.

Dwayne, needless to say, slept in.

Back then, it wasn’t unusual to find place settings for twenty-four, or even more, at some of the rural farms. Helen felt like a carpetbagger, buying up their family china.

The fishery had collapsed. The logging industry had been brought to its knees by the spotted owls. People were selling out in droves - many of them lifelong residents, like Blanche Pease, whose large extended family had gradually moved away, seeking better economic opportunities elsewhere.

For years, Helen dreaded the day when one of those emigrants might return to the restaurant - perhaps for a festive reunion dinner on the coast - and burst into tears, after being served an entrée on one of their grandmother's very own heirloom plates.

It was unlikely to happen, now.

Not after the last few price hikes. The rural, working-class people who had been forced out probably couldn't afford to eat at the Crab Pot Cafe anymore.

After Janice brought back the initial order for entrées, Helen demonstrated how to serve the venison.

"The idea is to build a little pyramid," she explained. "The pine nut pilaf goes on the bottom..."

Helen began pressing the rice mixture into a small spring-form mold, to shape it into a tapered square block, which would form the base of the pyramid. She arranged a bed of chard on the plate, using just four

of the ruffled red-veined leaves in the shape of four-leafed clover, and positioned the molded rice pilaf at the center.

“Next comes a layer of red cabbage. Then, a bit more rice. Mound it up a little, like this...” Helen advised, deftly wielding her spoon. “Finally, drape the venison around the top, like so...”

She wrapped the thinly sliced meat in an ascending spiral, leaving a little hollow at the apex, which she filled with a spoonful of the braised red cabbage and cranberries. She finished it off with a few flourishes of the vibrant red juice, dribbled in streaks across the plate.

Helen added a single sprig of chervil, almost as an afterthought, then straightened up, and took a step back.

“There. What d’ya think?”

Rosalind wasn’t sure.

It bore little resemblance to a pyramid. More like a miniature rice bungalow, roofed with meat. With such bold colors on the plate, the effect was dramatic.

“It’s practically a work of art,” she commented.

“Well...that’s sort of the idea...” Helen leaned toward the counter, and slid the plate a little further underneath the heat lamps, so the entrée wouldn’t get cold. “Sure. That’s it exactly. Food as *art*.”

Rosalind noticed a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

“We’re *very* avant garde, I want you to know,” Helen added, exaggeratedly lifting up one limp wrist, in a caricature of snobbishness. “Constructions like this are simply *all* the rage.”

“I see...”

“Only at the trendiest spots, of course. Where the food is ever so...*stylish*.”

“Oh, dear,” Rosalind sighed. Coming from Helen, the word ‘stylish’ was hardly a compliment. Given her general disdain for fashion, and disregard for style, Helen used the word ‘stylish’ as if it were an epithet.

Rosalind reached over, and patted her on the shoulder. “That bad, huh?”

Helen shrugged. “Yeah. Well. Seems a trifle decadent, doesn’t it? Eating works of *art*?”

“God. You simply don’t understand fashion,” Rosalind chided. “It’s all about fun. Feeling playful. What’s wrong with that? Really, Helen. Why make a big political issue out of it?”

Helen had to laugh. “Blame it on my mother. She always taught me not to play with food.”

When Janice came to fetch her venison, she clipped up order slips for five more.

Rosalind went right to work. She rather enjoyed doing the first few. But the venison bungalows got a bit boring, after she'd turned out a dozen, or so. After a dozen more, she felt like part of an assembly line.

Rosalind knew none of Helen's employees at the restaurant with the exception of Janice, who'd been there for ages. Then, Nigel and Sophie, of course. Now, on one elbow, she had someone named Izzy, doing the paella. On the other, Katy, doing the crab flan. Then further down, a woman whom she'd yet to meet, arranging the lime chicken. With a stream of wait staff plying the aisle behind her, she barely had room to move.

By the time Rosalind had assembled her forty-third, and thankfully her last, little pyramid, she could better appreciate Helen's ambivalence toward turning food into works of art. From the perspective of the kitchen, the edible creations clearly had more in common with kitsch.

What really bothered Helen, however, was that everyone thought the food actually tasted better, presented that way. Not being a visual person, Helen attributed it to trickery. Some sort of deceit, anyway. She couldn't accept that her cooking might be improved, merely by arranging it in a particular way on the plate.

"Nice touch with the venison," Helen offered.

Rosalind thought she was being sarcastic.

“No, really,” Helen assured her. “Janice said it garnered lots of compliments.”

Rosalind smiled appreciatively. Helen had changed back into her logging boots, she noticed.

“You headed home?”

Helen felt free to leave after the last of the entrées had been served. The customers would linger on for another hour, sometimes longer, and she entrusted Janice to look after their desserts, and lock up for the night. “Yeah, I’m beat. Are you all set upstairs? Find the blankets?”

Rosalind nodded.

“I have to harvest mushrooms in the morning, across the river,” Helen added. “Want to come? I’d be happy to row over, and pick you up.”

“Mushrooms...?”

“Chantrelles. I’ve got a good crop this year. Besides, you wanted to see my cabin, didn’t you?”

Rosalind could hardly refuse.

Helen didn’t mind rowing home in the dark. The lights in the dining room streamed out through the windows, and lit up the whole river.

During the summer dry season, there was seldom any significant current in the river, other than the tidal stream. It would turn regularly, flowing rhythmically in and out, almost as if the river were breathing. There was no hurry to it. Just twice a day. But in the winter, there was more urgency to its flow, and a kind of tension.

Helen could almost feel it.

The eddies from the two opposing streams caused tiny whirlpools to form, and she could hear them, off in the darkness, sucking down little gulps of air.

It made her think of Rosalind.

She'd certainly been tense, when she arrived. Even without the telltale streaks of mascara, the tension would have been evident on her face. And there were unmistakable signs of turbulence, just under the surface.

A little hard work in the kitchen had done her a world of good, Helen thought. Fussing over the venison was surely less destructive than the things she usually obsessed about. At least she hadn't droned on about Helga, all day.

Talk about progress.

## CHAPTER 6

### LIFE ON THE RIVER

Friday

“Feel like trying your hand at rowing?” Helen asked, offering Roz the middle thwart in the skiff. The boat was already crowded, its bottom crammed with pails of wild mushrooms, with barely enough room in between to squeeze their feet.

“You’d better,” Rosalind said. “I’ve already got a blister.”

“From what?”

Helen wondered what could have caused it. Rosalind hadn’t really done anything except harvest mushrooms. Helen had rowed the skiff across herself, after picking up Rosalind at the restaurant.

“Yesterday. Shucking the oysters.” Rosalind looked down, and rubbed the finger. “I’ve gotten a bit soft, I guess.”

Helen nodded.

It wasn’t just her hands. Rosalind was soft, all over. She had been complaining all morning. The woods were too wet. The rain parka made her sweat. The trail was too steep, and muddy. The hiking boots were too heavy, and stiff.

Nothing seemed to suit her, including Helen's little cabin. Rosalind had been diplomatic about it, but she clearly had no intention of spending even one night in the woods.

Admittedly, the cabin had a few flaws. Helen had built it herself, entirely from salvaged demolition timber. Some of the pieces hadn't fit together all that well. There were a few gaps, particularly around the stained glass windows, which were all different sizes, since she'd bought them one at a time, at various yard sales. But the roof had a long overhang, and the rain wouldn't come in. Not unless it was really windy.

"Won't mice get in?" Rosalind had worried.

There weren't any mice to speak of. Only chipmunks. And they much preferred staying outside, now that Nutmeg was on the prowl. In any event, the chipmunks and wood mice hardly posed a threat. But it wasn't just rodents that bothered her. Rosalind objected to sharing her space with virtually anything alive. She was afraid of the spiders in the outhouse, and all the ants, and mildew...even the stately Douglas fir trees that towered over the cabin.

"Won't the limbs come crashing through the roof?" she had asked.

They didn't weigh all that much. The branches invariably weakened and died before breaking off. Usually, the ones that hit the roof had already dried out. They weren't all that long, either. The stand of firs had never been thinned, and were now rather crowded,

considering their size. The trees had been forced to grow toward the light, and the side branches had stayed short, like bristles on a bottle brush.

Some were a hundred feet high, however, so the falling branches often gathered considerable momentum. In truth, there were a few substantial dents in the corrugated steel roofing.

Helen had taken adequate precautions. She'd designed the roof with an especially steep pitch, so that a falling limb would deliver only a glancing blow. Then installed a strong wooden beam under the peak, where the structure might suffer a direct hit.

Despite her confidence in the integrity of the roof, the branches made a frightful noise, bouncing off the sheet metal. Especially during a storm, when the wind began whistling through the trees, and sound of the rain beating on the roof had already put her on edge.

Sophie thought the noise was comparable to that on her sailboat, during a storm at sea, when the wind howled through the rigging, and the waves crashed mightily across the steel deck.

Although Helen would have preferred a roof which provided a softer landing, like cedar shakes, the metal was undeniably more practical. In addition to being puncture resistant, the smooth, self-cleaning surface was superior for gathering rainwater. There were plenty

of fir needles in her drinking water as it was. She could do without chunks of moss.

Her acreage had previously been logged, as had the rest of the river basin. A sawmill had been established on the river long before any roads were built, and the trees accessible from the water had naturally been the first ones taken. Few traces remained of the logging. Some of the more massive stumps on her property were still identifiable, but only as mounds, rich in fragmented, finely fissured wood chips. Some of the deposits were more than ten feet across.

As a result of the clear-cutting, some deciduous trees had gained a toehold along the river. Several acres along the bank were now thickly covered with alder, mixed with Oregon oak and ash. The stand of hardwoods supplied her with all the firewood she would ever need. She'd cut and stacked almost ten cords over the summer, just by cleaning out the deadfall, and pruning away the dead branches.

Originally, she had contemplated building the cabin closer to the river, in a small sunny clearing among the alders. Yet, attractive as the sunshine might be, it encouraged the undergrowth. The ferns in the clearing were chest high, and blackberries ran rampant. She had made a few half-hearted attempts to hack down the thorny blackberry canes

with a machete, but quickly discovered that chopping off the suckers only made the bushes grow back thicker than ever.

Clinton had advised her to use defoliant. Then burn the withered plants, and rototill the roots, before planting ryegrass.

But Helen was unwilling to use herbicides. She was afraid she'd poison her mushrooms. So she'd settled on the site under the coniferous canopy. The ground was barren by comparison, and blanketed with fir needles, which made it pleasant to move around.

The moist, moderate climate on the coast provided an excellent habitat for fungi, and Helen had discovered several choice edibles growing on her acreage, at the time she bought it. She had two kinds of chanterelles: the common orange chanterelle, *Cantherelles cibarius*, as well as *Cantherelles subalbidus*, the white chanterelle.

There were also numerous species of boletes, including *Boletus mirabilis*, or the Admirable Bolete. She had several patches of those, which produced a steady crop of choice, meaty mushrooms from September through December. The caps often reached five or six inches across. They were plentiful around fallen fir or western red cedar trees, and she had both.

The boletes were particularly good with pork, she thought.

Her grove of hardwoods produced abundant perennial crops of *Pleurotus dryinus*, or the Veiled Oyster mushroom, which grew directly on dead alderwood. They were delightfully aromatic mushrooms, and Helen much preferred them to the oysters which were being grown commercially - all of them varieties of *Pleurotus ostreatus*. The cultivated mushrooms were admittedly more tender, but Helen found them rather tasteless compared to the oysters she harvested in the wild. The commercial ones were grown on oat straw, under dim fluorescent light. Raised like that, they couldn't help but come out a little bland.

As Helen began harvesting more and more of the wild mushrooms to serve in the restaurant, she began experimenting with the chanterelles, to see if she could increase their number.

The visible mushrooms were merely the fruit. The fungus itself lived underground, and consisted of a mass of finely interwoven white threads, or mycelia. She began digging up some chunks of it, in the hope of establishing the chanterelles in additional areas, where the habitat seemed equally suitable. Over the course of several seasons, she transplanted close to a hundred budding mushrooms, along with a sizable piece of the surrounding dirt.

She had chanterelles all over, now. Propagated either by the spores, or by the mycelia in the ground, quite a few of the relocated mushrooms had taken hold, and eventually bore new fruit.

Buoyed by the success, she decided to take the experiments a step further. Her acreage was devoid of two highly-prized edible species that she truly coveted: namely *Craterelles fallax*, the Black Trumpet mushroom; and *Armillaria ponderosa*, the White Matsutake. She frequently came across both species, mushroom hunting on the coast, and saw no reason why they wouldn't grow on her land. So when the mushrooms came up the following fall, she began hiking through the woods, and digging up black trumpets and white matsutakes.

It was back-breaking work. She would sometimes have to hike for miles, before finding any. With each find, she'd have to trudge back to the car to fetch her long-handled shovel, and a stout container to hold the clump of dirt. Then she'd excavate a trough around the mushroom, so that she could remove the chunk of mycelia intact. She'd drag it out of the woods. Ferry the heavy containers across the river in the skiff. Haul them off to suitable sites on her acreage with a wheelbarrow. And finally, she'd commence watering them with water that she carried from the river, like a coolie, with two plastic buckets suspended from the ends of an old mop handle.

The black trumpets usually grew in mossy areas, under deciduous trees. The habitat in her grove of alder was similarly endowed with moss, so she planted most of the trumpets in there. The matsutakes seemed to prefer a sandier soil, under conifers. So she carried those a little further inland, and planted them under the Douglas firs.

She continued digging both species for two more seasons, with no apparent success. Then, as fall was approaching, almost three years to the day after she began transplanting them, she found her first black trumpet. A nice big one, nestled on the ground next to a decaying alder branch, which was covered with moss.

The crop was small that year - just five or six. She dutifully refrained from harvesting any, and let them drop their spores on the ground. The next season she harvested around fifty. With each succeeding year, as the mycelia became better established, the crop literally mushroomed. Helen now had more black trumpets than she could possibly use fresh, and had resorted to freezing them in bulk.

The black trumpets belonged to the genus *Craterelles*, which was closely related to the chanterelles, or *Cantherelles*. They tasted quite similar, but the black trumpets were wonderfully fragrant, reminiscent of apricots. They were especially nice with fish.

Much to her regret, not a single one of the white matsutakes that she brought back from the woods had taken hold. The habitat seemed eminently suitable. But it was all guesswork, really. And mushrooms were notoriously fussy creatures.

Helen had come across an interesting piece of trivia regarding another species which belonged to the genus *Armillaria*, in common with the white matsutake. Someone - a university mycologist, presumably - had discovered that *Armillaria mellea*, or the Honey mushroom, possessed mycelial strands which were over three hundred feet long. And four hundred years old. She could appreciate how such a creature might be somewhat set in its ways, and resist being moved.

In any event, Helen thought it unlikely that she'd try the matsutakes, again. They were much harder to find, now. The shovel had become problematic, as well. She needed a fairly large one, in order to dig a chunk of mycelia big enough to stand half a chance. However, the market price of white matsutakes had risen to the point where the people out gathering them had started carrying *guns*. Seemed a little foolhardy going up against them toting a long-handled shovel.

Even so, she hadn't cured herself of the habit of searching for the elusive matsutakes. She would often find herself scanning over the forest floor, trying to spot some, even through the windshield of her car.

Yet, she hadn't hunted mushrooms in the woods for several years. She barely had the time to harvest her own.

The current fall crop had reached its peak. Mushrooms sprouted and grew to maturity in a matter of days. They deteriorated rapidly if left in the ground, especially during wet weather. Helen hated to waste them, and tried to pick daily during the height of the season. But twenty acres was a lot of ground to cover, even though she knew exactly where to look. Helen was grateful that Rosalind had agreed to help. Between the two of them, they wouldn't have missed many.

Mercifully, the rain had held off while they were picking. However the fog had finally lifted, and coalesced into a steady drizzle. Rosalind looked pretty miserable. She had cinched up the hood of her parka, and scrunched herself between the buckets of mushrooms in the stern of the boat.

She hated getting wet, apparently.

Helen felt a little guilty for having dragged her along. But there seemed little point in apologizing for the rain. She couldn't think of anything soothing to say, and put her energy into rowing back across the river.

Rosalind's constant need for 'comfort' bore all of the hallmarks of an addiction. She became practically dysfunctional without it. The mere thought of discomfort was enough to make her feel anxious.

She felt exposed in a natural setting, Helen thought. As out of place as a declawed indoor cat, whose every venture into the great outdoors was accompanied by a certain degree of terror. And constant worry. It wasn't just the mice, or the spiders, or the falling limbs and rain - Rosalind lived in constant fear of feeling uncomfortable.

Helen found it maddening.

One of the excuses which Rosalind had given for being unable to stay in the cabin was that she couldn't plug in her hair dryer. It didn't seem to matter that she wouldn't be needing it, since she couldn't take a shower - the cabin was without one - Rosalind simply felt vulnerable without it.

To be fair, Helen hadn't built the cabin with the comfort of visitors in mind. She had made no attempt to duplicate the amenities available across the river at the restaurant, where electricity, propane, and pressurized water were available at the turn of a knob. She could take her hot meals and showers over there.

Installing even the simplest pressure water system on her acreage would require an electric pump, and a motor-driven generator to power

it. Helen didn't want to live surrounded by any of that. She liked to think of her land as a designated 'wilderness' area, where machinery of that sort was not permitted.

Naturally, she made allowances. Like borrowing Clinton's portable generator and a few power tools when she was framing the cabin. Or using a chainsaw to get in the firewood. But those exceptions always emphasized the need for the rule.

She hated the noise, more than anything else.

Helen seldom cooked anything on the days when the restaurant was closed, so she had no need for a kitchen. After finishing up on Sunday, she'd sometimes bring across a container of leftover soup. Then reheat it on the woodstove during the week. Most of the time she made do with yogurt, or cheese and fresh fruit, along with an occasional leftover dinner roll.

Nevertheless, she regularly made coffee. She had a Coleman stove, which she could use when the woodstove wasn't burning, and kept a chipmunk-proof sheet metal chest filled with dried fruit and nuts, melba toast, and all sorts of biscotti.

The cabin was not without its creature comforts. There was a lovely cherrywood bed, fitted with a thick goose-down duvet. Then, an oiled oak chair and matching table, with a tall kerosene lamp, fitted with

a parchment shade. Even an overstuffed armchair, with a nautical brass reading lamp beside it, which Nigel had bought for her at a marine chandlery in Portland. It was powered by a solar panel, suspended between two of the Douglas firs, almost fifty feet above the ground.

She needed nothing more.

Rosalind suddenly sat bolt upright in the stern of the skiff. “Helen! Look!” she shouted, through the hole in her parka.

The outburst caught Helen by surprise, and she was slow to look where Rosalind was pointing.

“What is it? An eagle?” Rosalind asked excitedly.

The bird had just taken a large fish from the river, and was carrying it aloft with deep, powerful beats of its wings, as if struggling under the weight of its catch.

Helen had to laugh.

Something really dramatic had to happen before Rosalind took notice of the natural world around her. Still. At least she’d noticed.

“An osprey,” Helen said.

Several gulls were in hot pursuit. They tried harassing it, in the hope that the osprey might release the fish, but were no match for it.

“Watch. Watch where it goes,” Helen urged.

The osprey flew off in the direction of the cabin, and alighted atop one of the tallest cedars, whose crown was bent over in a broad arc, affording a convenient perch.

“Must be a lot of fish scales up there. They always use the same tree.”

Helen got the skiff facing face upstream, so that Rosalind wouldn't have to twist quite so awkwardly in her seat. The tension in the river had disappeared overnight, and there appeared to be no current at all. The skiff sat quietly in calm water, drifting slowly upstream under the influence of a slight onshore wind. The river was seldom smoother. Its surface had taken on a dull metallic sheen in the gray light.

“It's starting to eat the fish,” Rosalind reported, still staring intently at the top of the cedar. The side branches of the tree formed a platform, of sorts, where the osprey could lay down its catch, and dine at leisure.

“They sometimes sit up there for hours,” Helen said.

Unfortunately, she couldn't wait that long before starting work. So Helen reshipped the oars, and resumed her stroke.

Rosalind turned and faced front.

She seemed exhilarated.

“God. Wasn't that something! It's amazing how they can catch fish with their talons like that. I don't think it even got wet.”

Rosalind had obviously forgotten how miserable she'd been, sitting out in the rain. She'd thrown back the hood of her parka, for the better view, and her hair was already dripping. Several strands had even stuck to her cheek. Yet, she didn't seem the least bit uncomfortable. She began trailing her hand gaily through the water, and laughing at the antics of the gulls.

Helen thought there might be hope for her, after all.

## CHAPTER 7

### REUNION

Friday

A cold, steady rain began pelting down, as Dwayne approached the coast. He had hoped to have a look at Xenogenics' breeding farm before checking into a motel, but he couldn't seem to find it.

The defroster on his rental car could barely cope with the condensation. Although he could see reasonably well through the windshield, the rest of the windows had completely fogged over. He could barely make out the buildings along the side of road. When he spotted the restaurant, he realized that he'd gone too far.

The road was too narrow to allow a safe U-turn, as the shoulder sloped off steeply on both sides, into impenetrable thickets of wild blackberries. The restaurant parking lot provided the first convenient place to turn around.

But he was reluctant to enter it.

Helen would be working in the kitchen, he imagined, making final preparations for dinner. Dwayne still hadn't decided whether to see her, or not. Either way, it seemed foolhardy to risk a chance encounter.

Although he could improvise when necessary, Dwayne never walked into important meeting without a few well-chosen words prepared in advance.

He simply wasn't ready to face her.

So he continued on, and turned around at the motel at the edge of town.

After reversing directions, the driver's side window was facing the river, and somewhat sheltered from the rain. He tried cracking it open. Some spray found its way inside, but not enough to warrant continuing to drive blind. He left it open a few inches, and slowed down for a closer look as he drove past the restaurant for the second time.

Helen had really spruced up the place. The last time he'd seen it, the entire building was badly in need of paint. But, instead of repainting, Helen had stripped the clapboard siding down to bare wood, then stained and varnished it, like she used to do with the antique oak chairs she found in flea markets, albeit on a much more massive scale. The windows and trim were still painted - now a dark forest green - which provided a nice contrast to the expanse of natural wood.

The building had always been rather dark inside, and the lights were already turned on, even though dusk was still an hour away. He noticed someone standing inside, staring out the dining room window. Right at him, in fact. But the figure was little more than a silhouette.

He couldn't tell.

At the first farm out of town, Dwayne noticed a small weather-beaten sign affixed to the mailbox post.

#### WEANER PIGS FOR SALE

Not *transgenic* piglets. Surely.

But the number on the mailbox matched. There were no other signs visible from the highway, and nothing to indicate that the property had any affiliation with Xenogenics. The lack of advertising was hardly surprising, however, given the company's preference for anonymity.

The little farm belonged to a fisherman, he recalled. Although he could picture the man's face, he couldn't seem to remember his name. Yet he hadn't forgotten the name of his fishing boat.

*Sweet Caroline.*

Dwayne had seen it daily, for two years, moored just outside the kitchen window with the name, *Sweet Caroline*, painted on the bow in bold flowing script.

He couldn't recall seeing any pigs on the property, though. It was twenty acres, at best, and fairly typical of the small holdings along the river. Except for few stands of live oak and scrubby second-growth alder, most of it was covered with thick hummocky grass.

The guy might have sold the place, of course. But judging by the age of the sign on the mailbox, whoever owned the farm had been raising hogs himself, long before Xenogenics came along. And, judging by the overall appearance of the place, it had always been a shoestring operation. Dwayne decided to take a few photographs, thinking that Bernie might take heart, once he saw what he was up against.

The farmhouse was a double-wide mobile home, which had long since rooted itself. A cluster of outbuildings had sprouted up around it over the years, in the rural equivalent of urban sprawl. Nonetheless, numerous objects remained homeless. A partially dismantled flat-bed truck, and a camper shell, propped up with a pair of oil drums. A vandalized washing machine. Old tractor tires.

One building was set off by itself. The breeding shed, most likely.

Unlike the other structures, whose galvanized sheet metal cladding had largely been overtaken by rust, Xenogenics' building was covered with somewhat more expensive enamel-finished siding. It looked almost new. Yet, despite its attractive, pastel yellow exterior, it was hard to imagine anything miraculous coming from such a place. If Dwayne were shopping for a new heart, he'd certainly look elsewhere.

After finishing the roll of film, he began to feel a little conspicuous, parked in plain view of the house. His presence would surely be noticed,

and arouse suspicion if he stayed too long, so he turned around and headed back into town.

But he had no idea where he was going.

The motel had nothing to offer. He'd probably wind up sitting in the tacky little room, watching television. The waterfront held some appeal. He never tired of watching the ocean, and the strong southwesterly would have raised a magnificent sea.

The weather was lousy, though.

Dwayne felt his shirt getting wet. Now that he'd reversed direction, the rain was coming in quite heavily through the open side window. It would be even windier on the waterfront, he imagined. Colder as well, with the wind coming off the ocean. He'd wind up watching the waves from inside the car, through all the condensation.

Damn.

He didn't want to drive around aimlessly.

As he began rolling up the window, he spotted a narrow gravel driveway. The track led through the blackberry bushes toward a small grove of trees, just off the highway, on the side opposite the river. He slowed the car to a crawl.

It was a roadside picnic area. There wasn't much to it. Just two tables and a galvanized garbage can - all of them chained up to the same stout pole. But there was plenty of room to park.

He decided to pull over.

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Dinner preparations were well in hand, so Helen joined Rosalind for a short break out front. It looked to be a busy night. The telephone rang, yet again.

Janice was clearly getting frustrated. All of the tables were already booked. She called across the dining room.

"Helen? I think you'd better deal with this one."

"Why? Who is it?"

"Alice Cherville. She wants a table for four."

Helen grimaced.

"Who's she?" Rosalind inquired.

"You remember Alice. From the Alder Inn?"

Alice Cherville ran one of the most popular bread-and-breakfasts in town. She had been encouraging her overnight guests to dine at the restaurant for years, including the lean years, when Helen had really needed the business.

Helen took the call.

“I’m sorry to have left it so late, Helen. I had them written down for next week,” Alice explained. “Of course, turns out it’s tonight. And it’s their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary!”

Helen could hardly refuse.

“Well...in that case, we’ll just have to do something a little special for them, won’t we?” She hurriedly scribbled the word ANNIVERSARY on one of the post-it notes, and showed it to Janice.

“Oh, don’t go to any trouble,” Alice entreated. “Your dinners are always special.”

“Hold on a second, Alice. I’ll find you a time.”

Janice had apparently concluded that a protest would prove futile, and was already pouring over the reservation book, making calculations.

“So...tell her eight-thirty, then,” Janice offered, grudgingly. “But that’s it, Helen. Book’s closed.”

When Helen returned to the table, Rosalind was looking over one of the menus.

“What entrée can I make tonight?” she asked.

“Take your pick,” Helen suggested.

Rosalind reexamined the list of entrées. “Let’s see. How about the salmon? That’s not another pyramid, is it?”

Helen laughed. “Not exactly.”

Friday November 11  
AT THE  
**CRAB POT CAFE**

Smoked Salmon Soup

or

French Onion and Garlic Soup

with chanterelles en croûte and shaved parmesan cheese

Green Salad of the Day

with endive, goat cheese, and lime vinaigrette

Grilled Lemon Chicken

with braised Savoy cabbage and orange chanterelle mushrooms  
over lemon-infused linguine

or

Applewood Smoked Pork Loin

in pear-ginger glaze

with garnet yams, hickory nuts and Forelle pears

or

Poached Chinook Salmon

in lemon and thyme balsamic vinaigrette

with shallots, baby lima beans, and black trumpet mushrooms

Mango Glazed Duck

with roasted red peppers and sliced mango  
over coconut basmati rice

or

Crab Pot Pie

baby octopus and snow crab sauté in pastry

with crème fraîche, wilted spinach, and wild oyster mushrooms

or

Roasted Garlic Steak Roulade

in red port wine sauce

with heirloom tomatoes and braised fall root vegetables

Baked Forelle Pears

with hickory nut brittle and crème brûlée

or

Hazelnut Cheesecake

with dark espresso chocolate sauce

PRIX FIXE \$60 - SERVICE NOT INCLUDED

When Caroline reached the restaurant, she immediately sought out Helen. The kitchen was deserted, and she found her out front with Rosalind, sharing a cup of coffee at one of the window tables.

Helen was acting silly. Giggling, and stuff.

“Somebody’s spying on our farm,” Caroline told her.

Helen just smiled. Then started laughing again. So Caroline emphatically raised her voice, demanding to be taken seriously.

“Helen! Listen!”

Caroline proceeded to relate the sequence of events. How she had been outside at the time - coaxing Xeno out of the blackberry bushes with a bucket of chicken scraps - when the car drove past, traveling very slowly. Then, how she’d witnessed the same vehicle return, just a few minutes later, and stop opposite the mailbox.

“I figure he’s lost, or something. So, once I get Xeno tucked in, I start walking out to the car. That’s when I see this big camera. He’s got his window rolled down, and he’s taking pictures of the house. Looking sinister, like. And, I’m like, ‘Whoa, sister!’

“So I ducked back inside the shed. I don’t think he saw me.”

Neither of them responded.

“Then, he turned around and left. Or, at least, that’s what I thought. You know, until I got cleaned up, and started walking to work,

and found out that he hadn't left at all. He'd just moved his car, a little further down the road."

"Maybe it was just a tourist, taking snapshots of the river," Rosalind suggested.

Helen thought it unlikely. She didn't want to embarrass Caroline, but her father's farm was hardly photogenic.

"No. Not there. Not in the rain."

"It was pretty scary," Caroline added, looking down at the floor, and scuffing her foot. "I had to walk right past his car."

Helen's tone was suddenly serious. "Did he approach you?"

Caroline shook her head. "No, nothing like that. He was like...hiding, you know? I surprised him, I think. As soon as he saw me, he rolled up his window really fast. The glass was all steamed up, so I couldn't see his face. But I could tell. He was watching me."

"I want you think carefully," Helen urged. "Have you seen his car before? In town, maybe? Or, hanging around the high school?"

Caroline rolled her eyes. "A white Ford Escort? Nobody notices cars like that."

"Well, you'd better start. If he comes back..."

"He never left!" Caroline pointed out the window. "He's still out there."

"Where?" Helen shifted around in her chair.

“Parked. By the picnic tables.”

Helen pushed aside her coffee, and stood up. “Okay, Caroline. Let’s go.”

“Hey! Wait a minute,” Rosalind protested. “What are you going to do?”

“Confront him, of course.”

The engine was still running, and a solitary figure sat slumped behind the wheel. Helen approached on the driver’s side. As she stepped up to the window, she slapped the roof of the car with the palm of her hand. The figure jumped.

“Hey! Open up! We’d like a word with you!”

The window opened just a crack, and a pair of eyes peered out.

Dwayne instantly recognized the little girl’s orange rain parka. The adult accompanying her was wearing a parka, as well, but the hood was loosely fitted, and fully revealed her face. A shiver went through him. He rolled down the window the rest of the way.

“Hi, Helen!”

Helen put a hand on the car to steady herself. “Dwayne? What the hell...? What are you doing here?”

Dwayne grinned. “Waiting for the restaurant to open. What else?”

Helen spotted the camera resting on the passenger seat. She quickly glanced over at Caroline, wondering if she'd noticed it, as well. But Caroline had apparently lost interest in the invasion of her privacy. She looked a little moonstruck, in fact.

She'd heard all of Helen's stories, of course. Stories about the early days of the restaurant. Stories about her old boyfriend, Dwayne.

"Caroline saw you taking pictures of her house," Helen explained, rather defensively.

"Oh, that. I should have asked permission, I guess," Dwayne conceded, turning to address Caroline, and acting contrite. "I'm really sorry if it upset you. I should have waited until tomorrow. I have an appointment to see your pigs."

Caroline's eyes widened even more.

Dwayne smiled at Helen. "I've gotten involved with some new, biotechnology issues. Fascinating stuff. Real cutting edge science. But, please. It's silly, talking here in the rain. Get in. I'll drive you both back to the restaurant."

Caroline didn't hesitate, and hopped right into the back seat.

The return drive would last all of a minute, so Helen saw no point in starting a conversation inside the car. She was still too stunned to say anything, anyway.

Caroline didn't shy away from it.

"Are you a doctor?" she asked.

"Uh, no. No, I'm not..." Dwayne said, speaking over his shoulder toward the back seat. He sounded a little puzzled.

Caroline shrugged. "Oh, it's just, you know...most of the people who come to visit the pigs are doctors."

Dwayne smiled. "Figures. My clients are doctors, actually. I give them advice from time to time, on how to invest their money."

"Oh, really..."

For a moment, Helen thought Caroline might propose that he sell the doctors a few pigs. But Dwayne pulled into the parking lot, and Caroline gathered herself up, so she'd be ready to jump out of the car. Having just ducked out of the rain, neither of them were anxious to get wet, again. When he brought the car to a stop, they both ran for the shelter of the awning.

Dwayne remained seated behind the wheel.

Helen reluctantly went back, and ducked her head inside the car. "Aren't you coming in?"

"Oh, I'd probably just get in the way. I'm sure you're busy. I thought maybe I'd check into the motel, and come back later for dinner."

Helen smiled. "Believe me, I'll be a whole lot busier later on. Besides, we're fully booked for tonight. Janice won't give you a table."

Dwayne was still hesitant.

“Come on,” Helen insisted. “Rosalind’s here. You can keep her company.”

*Rosalind?*

Christ. The pair of them would gang up on him, for sure. Dwayne wanted to protest, but Helen had already turned her back, and bolted for the kitchen entrance. It left him little choice. He followed her inside.

Caroline was already putting on her apron. Helen had crossed the kitchen, and was waiting by swinging cafe doors, which led into the dining room.

She motioned him over.

“There’s something you ought to know,” she said, pulling him aside. “Rosalind’s somewhat fragile, at the moment. You knew she’d been teaching, didn’t you? At the Business School?”

Dwayne nodded.

“Well, they decided not to give her tenure. Roz took it pretty hard. She’s been more or less dysfunctional, the last few months. So try not to upset her, all right?”

“Oh, wouldn’t dream of it.”

Helen glared at him. “I mean it.”

Dwayne strode right over and gave her hug. If Rosalind was surprised to see him, she certainly managed to conceal it. After calmly looking him over, she addressed Helen.

“God. This is the spy?”

Helen smiled. “Caught him red-handed.”

Janice had already unlocked the front door, and first group of guests arrived, well in advance of their reservation. A party of four. Sophie seated them near the woodstove.

Helen was in the habit of retreating into the kitchen, before the start of the dinner rush, and with the arrival of the evening’s first customers, she began to feel a little self-conscious, occupying a table out front. Particularly the large window table, which was rather conspicuous, backlit by the lights over the herb garden.

The sorry-looking table hadn’t even been set.

Although it was a lovely antique - solid walnut, in fact - Helen had never intended for it to be seen without a tablecloth. As busy as she was, she hadn’t been able to devote as much time to refinishing it as she would have liked. So she had focused her efforts on removing every last trace of paint from the legs.

They'd come out nicely, she thought. Especially the carved, claw feet. Unfortunately, the entire top surface, as well as the upper few inches of the legs, were still covered with ugly lime-green paint.

Janice would be furious. She liked the dining room arranged just so.

"We'd better relocate," Helen said. She slid back her chair, and made to stand, but Rosalind reached over and put a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Relax. It's not even six o'clock."

Helen plopped awkwardly back into her seat. "But Janice needs the table!"

"In a minute, all right? Right now, my feet are killing me."

Rosalind had already slipped off her shoes. She folded one foot onto her lap, and began massaging her toes. She'd been on her feet all day, helping out in the kitchen, and didn't have the shoes for it.

"Just pretend we're not open, yet," she suggested.

"Easy for you to say," Helen replied, glanced anxiously over shoulder at the party of four. They seemed perfectly at ease, though, and were listening intently while Sophie went through the wine list.

“Helen hasn’t changed, has she?” Rosalind observed, addressing the remark to Dwayne. “All these years...and the customers still make her nervous.”

“Oh, they do not!” Helen protested. “It’s not that! The restaurant’s different, now. That’s all.”

The two of them had often accused her of hiding out in the kitchen. There was some truth to it, Helen had to admit. She much preferred working behind the scenes, and rarely mingled with the customers.

On the other hand, there was also considerable merit to her contention, that both of them had consistently avoided their share of the menial work, by hanging out at one of the tables out front, acting like hosts, and leisurely chatting with the customers. There had invariably been a messy table in the dining room, back then. Usually cluttered with dirty coffee cups, and Rosalind’s trendy fashion magazines, or Dwayne’s Wall Street Journals.

Dwayne had opened up one of the menus, Helen noticed, and was idly scanning through it.

“So, how’s it different?” he asked. “The food looks pretty much the same.”

Helen smiled. It was largely true. Although she used far more expensive ingredients, now - vintage wines for the marinades, fresh mangoes and guava, lots of prime shellfish - they had served excellent food at the restaurant, right from the start. Drastically under-priced food, as it happened.

“Well...we were rank amateurs when we started out. So how could we have known? It’s not really the food! It’s all in the presentation. Pure show business. Now, we put on a polished, professional show.”

Dwayne couldn’t mistake the sardonic tone Helen had taken. He’d heard it often enough.

“Check out the prices,” Rosalind urged.

Dwayne examined the menu more closely. There weren’t any prices listed, that he could see. He resorted to checking the back, which turned out to be blank.

Rosalind pointed it out. “Right there. The fine print.”

Helen bristled. “Oh, come on! It’s not *fine print!*”

The party of four had ordered champagne, apparently. Janice emerged from the kitchen carrying a polished stainless steel bucket, freshly filled with ice. She went slightly out of her way, in order to approach the window table, and paused when she caught Helen’s eye.

Janice glowered at the unmade table, and mouthed something. Helen nodded, then quickly sprang to her feet, and began clearing off the table.

“What’s with Janice? Rosalind asked, keeping her voice to whisper. “What’d she say?”

“Showtime.”

Helen decided to lay claim to the employee’s table, which was hidden behind a small partition, alongside the waitress station. There was barely enough room to squeeze in two chairs, but she’d be up and down, anyway. She could fetch a stool from the kitchen.

“Why can’t we stay here?” Dwayne asked.

“The table’s already booked,” Helen explained.

He glanced around the room. “All of them?”

Helen didn’t feel like repeating herself. Sophie had left a set of linen for the window table, draped over the railing in front of the herb garden. Helen tossed Dwayne the tablecloth.

“Here. Make yourself useful.”

Rosalind soon found herself alone with Dwayne. After the initial entrée order came in, Helen excused herself, and fled into the kitchen. It seemed a little unfair. She didn’t want to be stuck with Dwayne.

“Sorry I never returned your call,” she said.

An apology seemed appropriate, but when Dwayne seemed unable to remember having phoned her, she felt sorry for having brought it up.

“Something about desalinization plants,” she added.

“Oh, that.” Dwayne dismissed it. “One of my brother’s bright ideas. Nothing much came of it.”

In truth, Malcolm had done rather well, Dwayne recalled.

The scheme involved growing mangoes in the Peruvian desert, using water reclaimed from the Pacific Ocean, with solar-powered desalination plants. The tax shelter aspects were first-rate, since the project was guaranteed to lose money for years, while the trees matured.

But Dwayne hadn’t sold a single share. He didn’t have the option of going global, it appeared. Not with his base of investors. They weren’t the right sort of fish.

He’d get depressed, if he dwelt on it, so he changed the subject.

“Hey! Let’s get a bottle of wine. Something really nice. My treat.”

The wine lists were stored within reach, in a rack mounted over the waitress station. Dwayne pulled one down, and began looking through it.

“What do think? Red, or white?” he asked.

Rosalind couldn't decide.

She wasn't really supposed to.

Not during her cleansing period. The wine was all right. She was allowed to drink a little wine, now and then. But not in the company of *men*. Rosalind couldn't decide whether Dwayne qualified, or not.

Alcohol stimulated the production of male auramones, apparently. Helga instructed her novices to minimize their exposure to men, as a matter of course, but stressed the importance of avoiding them altogether, whenever they started drinking.

Rosalind could see the sense in it. Some of her own worst experiences with men could often be traced back to a chance encounter in a bar. Yet, she felt silly worrying about Dwayne. His auramones seemed to have no discernible effect on her.

Besides, she loved nice wine. And Dwayne knew it. So, she could hardly refuse to share a bottle with him, without giving a reason. Rosalind was reluctant to mention Helga. Or the fact that she'd switched therapists once again. Dwayne hadn't been very supportive the last time, when she had taken to lugging the Bible around.

She decided she'd rather risk the wine.

They settled on a dry white.

But there were quite a few to choose from. The waitress station was only a few steps from the kitchen. Rosalind hopped up, and stuck her head through the opening in the cafe doors. Helen was peering intently into the gas broiler, brushing marinade on a couple orders of mango duck. Rosalind waited until she raised the broiler rack back into position.

“Helen? We thought we’d get a bottle of wine. Can you recommend a dry white?”

As it happened, Helen was also cooking something on the stove. She held up one finger, requesting a moment, and went over to attend to it.

Rosalind couldn’t help noticing that Caroline had taken her place at the serving counter. Arranging entrées of the poached salmon, in fact. Rosalind watched for a moment, as Caroline added the finishing touches to a couple orders at once. She seemed awfully good at it.

The vigor of youth, no doubt.

Rosalind imagined that her own enthusiasm for the job would wane even further, once she’d had a few glasses of wine. She decided not to mention the salmon.

“Something extra nice,” Rosalind emphasized.

“Who’s paying?” Helen asked, giving the matter her full attention.

“Dwayne.”

“Well, hey. In that case, try the Pouilly-Fuisse. I haven’t even tried it yet, but it’s gotten rave reviews.”

Dwayne had never seen the wine cellar. So Rosalind dragged him along.

They hadn’t really done anything with the room, in the beginning. Helen thought it would make a nice pantry, but once the renovation got under way, they had more pressing concerns, not the least of which was figuring out what to do with all the boxes of fishing equipment and spare parts, which Blanche Pease had left behind. They seemed too valuable to just throw away. The little storeroom already contained a few crates of marine engine parts, so they’d piled everything in there.

And closed the door.

Dwayne had spent a few afternoons, rummaging through the fishing tackle. Rosalind poked around in the boxes of brassware, occasionally. But the rest of that stuff sat undisturbed for several years.

Then one day, a few months after Helen had begun running the restaurant on her own, a man walked in and inquired about the whereabouts of Pease Fisheries Supply. Or failing that, the whereabouts of a set of injector pumps for his sixty year old diesel engine.

Helen had gladly showed him where to look.

Once he'd found what he was after - a set of four, cosmoline-coated metal gizmos, which he could hold in one hand - Helen couldn't imagine that they'd be worth very much. But the man handed her a cheque for two hundred dollars. She did some checking of her own inside the storeroom, after that. And after some cataloguing, and a bit of research, she sold the contents to an engine parts distributor in Seattle for fifteen thousand dollars.

And bought her acreage.

Helen had gotten used to having the pantry in her bedroom, by then, so the room basically sat empty, except for a few bags of flour, which were too heavy and awkward to cart up the stairs.

But the wine eventually outstripped the flour.

Rosalind had designed the cellar herself, at Helen's request. She'd put in subdued track-lighting, an Italian-tiled floor, and enough racks to hold four thousand bottles. Helen kept it pretty full, and the wait staff encouraged customers to look through it.

Dwayne picked out a Pinot Noir to follow their dry French white. When they returned to the dining room, a party of six was just coming in the door. The corkscrews were kept at the waitress station. Dwayne did the honors.

The Pouilly-Fuisse was marvelous, Rosalind thought.

“So. How’s life in academia?” he asked. “They been treating you all right?”

Rosalind winced, and looked away. “I’m not teaching, this year,” she replied tersely.

Dwayne acted surprised. “Really? How come? Are you on sabbatical?”

“They cut me loose, actually.”

“No! After all this time? What’s it been? Five years?”

Rosalind sighed. “Six.”

Dwayne slowly shook his head. “Imagine that.” He managed to suppress a smile. “Well. Can’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Rosalind glared at him. “Oh, spare me the gloating, all right?”

As much as she hated to admit it, Dwayne had predicted how it would play out. How they would call it a tenure track. How they’d string her along, and encourage her to follow it, knowing full well that it turned into a dead end road. But she hadn’t listened.

She figured it was just more sour grapes.

Ever since Dwayne had flunked out of graduate school, he had harbored a grudge against universities, in general, and the Business

School, in particular. Since he had nothing good to say about it, she found it easy to discount his opinion.

The two of them had started graduate school in the same year, and found themselves enrolled in exactly the same courses. So they began studying together. However, Dwayne struggled from the start, and soon fell behind; while she advanced steadily, and soon opted for the accelerated program. He attributed his slower progress to his scholarship, which required him to shoulder a heavy teaching load - grading papers, administering tests, and the like.

[Which he detested.]

But she knew it wasn't that.

She'd read his homework.

Dwayne was incapable of writing a coherent sentence. Well, maybe a sentence. Or two. But he certainly couldn't string enough of them together to produce a passable term paper. His prose was almost unreadable, especially when he tried to hide his atrocious spelling, behind equally atrocious handwriting, in the hope that he'd be accorded the benefit of the doubt.

His skills were such that she often wondered how he'd managed to slip through college. She never summoned the courage to ask, though. Dwayne was so well-spoken, and used words with such assurance, that

she assumed he had some sort of learning disability, and was too embarrassed to talk about it.

Graduate school was not the place where those things got sorted out, however. He failed Business Ethics that semester, which placed him on academic probation. Then, to make matters worse, he failed two qualifying exams, and suffered the indignity of having to take remedial classes the following semester, repeating courses which he'd previously taken in college.

[Which he bitterly resented.]

They never shared the same classes, after that, and could no longer compare notes. Instead, she began passing along her old notes, whenever he enrolled in one of the advanced courses that she'd already taken. But she knew it was hopeless.

Even Dwayne knew. Although he couldn't write, he could read well enough. And the handwriting was clearly on the wall. He wasn't going to get an advanced degree anytime soon.

So when they dropped out of the University, in order to open the restaurant, they departed under radically different circumstances. While she had completed all of the course work required for her doctorate, and been granted a grace period of five years in which to submit her thesis,

Dwayne had failed Business Ethics for the second time, and forever lost his scholarship.

So, except for the fact that she'd put up most of the money, opening the Crab Pot Cafe was something of a lark for her. She made it clear from the start that it was unlikely to become her life's work.

Two years was all she'd promised.

Dwayne, on the other hand, threw himself headlong into the restaurant. He had spent his final semester feeling as if he were in prison, and he felt liberated, having escaped. And what better place to make a new start than the ocean, with its bold vistas, and seemingly limitless horizon.

"University professors think of themselves as pretty big fish," he became fond of saying. "But they live in a very small pond."

He began to speak about the restaurant in increasingly grand terms, as if he envisaged it revitalizing the economy of the whole coastal strip.

Business closures had become the norm, following the collapse of the fishing industry, so the local residents were understandably curious when they noticed the old fisheries supply building being renovated.

People began to drop by at all hours, just to see what was going on. A few were simply worried about the fate of their meat, which had been consigned to Blanche Pease's freezer. Others stopped in to offer plumbing advice, or wanted to apply for a job. Nearly everyone was keen to gather gossip.

The three of them couldn't disguise the fact that they were amateurs, so their past association with the University soon came out in conversation. Dwayne found the subject rather awkward, at first. He was loathe to admit any failure, on his part. He saw himself becoming one of the pillars of the local business community, and thought it might tarnish his image, telling everyone that he'd just flunked out of graduate school.

So he scripted a kinder scenario.

In the new version, he took on the role of a community activist, who finds himself stricken with conscience over the sort of uncaring, corporate capitalism espoused by the Business School.

"Locally-owned small business. That's the way to go, if you want to build communities," he would say, trying to make a good impression on the locals. "But you won't catch them teaching that at the Business School. No way. They could care less if all the neighborhood pharmacies, or little corner groceries go out of business. They're in bed with the big corporations."

Even though his academic career still featured an unhappy ending, it no longer ended in abject failure, at least, but rather in divorce, over irreconcilable philosophical differences.

However, small business was just that.

Small.

The three of them barely earned the minimum wage, those first two years. Helen had to struggle for another ten, before she made an unqualified success of it. But, in the beginning, the restaurant couldn't even afford to hire a full-time dishwasher.

One of Dwayne's jobs was mopping the floor. And it rained a lot. So he had to mop it all the time. Yet all of the jobs in the restaurant were as unrelenting as that.

Just a dull, daily monotony.

Dwayne soon soured on it. And, like Junior Pease before him, he slowly soured on the town. He began calling it a backwater. Or a bog. Hardly the attitude one would expect from the local community activist. His new career had come to naught, and he once again found himself staring failure in the face. He needed another scenario. And, as luck would have it, his brother Malcolm had been working on a script.

The stage had just been set for the windmills, following the enactment of special, investment tax credits to encourage the

development of the wind-energy industry. Malcolm had been following the legislation, and had already assembled a cast of investors, willing to bankroll the start-up costs. But he couldn't pull it off by himself, based on the East Coast. The most promising sites for windpower generation were located in California, and he needed someone on the ground, working to secure a lease on the best possible site, while they were still ahead of the competition.

He called the restaurant, and offered Dwayne the part.

"I'll send you a cheque for a couple thousand," Malcolm had generously offered, just to cover expenses. "How's that? You can hire a replacement dishwasher."

So Dwayne found a new calling.

He envisioned the coastal California hills draped with windmills - a smooth, flowing line of them, following the contours of the land, their sculpted rotors spinning, and glinting in the sun - the work of an artist, really.

A university was not the proper place for artists, after all. It was meant for those who merely longed to be artists, but lacked the talent, and had to be content with studying them. And their work.

As for the restaurant - mopping greasy floors, and scouring food-encrusted stockpots for less than three bucks an hour - well, that was

hardly a suitable position for an artist, either. Not for a financial visionary, capable of transforming landscapes.

Dwayne decided that he was destined for bigger things.

And soon became insufferable.

Needless to say, Dwayne had belittled her decision to resume her academic career. Nor did he have anything flattering to say about her thesis. She'd shown him a copy of the first draft, to get some feedback on her choice of a title - *Paradise Lost: An Analysis of the Use of Nostalgia in the Marketing of Herbal Tea*.

He said it sounded flaky.

She hadn't been that upset. He'd never really taken her seriously.

Although that was exactly his point, of course. He was convinced that the faculty at the Business School wouldn't take her seriously, either.

According to Dwayne, the academic ecosystem was equivalent to a small pond. It could accommodate only a limited number of big fish. At the Business School, this select group would include an expert on international finance, for example. Then, perhaps a specialist on arbitrage, or computer technology management. But they'd never reserve a space for an herbal tea woman.

She'd be tagged as a lightweight, he predicted, and relegated to the shallows.

Now, of course, she could only guess. Maybe things would have turned out differently, if she'd specialized in cigars. Or single malt whisky.

Damn men.

They'd never touched the tea, which she'd set out for everyone on the counter in the faculty lounge. Not even once. In six years.

But screw them. She liked herbal tea.

Dwayne watched quietly, as Rosalind continued to peel the label off the wine bottle, in long, narrow strips. He waited until she finished. Then, tried to sound consoling.

"So. What are you going to do, now?" he asked.

Rosalind shrugged. "I don't know. Live in my car, I guess."

Dwayne wondered if he'd missed something. He stared at her for a moment. What did she mean? Her *car*? He'd noticed it in the parking lot, next to Helen's old Honda.

"You mean the, uh...Mercedes?"

"Umm."

Dwayne didn't know what to say.

Rosalind began lining up the little strips of paper on table top, in an attempt to reassemble the shredded wine label. She seemed oddly amused.

“I had to give up my house,” she explained, concentrating on her assemblage. “Once I leave here, I’ll be out on the street. Unemployed, and homeless.”

Dwayne wouldn’t fall for it. Job or not, Rosalind had hardly been reduced to penury. She could buy a new house on a whim. “Come on. Seriously. Are you looking for another teaching job?”

Rosalind suddenly looked up. “God! Are you kidding? I can’t begin to tell you how relieved I am, finally being shut of that place. But I haven’t even decided where I’m going to live, yet. I don’t know. There’s some consulting work I could do.”

“On what? Herbal tea?”

She had long since moved beyond that. Her area of expertise had broadened considerably, as a result of her research at the Business School. She had published several articles on the marketing of organic cosmetics. Another on herbal dietary supplements. Dwayne was most likely unaware of the phenomenal growth in the all-natural cosmetics industry. Her client list included some of the biggest players.

“Lipstick,” she said.

Certain subjects were best avoided, conversing with women, Dwayne felt. Topics like menopause, for instance. Or baseball. Cosmetics was pretty high on the list.

He decided not to pursue it. He leaned back, and peeked around the edge of the partition. The dining room had filled up rapidly. There were no vacant tables, at all, that he could see.

“I can’t understand why Helen hasn’t put in a few more tables,” he said. “There’s plenty of room.”

Rosalind had to laugh. “Try telling Helen that. She thinks the restaurant has too many tables, as it is.”

“No! She said that?”

“Pretty much. You know the table we were sitting at? By the herb garden? She wants to take it out of service. One of the legs has started to come loose. Seems to me, a drop or two of glue would fix it, but Helen wants to take it all apart, and refinish everything, before she glues it back together. She reckons it’ll take two months.”

“Christ. That table seats six people!”

“Yeah. Well, Helen never could tolerate wobbly furniture...”

Rosalind paused, having to laugh. “But there’s more to it than that. First, she tells me that her customers are eating too much chicken. Then, she says they’re eating too much fish. Far too much food

altogether, apparently. With one less table, she won't have as many mouths to feed. Makes sense, doesn't it?"

Dwayne was baffled. He couldn't see the sense in not cashing in, while the restaurant was popular. "Come on! It's crazy. Helen could squeeze in three or four more tables, at least. They don't have to be spaced so far apart."

Rosalind wondered. Judging from the way people jockeyed for reservations, the Crab Pot Cafe had already earned the distinction as a place where tables were hard to come by. She couldn't think of a better reputation for a restaurant. From a marketing standpoint - particularly in the long term - Helen's might be the better strategy. Of course, knowing Helen, 'strategy' was hardly the right word for it.

"Seems to me, Helen's doing remarkably well," she asserted.

"Oh. Yeah. Can't dispute that," he conceded, glancing around the crowded dining room.

Dwayne had started slugging down the wine, Rosalind noticed.

He could just as well swill the red, she decided. She helped herself to the last of the Pouilly-Fuisse, as he was draining his glass.

"So. What have you been up to, lately? Besides spying on farmhouses?" she asked.

“Oh, Christ...” Dwayne groaned. “All I did was take a few pictures of the breeding facility.”

Rosalind hadn't the slightest idea what he was talking about. She'd been under the impression that Dwayne had been caught photographing Caroline's place. Dwayne apparently noticed the confusion on her face.

“Helen hasn't mentioned it, I take it?”

“What...?”

“The breeding farm. It's just down the road. They're raising pigs.”

“Oh. You mean Caroline's pigs?”

Dwayne nodded. “Hasn't Helen told you about them?”

“Oh, sure. Just this morning. She says they'll eat virtually anything, except the citrus peels. Caroline keeps a big pail in the kitchen so we can save the food scraps. But the lemons all go in the garbage.”

“I see...”

“Orange rinds, too.”

Dwayne helped himself to more of the red wine. He seemed lost in thought, and stared at his wineglass as he swirled the Pinot Noir inside it, perilously close to the rim.

“These pigs. They're the reason you're up here?” Rosalind asked.

“Actually, I’m more interested in some research pigs that Caroline’s father is raising for a biotech company called Xenogenics. Genetically-engineered pigs. They’d be fed a special diet, I imagine. I thought that Helen might have said something.”

Rosalind shook her head.

“Just wondering,” Dwayne said, shrugging it aside. He changed the subject. “Where you staying, by the way? One of the bed-and-breakfasts?”

“No. Upstairs. Helen’s not living up there, anymore,” Rosalind said.

Dwayne seemed surprised.

“She’s built herself a cabin, and moved across the river.”

“Really? She finally put in a road?”

Rosalind shook her head again. “God. You should see it,” she told him. “Remember Ted Kaczynski’s cabin? Did you catch that? How they lifted the pitiful little thing onto a flatbed truck, and carted it in for evidence?”

“Yeah...?”

“Well, it’s like that. Only Helen’s put in all these stained glass windows...” Rosalind paused, and gave a little sigh. “Frankly, it’s got me a little worried. She’s living like a hermit over there. I wouldn’t be

surprised if she sits in the dark and feeds her stale dinner rolls to the chipmunks.”

Dwayne was slow to respond. “How’s she get to work?”

“Little rowboat.”

“Christ. That’s a long row.”

“Helen doesn’t seem to mind. She’s become something of a boat person. She equates living in her cabin to living aboard a small boat.”

Dwayne found it odd. “How would Helen know anything about living on a boat?”

“From talking with Nigel, I imagine.”

Dwayne was reluctant to ask.

He took another slug of wine. “Who, uh...who’s Nigel?”

“Helen’s janitor. But he’s a boatbuilder, really. From New Zealand...” Rosalind spotted Sophie delivering a basket of dinner rolls to one of the window tables, and pointed her out. “That’s his girlfriend, at the moment. Sophie. They’ve lived on the boat for years. A little sailboat. It’s tied up on the river.”

“On the old pile moorings...?”

Rosalind nodded. “Didn’t you notice? They’re all rented out, now. There’s even a waiting list.”

Dwayne suddenly slapped his hand on the table, startling her.

“Damn! I knew it!”

Dwayne once had plans for those berths. Big plans, Rosalind recalled.

Yet he hadn't been very supportive when she and Helen first broached the subject of buying the waterfront property.

"A *restaurant*...? You can't be serious," he'd replied. "The profit margins are pitiful."

"Wait until you've seen the place," Helen urged. "The river is so...I don't know, so..."

"Romantic," Rosalind suggested.

Dwayne had stared at them as if they were idiots. "Christ. And here I thought you were talking about starting a *business*."

Dwayne was particularly ill-suited to the restaurant business. He couldn't cook. Hated kitchen chores, and shopping for groceries. Even though he'd eat anything put on his plate - cold corn dogs, frozen pizza, greasy bacon burgers - he lacked any real passion for food. Considering the sort of cooking that she and Helen were doing at the time - recipes from *The French Chef*, she recalled - Dwayne must have known that he'd have little creative input, running the place.

Rosalind had been surprised when he agreed to accompany them on their return trip to the coast, for a second look at the property. He

had hoped to dissuade Helen, she thought. That, and the fact that he really had nothing better to do, since he'd just flunked out of graduate school.

Naturally, Dwayne took it upon himself to point out all of the flaws in the building. Cracked insulation on the wiring that would need to be replaced. Some dry rot under the porch. All the peeling paint. But his attitude seemed to change as they walked out onto the wharf. It was a lovely sunny day, Rosalind remembered, and the river was as blue as the ocean.

"Are the pile moorings part of the package?" he'd asked, as they stood watching the pelicans.

"I, uh...I assume so," she'd said, glancing uncertainly at Helen.

Helen hadn't a clue, either.

The subject hadn't come up. The fishing boats added an element of nautical charm, obviously. But the moorings had little bearing on their plans for the restaurant. They hadn't really given them a second thought.

Dwayne shook his head. "I can't believe you two," he said, laughing to himself.

Helen took offense. "Hey. So what? A bunch of poles."

He wiped the smirk off his face. “Just asking. But I wouldn’t sneer at it. That’s *rental* property you’re looking at,” he said, as if referring to something holy.

Rosalind had her doubts.

As income property, the pile moorings were definitely low-rent district. Of the ten fishing boats tied up to the poles, several were obviously derelicts, and nearly all of them appeared to be for sale. A few had been draped with old netting, in an attempt to discourage the gulls from landing, but even those vessels were well-encrusted with guano. One owner had propped a sign against his pilothouse - DEEP SEA FISHING CHARTERS - but the bottom half, which presumably contained the telephone number, was illegible, buried under the bird droppings. Fully half of the berths sat vacant.

Dwayne continued. “Seriously. The half-assed way you two are going about this, you’ll need all the cash flow you can get. Look. I’ll tell you what. I’d be willing to put together a business plan for you. How’s that? Then you’d know how the numbers look, at least.”

He began working on the projections, as soon as they returned from the coast. Not surprisingly, the pile moorings figured prominently. He delved into the occupancy rates and moorage fees charged at

comparable marinas on the coast. Estimated maintenance costs and billing expenses. Even postage.

But his business plan went well beyond passively collecting rent. Pease Fisheries Supply happened to possess the only wharf on the river which could be accessed at all states of the tide, by boats large enough to carry passengers. Dwayne saw no reason why such a valuable asset should be allowed to simply sit idle.

He envisioned running a fleet of charter boats, taking the tourists out salmon fishing. With the shoreside support available at the restaurant, they could offer dinner cruises on the river, or even luncheon excursions offshore, taking people out to watch the gray whales during their annual migration down the coast.

In the end, he arrived at a projected income of eleven thousand, four hundred dollars from the moorings for the first year alone, rising to over eighteen thousand the next, when the charter business began posting a profit. Good news, for a fledgling business, struggling to find its feet.

The actual figure was zero.

No one wanted to moor their boats in the river. The channel had silted up.

Helen had obtained several photographs of the old harbor, taken at a time when three-masted sailing ships commonly anchored on the river, while awaiting their turn to load logs. However, even small fishing boats had difficulty entering the harbor, now.

The erosion caused by decades of clear-cutting had left the river mouth fronted by massive sand bar, which extended nearly a mile offshore. The sea often broke furiously along the outer bank, sometimes for weeks on end. Access to the river was restricted to a relatively narrow channel, which was continually scoured out by the tidal current. At the time when Dwayne was putting together his projections, this channel hadn't been dredged for years. With even a moderate swell running, the breakers extended completely across it, and rendered it impassable.

The entrance was navigable in calm weather, during the hours either side of high tide. But boats heading out to sea had no guarantee that they would be able to return to port, if the weather happened to deteriorate unexpectedly while they were out.

Dwayne never did collect any rent.

The entrées had begun to emerge from kitchen in earnest. Dwayne was getting hungry, Rosalind suspected. His eyes kept following the food.

“I think I’ll check on Helen. See if she needs any help,” Rosalind announced. “You want some dinner rolls, or anything?”

They were delicate brioche pastries, actually, with an assortment of fillings - crabmeat, pesto sausage, wild mushrooms...sometimes cheese and herbs. Dwayne had craned his neck several times, peering into the wicker baskets as they went past.

He seemed eager.

Helen had her nose in the broiler again, putting the finishing glaze on some entrées of mango duck. Some leftover scraps of the roasted meat were sitting in a stainless tray on the counter. Rosalind helped herself to a few of the crispy bits.

“Well? What’d you find out?” Helen asked.

Rosalind suddenly felt hungry, and took a meatier piece. She hadn’t been under the impression that she was supposed to find out anything.

“Well...Dwayne seems pretty impressed. He figures you could be doing even better, if you’d put in a few more tables.”

“Oh, right! Easy for him to say,” Helen bristled. She couldn’t hide her impatience. “Come on! What’s Dwayne doing here? Did he say?”

Rosalind drew back. “You seem upset.”

“Upset? Of course, I’m upset!”

“But...why?”

Helen glanced over her shoulder and located Caroline, assembling entrées at the serving counter, a safe distance away. She nevertheless lowered her voice. “I’m worried about Caroline. She’s counting on those pigs to put her through college.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Just ask yourself. Why would someone like Dwayne fly all the way up here to look at a few pigs? Doesn’t it strike you as rather odd? You’ve seen the kind of operation Clinton’s running over there. Can’t be much in it.”

Rosalind briefly considered it. “I see your point.”

“Sure. There’s a scam, somewhere. Must be, if Dwayne’s that interested.”

Janice called across the kitchen. “Helen! Waiting on four duck over here!”

“Okay! Coming!”

The order slips for entrées were clipped to the exhaust hood over the broiler. Helen quickly scanned through them. Then pulled down a few, and crumpled them up.

“I’ve just about caught up with the first wave,” she claimed. “I’ll come out in a minute, and we’ll get to the bottom of this.”

When Rosalind returned with the basket of rolls, Dwayne was halfway out of his chair, gathering up their wineglasses. The Pinot Noir had put him in a festive mood. The bottle was two-thirds empty.

“Sophie’s found us a table,” he said, obviously pleased to be leaving their cramped cubicle at the waitress station. “It’s over there, by all the plants.”

Rosalind spotted it, at once - a recently bussed table for four, right next to the herb garden. They had to thread their way past several occupied tables, crossing the dining room. Dwayne insisted on stopping at every one of them, and having a word with the customers.

She found it a little embarrassing.

At the penultimate table, he addressed a white-haired gentleman, seated with an elegantly coiffured woman who appeared to be his wife.

“Everything all right, here?” he inquired. “I see you’re having the, uh...roast pork, is it?”

The man merely nodded.

Dwayne hadn’t noticed that he’d just taken a mouthful of food. He waited until the man finished chewing. Then asked, “Any good?”

“Never had better,” the man gushed.

Dwayne jovially patted him on the shoulder. “Glad to hear it. I was planning on having that, myself. Enjoy your meal.”

Dwayne wasn't representing himself as the owner of the place, at least. Rosalind had to give him that.

They had no sooner sat down when Dwayne expressed regret. "Damn. We should have brought along another bottle of wine."

"Might pay to eat something," Rosalind suggested, counseling restraint.

"Yeah. You're right."

Dwayne began devouring the dinner rolls.

"Quite the place, isn't it?" he said, surveying the dining room in between bites. "I'd heard some good things about it, but this..." Dwayne motioned expansively. "I had no idea."

When Helen approached the table, Dwayne graciously rose to his feet, and presented her with a chair, as chivalrous and charming as ever.

Helen wasn't in the mood to be charmed, however, and found the gesture mildly irritating. She eased the chair from his grasp, then spun it around, and sat on it backwards. She wasn't ready to relax, or get comfortable, either.

Rosalind eyed her apprehensively. "Everything, um...under control?"

“Pretty much,” Helen reassured her. “Looks like we’ll run out of lemon chicken, though.”

“Marinate some more,” Rosalind suggested.

Helen pulled a face. She usually marinated the meat for a minimum of four or five hours, so the flavor would fully penetrate. “Bit late, for that. Doesn’t matter. I’ll just substitute for it. Prawns, probably.”

Rosalind didn’t respond.

Which was just as well, since Helen couldn’t continue to ignore Dwayne, who was waiting politely, with an adolescent grin on his face. She looked him in the eye.

“So. Why the sudden interest in swine husbandry?”

He briefly fumbled for words. “Well, I, uh...I suppose it is, well...recent. I haven’t really followed the biotechnology issues. They’ve performed poorly, as a rule. To be honest, I’d never even heard of Xenogenics until just last week.”

“What’s ‘Xenogenics’?” Rosalind asked, having heard it mentioned for the second time.

“That’s the company Clinton’s working for,” Helen explained.

“So you know about it, then?” Dwayne said.

“Xenogenics? Sure. Caroline and I are pretty close.”

Dwayne whistled between his teeth. “Damn,” he cursed, with a pained expression on his face. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

Helen reacted with alarm. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“Well, the company’s in real jeopardy, I’d say. The way they’re headed, it’s only a matter of time before the principals get indicted for fraud.”

“Oh, no...”

“Yeah, it’s a real shame,” Dwayne said, shaking his head, then helping himself to the last of the Pinot Noir. He stretched the truth a little. “The sad thing is, Xenogenics looked to have a promising future. They seem poised to succeed with their pigs.”

Helen was close to tears. “Caroline’s going to be devastated.”

Dwayne tried to be solicitous. “Come on...don’t.”

“But she’s worked so hard...”

“Look. There’s still a chance the company can turn things around. Who knows? Perhaps I can get them to listen to reason. We’ll just have to see.”

Helen was suddenly suspicious. “Wait a minute. I thought you said that you’d never even heard of Xenogenics, until just last week.”

“Well. Yeah...?”

“And, now, one week later, you’re ready to ride in and rescue the company? Is that the gist of it?”

Dwayne looked rather hurt.

“And...I’m supposed to believe this?” Helen added.

“Hey! I’m only trying to help! If you could keep your cynicism in check, I think you’d see that I have Caroline’s interests at heart. Honest. At least hear me out. Could you do that?”

Helen couldn’t make any promises.

Dwayne briefly considered how to proceed.

Common sense dictated that he revise the scenario somewhat. He couldn’t include the actual opening scenes, for example, in which he’d negotiated the insurance settlement with Bernie. Any mention of a viatical deal would surely alienate Helen.

She had shown scant interest in the various ventures that he’d been involved in, over the years. Yet she’d taken the trouble of writing him a long personal letter regarding his viatical business. A rather scathing letter, actually, which contained a plethora of adjectives - words like despicable, and predatory.

Unconscionable, he recalled.

As far as Helen was concerned, the viatical business was the lowest form of ambulance chasing. It was a gut reaction, no doubt. Yet, one which had unfortunately left him condemned, merely for making a profit from the desperate and dying.

Of course, he'd made a profit.

That's the way it worked.

The drug companies made a profit. The doctors made a profit. Nearly everyone in the death care industry had posted profits at the time. Helen had never appreciated how he had truly helped some people, at a time when no one else was willing to do so.

But that was long ago. It wasn't the time to reopen old wounds. Not when he was about to redeem himself.

"Okay. Here's what happened. First of last week, one of my clients brings me a copy of a confidential memorandum from Xenogenics, offering limited partnerships in a new, state-of-the-art breeding facility. Heart surgeon, actually. Guy named Bernie.

"As it happens, Bernie's completely sold on the company. But before he buys into it, there's a few things he wants me to check. The financial aspects of the private offering. Risk factors, and so on. But Bernie's really more intrigued by something else. Turns out, he's learned from a colleague that Xenogenics is secretly operating a medical clinic in Mexico. Run by a member of the board of directors, Dr. Charles Xong.

"Ever heard of him?" Dwayne asked, directing the question to Helen.

“Sure,” she said. “Caroline calls him Charlie. He visits the pigs now and then. But I never knew he worked in Mexico...” It took a moment before Helen made the connection. “Gosh. I wonder if that’s where Caroline’s taking Xenia...?”

Rosalind had largely followed the conversation up to this point, but Helen’s last reference had her baffled.

“Who’s Xenia?” she inquired.

“One of Caroline’s favorite pigs. Just got sold.”

Dwayne was astonished. “Christ. She gives them *names*?”

Helen shrugged. “Caroline’s like that.”

Dwayne helped himself to another one of the dinner rolls, while he tried to recover the thread. “So. Let’s see...I talk to this colleague of Bernie’s. Turns out, he’s a heart surgeon, as well. And the reason he knows about the clinic in Mexico? One of his former patients has checked himself into it. Guy named Cayle, whose heart is ready to burst.

“The evidence seems pretty conclusive, Helen. Xenogenics is conducting secret clinical trials down there, using human patients. Do you already know about that, as well?”

Helen drew out the corners of her mouth. “I’m not sure how much I should be telling you. Some things Caroline told me in confidence.”

“Look. Caroline’s probably in the dark about this, herself. Xenogenics hasn’t disclosed all the facts to their investors, either.

Caroline isn't likely to know that failure to do so constitutes fraud. Besides, the human trials are illegal."

"Illegal...?" Helen gasped.

"Sure. Well, technically...not in Mexico. Still, Xenogenics is taking a terrible risk, politically speaking. The FDA takes a rather dim view of companies that flaunt their guidelines."

"I see..."

"Unfortunately, that's not the worst of it. This guy Cayle? The one that Xenogenics is about to experiment on?" Dwayne spread his hands wide, for emphasis. "Cayle's a known drug addict."

"What...?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid so. I checked out his criminal record, myself," Dwayne added. "Cayle's got a couple priors for peddling crystal meth."

Helen couldn't respond.

She stared forlornly at the table for a moment, then mumbled something about having to go back to work, and fled into the kitchen.

Rosalind eventually broke the silence.

"What kind of pigs are these?" she asked.

"They're called transgenic donor animals, actually," Dwayne replied, trotting out the jargon that he'd recently picked up from the private offering.

Xenogenics had scrupulously avoided referring to their animals as ‘pigs’, he’d noticed. Part of a marketing strategy, perhaps, to distance themselves from the manifold pejorative uses associated with the word, pig. Xenogenics wanted to be known for breeding state-of-the-art transgenic donor stock. Not swine.

Rosalind wanted more than jargon, apparently.

“They’ve been genetically engineered to produce human proteins,” he continued. “The idea is to fool the human immune system, so that the organs can be used for transplant purposes.”

“Organ transplants?”

“Right.”

“From pigs? Into people?”

“Yeah. That’s the general idea.”

Rosalind shuddered. “God...”

Dwayne suddenly gave a little laugh. “I swear. When I saw the map that Bernie sent, showing me how to find the breeding facility, I almost fell out of my chair. Had to be Caroline’s place, I figured. So I got up here as quick as I could.”

Caroline had yet to enter kindergarten when Dwayne quit the restaurant, Rosalind recalled.

“You remember her? From way back then?”

Dwayne laughed, again. “Hey. If there’s one thing I’ll never forget about the restaurant, it’s the sight of Clinton’s salty old fishing boat, right outside the kitchen window. Remember? It had *Sweet Caroline* written across the bow. How could I forget that? They’re good people.”

Rosalind was astounded that Dwayne would choose to put a positive spin on it. He had hated that decrepit little boat. Largely because Clinton had never paid his rent.

From inside the kitchen, the window with the best view the river was located next to the dishwashing machine. Dwayne had spent a lot of time there, staring out at the boats, bored to death. *Sweet Caroline* was rather conspicuous, moored in front. So its continued presence became particularly galling.

A constant reminder, perhaps, that his big plans for the moorings had come to naught.

Dwayne began lobbying for another bottle of wine.

Rosalind offered to fetch it. She felt like freshening up, anyway, and the wine cellar was right down the hall.

She eventually settled on a zinfandel. When she returned with the bottle, Helen had resumed her place at the table. Dwayne was still talking about the pigs.

“We should have enough leverage to get the ball rolling,” he was saying. “We’ll see what happens in Mexico.”

Rosalind deposited the wine bottle at his elbow.

“Mexico...?”

Dwayne had already begun searching among the items on the table, trying to find the corkscrew. She’d thought to bring one from the waitress station, and handed it to him.

Helen filled her in. She’d calmed down, and seemed a little encouraged.

“Dwayne’s flying down there tomorrow to meet with Dr. Xong.”

“If I have the strength...” he grunted.

Dwayne was having a bit of trouble with the cork. He finally resorted to clamping the bottle between his knees. Once he succeeded in removing it, he pointedly dropped the cork into the empty dinner roll basket.

“What’s with the service in this place? We’ve been sitting here long enough to starve to death. And no one’s come to take our order.”

“Hungry, huh?” Helen laughed as she said it, realizing that it went without saying where Dwayne was concerned. “I’m sure Janice would have gladly brought you something.”

“She seemed pretty busy.”

“Well. There you go, then. Squeaky wheel gets the grease, around here.”

Helen naturally wanted to join them, which meant that Dwayne would have to wait a bit longer for his dinner, at least until she was over the hump. The kitchen was invariably swamped, dealing with the first wave of customers, who tended to arrive en masse after the doors opened. The pace slackened, after that. Although there was often a second wave, around nine o'clock, it was always more diffuse.

Some of the guests would sit and talk for hours. They'd rest awhile between entrées, or before tackling dessert. Then, linger over their coffee, or a nice bottle of port. Janice never rushed anyone, and staggered the second bookings to allow for it.

Dwayne wanted to try everything, so they had no call to consult the menu. Helen started him off with the roast loin of pork. He paid it his highest compliment.

“This is tasty, Helen. Are you sure you won't try some?” he asked.

“No, I'm fine, thanks.”

Helen had brought a little bowl of broccoli for herself. Just a few steamed tops, which she'd run under the broiler with some grated pecorino romano cheese. She never ate proper 'meals'. Not in the

traditional sense, where you sat down and polished off a heaping plateful of food. She ate more or less continuously throughout the day. Like a cat, she thought.

Dwayne ate more like a dog.

Made sense they had trouble getting along.

Dwayne was intent on sharing his pork, apparently. He offered some to Rosalind, who had opted for a half portion of the poached salmon. She declined, as well.

“I haven’t been eating much red meat lately,” she explained.

“Christ. On top of everything else, now you’re going vegetarian?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s the hormones they put in it. They’re bad for me, right now.”

Helga cautioned against consuming red meat during the cleansing period. Particularly the sort of red meat produced in the United States, which was heavily laden with growth-stimulating hormones. Helga ate nothing but reindeer meat herself, which she imported from Finland. Rosalind once tried some - just an introductory trial pack of frozen steaks - but they were terribly expensive, and she found them rather tough.

She didn’t miss the meat all that much.

Their discussion inevitably returned to the topic of the pigs. Rosalind felt uncomfortable with the idea of transplanting their organs.

“Seems ghoulish, if you ask me,” she said.

“Come on!” Dwayne scoffed. “That’s what people were saying thirty years ago! Remember? When they transplanted that first human heart, in South Africa? The media had a field day with it. But now, everyone has embraced the new technology. Transplant surgery has almost become commonplace.”

Rosalind had something else in mind. “That’s not what I mean. The ghoulish part is removing the organs from living pigs. It just doesn’t seem right, somehow.”

“Why? Pigs are alive when we butcher them to make sausage, aren’t they? From the pig’s point of view, I can’t imagine the end product matters very much. Bacon, pork sausage, organs...what’s the problem with that?”

Helen gave a little laugh. “Pretty obvious, isn’t it? These organs you’re taking? The pigs need them, I should imagine.”

Dwayne had been expecting them to gang up on him, at some point. Fortunately, he had prepared a few decent arguments in advance.

He related a few of the case histories, which Cindy had gathered online, about people who were languishing on waiting lists. Then, proceeded to tell them about the rapidly emerging trade in illicit organs. Impoverished parents selling their children's kidneys in India. Livers being taken from helpless mental patients in Africa. Bernie's story about removing the hearts from executed prisoners in China.

Rosalind was mortified. "God. I had no idea."

"Yeah. It's heart-wrenching stuff. As I see it, we've come to the point where medical science has outstripped the medical system. As surgeons pioneer new transplant techniques, people's expectations will rise even higher. But the system can't supply enough parts as it is. That's where the pigs come in.

"Disregarding metaphysics for the moment, the human body is essentially a machine. Am I right? And like any machine, the parts eventually wear out. Some are defective to begin with. Think of the pigs as little factories, churning out replacement parts."

Dwayne felt satisfied that he'd made his point. He relaxed fully into his chair, and downed his glass of zinfandel.

A little dribble ran down his chin.

It made Helen think of blood.



## CHAPTER 8

### XENIA, SIX OF SEVEN

Saturday

When Dwayne arrived in the morning, nursing a hangover, Clinton was nowhere in sight. Caroline was already at work, laying down some clean straw for the animals. Her father had left to make arrangements about a trailer.

“There’s a fresh pot of coffee in the office,” she offered graciously. “Look around, if you’d like. I’ll be done in a minute.”

Dwayne wasn’t sure what to make of the place. He had been expecting something a little more sterile.

He knew nothing about raising pigs, except for what he’d learned in the documents from Xenogenics. So he had expected the breeding facility to resemble the one he’d read about in the private offering, in which the transgenic animals were kept in an immaculate laboratory-like setting, and reared in isolation, under strictly-controlled sterile conditions.

He had anticipated that Xenogenics might be bending the rules somewhat, at their temporary facility. But these pigs were being raised like ordinary farm animals.

The opposition to using transgenic animals for medical experiments was not confined to animal rights activists, and religious extremists. Some well-respected scientists had also voiced their concern, particularly virologists, who feared that transplantation of such tissues might introduce potentially lethal animal viruses into the human population. As an example, they cited HIV - the retrovirus thought responsible for AIDS - which many researchers believed had been transmitted to humans from monkeys.

In response, the FDA had drafted a set of guidelines for the husbandry of transgenic animals, intended for cross-species transplants. But Xenogenics had made no effort to comply with them. With good reason: their breeding facility was better suited to storing hay.

It was an agricultural pole building, with creosoted timbers set into the ground around the perimeter of a concrete slab. The framing was fully exposed, as were the prefabricated wooden trusses, which had been bolted to the top of the poles. Some of the purlins supporting the roof bore muddy bootprints, where the carpenters had trod on them, while the planks were still on the ground.

One corner of the building had been partitioned off with three sheets of bare construction-grade plywood, stood on edge - the office, presumably - while the rest of the structure was open. About half the floor space was taken up with enclosures for the animals.

Dwayne counted sixteen.

The coffee maker was mounted on a crude shelf, screwed onto one of the sheets of plywood. He helped himself, and carried the cup with him as he walked around, looking over the animals.

Some of them were allowed to run loose. One of the smaller pigs persisted in rubbing its snout against his leg, like a house cat, asking for a bit of attention. Dwayne shied away from it.

“Xenia, you bad girl! Stop that!” Caroline came over, and gave the animal a firm slap on the rump, which sent it scurrying.

*Xenia?*

Dwayne distinctly recalled Helen using the name in connection with the animal that had recently been sold. But the pig that Caroline called Xenia barely came up to his knee. It was obviously a juvenile, and would surely have a heart too small for a man the size of Cayle.

“That’s her name? Xenia?”

Caroline nodded.

Dwayne wanted to be certain there was no mistake. “You must feel sad about selling her. Helen mentioned that she’s become one of your favorites.”

“Oh, no. That’s a different Xenia.”

Dwayne waited for an explanation.

Caroline seemed a little embarrassed. “Actually, all of them are named Xenia,” she confessed, briefly looking down. “My dad doesn’t like it when I give them names. He says it’s unhealthy, getting too attached to them.”

“Oh. I see.”

“But I have to call them something. You know. Besides ‘pig’. So I call them all Xenia. Or Xeno, if they’re males. The pig we sold is Xenia, Six of Seven. She’s from the same litter as Xeno, Five of Seven, who went to Mr. Colerabi. Would you like to see her?”

“Very much.”

The authentic Xenia had a spacious enclosure all to herself. Cayle wouldn’t be short-changed in the heart department, at least. The beast was enormous.

The animal rose to its feet, and started wagging its comical little tail as Caroline approached, then stuck its snout over the rail, hoping she’d scratch its neck.

Caroline obliged.

“Hey! Who’s a good girl!”

Clinton’s attempt at preventing his daughter from becoming attached to the animals clearly wasn’t working. The pig even had some toys - soccer ball, a frisbee, and a sorry-looking, much-abused plush animal, which bore some resemblance to a muskrat.

Dwayne asked Caroline whether she’d noticed anything different about the transgenic pigs, compared to the ones she’d raised before.

“They’re just pigs,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “They seem pretty smart, though.”

Naturally, Dwayne thought. He’d expect an increase in intelligence, with the inclusion of human genetic material. Their skin color baffled him a bit, though. Ordinary pigs were pink, he thought, while these were a deep russet brown. He didn’t understand genetics all that well. But it seemed remarkable that just a few human genes could cause such a dramatic change in skin color.

Xenogenics was running a budget operation, however. So, perhaps they’d obtained their human foetal cells from an inner-city abortion clinic. And got a person of color, presumably.

“Aren’t they rather dark?” he asked.

“Oh, that’s their normal color. They’re Duroc-Jerseys,” she explained. “Nice, aren’t they?”

A glass-fronted trophy case was mounted prominently on the wall, at eye level. Dwayne wandered over to have a look. Their collection of blue ribbons for their prize pigs was impressive, but what really caught his eye was a pair of framed, portrait photographs, both of which were draped with a black velvet ribbon. One showed the face of a heavy-set man. The other, a middle-aged woman. It appeared to be a memorial of some sort.

Caroline noticed him scrutinizing them. “Those were from our first two litters,” she said.

Dwayne scratched his head. “I don’t understand.”

“Well, the lady on the right, that’s Mrs. Lettis. She got our first liver. That was from Xenia, Two of Six. And the man is Mr. Colerabi. He got our first heart. From Xeno, Five of Seven.”

Caroline lowered her eyes to the floor, and began sweeping a wide arc into the wood chips with the toe of her boot.

“Neither of them lived very long, I’m afraid,” she added, sadly. “Mr. Colerabi held on for ten days. He was doing fine, too. Walking around, and everything. But then he got pneumonia.

“They’d given him all these drugs. You know, so his body wouldn’t reject the new heart. But the drugs weakened his whole immune system. That’s why the infection got so bad. Dr. Xong thinks they might have used too high a dose. So he’s trying something different this time. It’s a rare herbal medicine. From China.”

*Herbal* medicine? After all that sophisticated, genetic engineering? Talk about experimenting.

“What’s Dr. Xong like? I’ve never met him.”

“Oh, he’s really smart. He knows a whole lot about pigs. Lots of people raise their own, in China. His medical school even kept a few. You know, for their cafeteria.”

“I’m flying down there this afternoon,” Dwayne said.

“Really? To the clinic?”

Dwayne nodded. “I have a business meeting scheduled with Dr. Xong.”

Caroline thought for a moment. “If it’s not, like...urgent, or anything, why don’t you come down with us? That way, you could spend the rest of the weekend visiting with Helen!”

He gave her a questioning look.

“We’re taking Xenia down on Monday,” she explained. “Me and my Dad. There’s plenty of room in the pickup.”

Dwayne hadn't expected events to unfold quite so quickly. Yet Bernie had been telling all along that Cayle's heart had precious little time left. Perhaps he'd taken a turn for the worse.

Caroline thought to add something. "It might be kind of a long trip, though. My dad figures on a day and a half. We'll have to take it pretty slow, towing Xenia."

Dwayne graciously declined. "Wish I could, Caroline, but you know how it is. Business comes first."

Caroline sighed. Adults were so predictable. Her dad was fond of saying the same thing. Only with him, it was always 'chores come first'.

"Hey! Tell you what," Dwayne offered. He glanced toward the trophy case. "Since I've already got my camera with me, and I'm headed down there, anyway - maybe I could take a nice photograph of Mr. Cayle, for you. Would you like that?"

"Oh, please! Could you?" Caroline enthused.

"No trouble, at all."

"I've been worried that I wouldn't be able to get one," she confided. "His surgery is scheduled for Wednesday morning, and Dr. Xong might not want me to disturb him. You know. The night before."

Dwayne suddenly looked troubled.

Caroline worried that he might be reconsidering the offer.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

“Well. It might be a little awkward. Dr. Xong doesn’t even know me. So, I’m wondering how it will look. You know. A perfect stranger comes snooping around, toting a professional-looking camera. I’d hate to have him think I’m invading his privacy.” Dwayne grinned broadly. “Let’s face it. My photography has been getting me into hot water, lately.”

Caroline nodded sagely. “I see what you mean.” Then, she brightened. “I’ll write Charlie a little note! How’s that? Then, he’ll know what it’s for!”

They both agreed. It was a sensible plan.

Dwayne had to leave, to catch his flight, so Caroline went into the office to write the note. But the only writing paper available in the office were a couple of lined, spiral notebooks, like the ones she used in school. She wanted something a little nicer, and headed up the house to snatch some of her mother’s stationery. She stopped short, just as she was about to leave the barn.

“Wait! I’m not sure how to spell his name,” she announced.

Dwayne didn’t know if she meant Cayle, or Dr. Xong.

“Whose do you mean?” he asked.

“Mr. Quayle.”

“No, it’s *Cayle*. Dan Cayle.” He spelled it out.

Caroline concentrated intently, committing it to memory, then sprinted off.

She soon returned, clutching a small, brown paper bag. She unfolded the top, and extracted a small, flower-embossed envelop.

“This oughta do the trick,” Caroline predicted.

She confidently dropped the envelop back into the sack, and passed it over. Dwayne was surprised by the weight of it. He peeked inside. The bag also held a pair of screw-top glass jars. Home-canning jars, looked like.

“What, uh...”

“They’re my mom’s butter pickles,” Caroline explained. “Charlie really loves them.”

Saturday November 12  
AT THE  
**CRAB POT CAFE**

Smoked Salmon Soup

or

Wild Mushroom Soup

with mixed chanterelles, boletes, and black trumpet mushrooms

Green Salad of the Day

with radicchio, romano, and roasted garlic vinaigrette

Grilled Chicken à la Orange

with prawns and chanterelle mushrooms in blood orange glaze  
over mixed mesclun greens

or

Roast Loin of Venison

with braised Northern Spy apples and Forelle pears  
over wild mushroom risotto

or

Halibut and Razor Clam Roulade

with wild oyster mushrooms and applewood smoked bacon  
in clam nectar reduction and crème fraîche

Peppered Lamb Loin

with wilted red chard and braised savoy cabbage  
over mint-infused linguine

or

Barbecued Chinook Salmon

grilled over alderwood, in honey and lemon glaze  
with hickory nut and corn bread stuffing

or

Mango Glazed Duck

with roasted red peppers and sliced mango  
over coconut cream basmati rice

Baked Forelle Pears

with hickory nut brittle and crème brûlée

or

Hazelnut Cheesecake

with dark espresso chocolate sauce

PRIX FIXE \$60 / SERVICE NOT INCLUDED

## CHAPTER 9

### HORMONES

Saturday

“What’s with all the baked pears?” Rosalind asked. “This makes three nights in a row.”

“Yeah, I know,” Helen said. “But I’ve got all these ripe pears...”

The previous two nights had made a dent in the fruit, but she still had several bushels of Forelle pears and Northern Spy apples in the walk-in fridge.

“Where’d you get them?”

“Remember Tom Maitow? From the Town Council?”

Rosalind shook her head.

“Well, Tom has a lovely fruit and nut orchard. Heirloom varieties, for the most part. He trades his extra fruit with Clinton, for pork roasts. But Clinton stores the frozen pork here at the restaurant, so this is where Tom brings the fruit.”

“So...they’re Clinton’s pears?”

“Yeah, I guess. Technically. But Clinton doesn’t fancy pears all that much. So I try to use what I can. I’d hate to see them go to waste.”

“Uh-huh...”

“The restaurant trades with Clinton, too. He uses our food scraps and freezer space. Then, there’s always other stuff. Last week it was a three-pound brick of double Gloucester cheese. Five pounds of butter before that. It all evens out.”

“And what do we trade for? Besides the fruit?”

“Meat. I thought you knew that.”

“Well...sure. If you mean the venison.” The restaurant had been serving locally-hunted deer meat for years. No one had ever complained. The county health inspector was an avid hunter, himself, and turned a blind eye to the uninspected venison. “But we’re not serving Clinton’s pork, are we?”

“Only the loin cuts.”

Rosalind was mortified. According to Dwayne, the transgenic pigs produced what were essentially human proteins. “Helen! We can’t serve people genetically-altered meat! God. It’s practically cannibalism.”

Helen refused to take it seriously. “Come on! You didn’t even taste it.”

Rosalind gritted her teeth. “Helen? You’re not listening...”

“No, honestly. Why would Xenogenics alter the meat? They’re only interested in the internal organs. That’s why Clinton has so much pork. It’s lovely meat. No hormones, at all. I bet you’d like it.”

Rosalind stared up at the ceiling. Kept silent for a moment.  
“Helen?” she asked quietly.

“What?”

“There’s one thing I’d like you to consider. All right? Are you listening?”

“Shoot.”

“Lawsuit.”

“Ahh...”

Helen seldom thought of such things.

She didn’t even have insurance on her car. She’d never been in an accident. Hardly ever went anywhere. So what was the point? Buying insurance was like betting against herself.

Yet her circumstances had changed dramatically over the last few years. Her pockets were no longer empty. In fact, they were now rather deep, according to Rosalind, who kept the books. Spiritually, Helen preferred the idea of owning nothing.

But one had to sensible.

## CHAPTER 10

### CAYLE

Saturday

Dr. Xong was pleased with the pickles, apparently.

Dwayne had barely settled into his waiting room seat, and leafed through only a few pages of *Sports Illustrated*, before the receptionist returned, and escorted him back to the doctor's private office.

Dr. Xong was a small, studious-looking man. He had already cracked open one of the jars, and was seated at his desk, plucking out a pickle with a pair of hemostats. He smiled widely.

"Hey! Great pickles!" he said.

Dwayne was surprised by his command of English. He spoke with almost no accent. Dr. Xong motioned for him to take a seat. Then, he picked up Caroline's handwritten note, which was laying open on his desk, and began reading through it.

Dwayne took the opportunity to survey the contents of the room.

It was sparsely furnished, with cheap-looking, black-enameled metal office furniture. The walls were bare, except for an array of diplomas and framed professional certificates mounted behind his desk.

Most of them were printed in Chinese, which made the one in English immediately stand out.

Charlie Xong had graduated from Stanford.

Dr. Xong removed his reading glasses, and held up the note.

“Perhaps you can help to explain this. Caroline says that she’d like a portrait photograph of Dan Cayle. I find the request rather odd.”

Dwayne shrugged. “Maybe she figures it’ll bring him luck.”

Dr. Xong waved the suggestion aside. “Oh, I fully understand why she wants it. That’s not what puzzles me. You see, I haven’t spoken with Caroline since Cayle became my patient. I’ve been in touch with her father recently, but I’m quite certain that I never mentioned Dan Cayle. Unlike his daughter, Clinton has no desire to become emotionally attached to my patients. And rightly so. So, how could Caroline have known to ask for Cayle’s photograph, by name?”

Dwayne winced slightly, but managed to maintain his composure by squeezing forcefully on the armrests of his chair, a technique which he’d perfected during visits to his dentist, to avoid embarrassing himself. He couldn’t recall how Cayle’s name had first come up, in his conversation with Caroline. But clearly, he’d been mistaken, assuming that she had already known everything about Cayle. Still, he wasn’t about to compound his gaffe by offering up a lame excuse.

“I must have let it slip,” he admitted.

Dr. Xong eyed him warily. “I see.”

“Perhaps I should explain. I’m a media consultant, Dr. Xong. From New York.”

Dwayne unlatched his briefcase, and pulled out one of the photographs which Cindy had downloaded off the Internet. It showed a sad-looking woman, seated on an overstuffed sofa, wearing a floral print housedress. She was flanked by her two teenage children. A large calico cat was nestled on her lap. He handed the photo to Dr. Xong.

“Several months ago, I was approached by the family of this woman, and asked if I could assist in securing her a heart transplant. Her name is Dolores Unyon. The case has attracted a good deal of favorable publicity recently. Perhaps you’ve heard of it?”

Dr. Xong shook his head.

“Well, I’m not too surprised. The New York media is a world unto itself. Suffice it to say, that despite an outpouring of sympathy, and a highly successful fund-raising campaign, Dolores Unyon continues to languish on the waiting list, with little chance of obtaining a new heart. She’s not seen as a suitable candidate. As you can see, she’s rather, uh...obese.

“Her family is discouraged, of course, although they’ve continued to operate their website, which has become something of a forum for the

debate over the allocation of donated organs. Which brings me to the point of my visit. Her brother contacted me again, just last week, about some allegations which have come light concerning Xenogenics, and your patient, Dan Cayle. For instance, are you aware that Mr. Cayle has three prior convictions for illicit narcotics possession?”

Dr. Xong was visibly distressed.

Dwayne took it as an encouraging sign.

“But, it doesn’t stop there,” Dwayne went on, wagging his finger in the air, for emphasis. “Mr. Cayle also has a history of violent behavior towards women. He’s had restraining orders placed against him for harassment. Even been arrested, for beating up both of his ex-wives.

“Dolores Unyon, on the other hand, has an equally long history of volunteer service to the community, including hospice work with the victims of domestic violence. Compared to Cayle, the woman’s practically a saint.”

Charlie Xong had managed to regain his composure. “Might I ask the source of these charges?”

“The message was signed simply, ‘an outraged heart surgeon’. But I’ve since taken the precaution of confirming the allegations, myself. The Court records are public documents. It’s all there.”

Dr. Xong’s response was slow, and measured. “This woman has my sympathy. Obviously. But my duty as a doctor requires that I treat

the patients under my care. Not interrogate them. When Mr. Cayle chose me as his surgeon, the only aspect of his past that was of concern me was his medical history. As for the inherent injustice in having to allocate a limited supply of donated human organs - well, I assure you, Dwayne, that's precisely the problem we're trying to address."

"Oh, don't get me wrong, Dr. Xong. I, uh...say, would it be all right if I called you Charlie? I couldn't help noticing, when Caroline addressed her note to you, that she..."

"Certainly. Please do."

Dwayne smiled. "Well, just between us, Charlie, let me say that I appreciate what you're trying to accomplish, down here. In fact, I think that Xenogenics ought to be congratulated. But the fact remains. They're extralegal experiments. You can't blame the family of Dolores Unyon for wanting to make as much political mileage as they can out of this. They have nothing to lose.

"Unfortunately, Xenogenics stands to lose a great deal, should the licensing process become a political one. And it will, I'm afraid, if these allegations are made public. You see, the problem is, the Congressman from Dolores Unyon's district happens to sit on the House Ethics Committee."

It wasn't necessary to spell out the implications. The outcome of the Congressional hearings on transgenic research would have a direct

bearing on Xenogenics' future. The company couldn't hope to attract investors, if their application to conduct clinical trials was turned down by the Food and Drug Administration.

Not to mention the patent on their pigs.

Charlie Xong sat impassively, with his palms laid flat on the desk, as if he were trying to prevent it from levitating. Then, he seemed to reach some sort of decision. He tapped his fingers lightly on the desktop, and smiled.

"Would you care for a cup of tea?" he offered.

Dr. Xong was reluctant to discuss the substantive issues any further, until he had the chance to consult with his partners at Xenogenics. He seemed equally uncomfortable with small talk. Which left them little to talk about, while they waited for the tea.

Dwayne took the opportunity to add a few embellishments to his resumé in public relations.

"I don't mind telling you, Charlie, I'm feeling a little out of my league," he said, affably. "Don't get me wrong. I'm accustomed to playing for high stakes. I typically deal with corporate clients. That, and a few select, private investors. But, working with people like Dolores Unyon, or Dan Cayle, whose very lives are at stake...well, that's

something else entirely, isn't it? I don't know how you cope with the stress, Charlie. I really don't."

Dr. Xong wasn't immune to flattery. He appeared to relax, and even opened up a little, when he wasn't feeling threatened. Yet, he continued to choose his words with care, and offered little in the way of useful information.

Dwayne sensed that he was more interested in pursuing his medical research, than in becoming a businessman. Naturally, that meant achieving success in the laboratory - or, on the operating table, as the case may be - before attempting to succeed in the marketplace. But the spectre of Cayle's public relations nightmare clearly had him worried. It opened the possibility that even a successful surgery might be greeted with scorn.

Once they'd finished their tea, Charlie escorted Dwayne back to one of the private rooms, so he could meet Mr. Cayle. Then, he excused himself, and returned to his office to place a conference call, while Dwayne took the photos for Caroline.

Cayle was more than willing to pose for the camera. He seemed delighted to have some company.

"You know, you're the first white person I've seen since I got here," he said.

“Yeah? That a fact?” Dwayne was forced to ignore him for a moment, while he fiddled with the adjustments on the tripod, and leveled his videocamera. “They treating you all right, though?”

“Ain’t too bad. They got me a nice stack of videos. But the food sucks. They got a Mex doing the cooking, but Charlie’s making him cook Chinese. Ain’t working. The bastard puts jalapeño peppers in everything. Even the sweet and sour pork.”

Dwayne checked his light meter, then went over to the window and fully opened the bamboo curtains. The room was cheerful, he thought. The lighting would look good with the addition of sunlight reflected off the ocean. Cayle didn’t look too bad, either. Except for an obvious shortness of breath, he appeared quite comfortable, propped up in bed.

“Say. You wouldn’t have any smokes, by any chance?” Cayle asked, hopefully.

Dwayne shook his head.

“Sorry, Dan. Never picked up the habit.” Dwayne attached his zoom lens to the camera, and tested it a few times, to make sure the actuator was operating properly. “Okay, Dan. We’re about ready. I’ll just turn on the camera, and we can start talking. How’s that? Don’t worry about putting on a polished performance, or anything. We’ll edit the tape, later.”

Cayle seemed somewhat at a loss. “You want me to talk about the surgery? Or what?”

“Let’s start with some background stuff, just to get things rolling. Tell me little bit about yourself. Things you like to do. Sports. Hobbies. Stuff like that.”

“Well. I like collecting beer cans,” he said. “Got close to six hundred. None of that foreign stuff. And no aluminum, either. But you can’t hardly find nice, heavy steel ones, anymore. I had fun collecting them, though. Helped to break the monotony, when I was out on the road.”

Dwayne urged him to continue.

“I’m a long-haul trucker,” Cayle explained. “Been through every state in the Union. More than once. Lower forty-eight of ‘em, anyhow.”

Cayle was a natural.

Dwayne sat back for a few minutes, and listened to some of his trucking stories. Then, with a few well-placed prompts, he managed to lead him onto the subject of methamphetamine use in the trucking industry.

“Yeah. They collared me a few times,” he admitted. “But it was entrapment, pure and simple. That’s why they let me off with probation.”

“How’d you get busted?”

“The narcs work the plazas. Way it works is, they prey on your sympathy. One of these guys will come up, while you’re waiting at the pumps. If it’s summertime, he might tell you he’s hauling perishables, and that his fridge just packed up. Or, if it’s in the winter, maybe he’ll say he’s had trouble with his chains, going through the mountains. Then, he’ll spill out his guts. Tell you how he’s worried sick about having to pull another all-nighter, and could you be a pal, and help him out with a pinch of white.

“Usually, they try so hard to act like truckers that it’s easy to spot them. But, sometimes, they’ll use one of our own. Probably after they’ve busted his ass, and gotten their hooks into him. Bastards. It’s gotten to the point where you can’t trust nobody.”

“You seem a little bitter about it.”

“Well, it burns me up. Those white collar guys, they’ll get a fistful of prescriptions from their doctor, so they can cope with their so-called, high-stress jobs. But guys like me...hell, all we get is coffee. Ain’t enough, sometimes.”

Dan Cayle came across as remarkably candid. Dwayne had to give him that.

“Tell me, Dan. What would you say to someone watching this tape, if they were to ask - why does Dan Cayle deserve to be given a new heart? The guy’s got a criminal record.”

Cayle considered it. “Well...unless it was God asking the question, I’d say it’s none of their damn business. I got the right. I’m paying for it out of my own pocket.”

Dwayne was dying to ask how much he’d paid for it. But he restrained himself, and asked about health insurance, instead.

Most medical policies wouldn’t cover experimental surgery, so the extent of Cayle’s health coverage didn’t really concern him. But the broader topic of insurance certainly did. From the outset, he’d been curious to learn why Cayle had been carrying such a large life insurance policy. The couple had no children. So why the \$2.4M? The figure seemed even more out of line, now that he’d learned that the man had driven a truck all his life.

Surprisingly enough, Cayle was willing to talk about it. Given the gravity of his impending surgery, perhaps he felt that the videotape was his last chance to set the record straight.

According to Cayle, his second wife had tried to kill him. Or, she’d wanted him dead, at any rate, so she could collect on the insurance, and retire to Florida with her boyfriend. Cayle hadn’t suspected a thing. She’d been discrete about the long-standing affair, and limited her liaisons to times when he was on the road.

Shortly after he was diagnosed with early symptoms of heart disease, she had conned and cajoled him into massively increasing his

coverage. Cayle hadn't hesitated. It seemed only natural that she'd be feeling insecure. But she grew restive, once his heart weakened to the point where he was forced to discontinue driving, and he constantly stayed at home.

She tried hastening the process.

She began adding extra egg yolks to his omelettes, to boost the cholesterol. Using fattier cuts of beef in her pot roasts, and putting bigger gobs of butter on the potatoes to increase his intake of saturated fat. She might have pulled it off, if she'd been able to resist sneaking off for trysts with her lover.

Dwayne was inclined to believe Cayle's side of the story, regarding the charges of spousal abuse. He readily confessed to hitting his wife. However, he insisted that she'd come at him with broken beer bottle, and that he'd acted on instinct, only in self-defense. The account seemed credible. He came close to tears, telling it, and had spoken to the camera as if it were a priest.

Cayle seemed drained, afterwards, so Dwayne decided to wrap things up. He had considered recording a few sound bites - a plug for Xenogenics, perhaps, or a few kind words about the pigs - but Cayle's endorsements wouldn't be worth much if he failed to survive the surgery. The promo tape could wait.

“Any last, uh...anything else to add, Dan?”

Cayle couldn't think of anything.

So Dwayne switched off the camera, and began packing up his gear.

Cayle had started wheezing, a little. He had turned to face the window, and sat slumped against the pillows, staring out to sea, looking rather sad. He shifted back around when he heard the zipper closing on the camera case. Dwayne gave him a thumbs up.

“I'll see you next week, all right?”

Cayle smiled thinly. “I'll be here.”

When Dwayne returned to the office, Charlie Xong was sitting at his desk. He was ready to talk business.

“It appears that we have a heart available, which should be suitable for Ms. Unyon,” he said. “Of course, I'll need to examine her medical records, and confirm her diagnosis, before agreeing to perform the procedure. How soon can you get them to me?”

“Well, since it's the weekend...I don't know,” Dwayne hedged. “I'll have to check.”

Dr. Xong nodded. “Now, as you can imagine, the expenses involved in an undertaking like this are substantial. You mentioned a

fund-raising campaign. Dolores Unyon's family is in a position to cover these costs, I take it?"

Dwayne had no idea. The woman could be penniless, for all he knew. He'd left it to Cindy to find the photos on the Internet.

"To be honest with you, Charlie, I'd like to hold off discussing the monetary aspects, at this stage. There's costs to consider on the public relations side, as well. So it depends upon how we decide to structure the deal. First, let's see if I can convince the family. They might not consent to an experimental procedure."

"But...I thought you said..."

"What? That they're desperate? Well, that goes without saying, doesn't it? But getting them to accept one of your pig hearts is another matter entirely."

Dr. Xong winced. But said nothing.

"Come on, Charlie," Dwayne urged. "Help me out, here. Give me something that I can take back to them."

Charlie saw the sense in it.

He began riffling through one of his filing cabinets, which contained hundreds of scientific articles, reprinted from the medical journals. He selected a dozen, or so, and passed them to Dwayne, one at a time, after highlighting the most relevant passages with a bright yellow

felt-tipped pen. Then, he retrieved a pair of documents from his office safe, and handed those over, as well.

Dwayne immediately recognized the one on the top. It was the technical section on xenotransplantation, which had been included with Xenogenics' private offering.

The second manila folder contained a report of the autopsy, which Charlie Xong had performed on Mr. Colerabi. The results were encouraging, he felt, and worth pointing out to Dolores Unyon's physician. Particularly, the microscopic analysis of the transgenic heart tissue, which revealed no evidence of rejection whatsoever.

"What do you make of Cayle's chances?" Dwayne asked.

"Oh, quite good," Dr. Xong said, without hesitation. "At least in the short term. He should survive the surgery."

"And after that?"

Charlie shrugged. "That's entirely up to him. His blood pressure is higher than I'd like. So unless he sheds some of his unhealthy habits...not to mention a few pounds...well, we'll just have to see."

With that, Dr. Xong stood up, and offered his hand.

## CHAPTER 11

### XENO - THREE OF SIX

Saturday

“Helen! Guess what?” Caroline exclaimed, bursting into the kitchen as she arrived for work. “Dad thinks we’ve sold another pig!”

Helen was kneading the dough for the linguine. Her hands were white with flour. “Whoa sister!” she laughed, warning Caroline off as she tried to embrace her.

Caroline could barely contain her excitement. She was panting, in fact, having just run the half mile from home.

“Charlie just called...from Mexico,” she managed to say, before pausing to catch her breath. “I mean, it’s not like...definite, or anything. But Dad says we should figure on two weeks. We’re putting Xeno, Three of Six, on an accelerated cardio program. He’s close to the target heart rate already.”

Helen smiled. “That’s just great.”

“Yeah. Dad’s over the moon.”

CHAPTER 12  
THE DETECTIVE

Saturday

Dolores Unyon's family would need a few days, Dwayne imagined, in order to weigh the options, and adjust to the idea of transplanting a pig heart into their mother.

Their initial response was likely to be cynical, much like his own. Yet, with no other hearts on the horizon, and Mom's life hanging in the balance, they couldn't afford to reject the notion out of hand. The days leading up to Cayle's surgery would give them the opportunity to air their pessimism. Then, after several days of doubt and despair, even an ambiguous result might seem like a ray of hope. Cayle had to last only a few days.

Dwayne couldn't leave it until Monday to contact the family, at any rate. After disposing of his rental car at the San Diego airport, he called Cindy at home. She seemed only slightly upset.

"Dwayne! It's after ten o'clock."

"I know. I'm sorry to bother you on the weekend, old girl, but I need to get hold of one of those women on the waiting list. Dolores Unyon."

“Which one was she?”

“Uh...three kids...calico cat?”

“Can you hold on? I’ll have to go online, and see if there’s a contact number.”

“Actually, I was hoping that you could just send her an e-mail.”

Cindy didn’t respond.

“Please? It’s important,” Dwayne pleaded. “I think I’ve found her a heart.”

“How’d you manage...?” Cindy paused abruptly. “Hey. Wait a minute. It’s one of those creepy pig hearts, isn’t it? I thought you said they wouldn’t work.”

“I might have been wrong about that,” Dwayne confessed. “Trust me. From what I’ve learned, I’d say her chances are as good as any, with one of these transgenic hearts. We should contact her, at least. See if she’s interested.”

Cindy didn’t trust him, unfortunately, so Dwayne was forced to elaborate.

Dolores Unyon had several things working in her favor.

Charlie Xong specialized in treating the morbidly obese. He had chosen the specialty, the very first day, when he flew into San Diego and noticed that everyone in the airport looked fat. He had been out of the

country for close to fifteen years - he'd returned to China, after graduating from Stanford - so the overall obesity of the American population had come as somewhat of a shock.

And a revelation.

Even though he intended to set up shop in Mexico, the bulk of his patients would naturally be drawn from Southern California. There were dozens of liposuction clinics operating along the Baja coast, all of them doing a thriving business. Living off the fat of the land, so to speak. The land to the north.

He'd get plenty of referrals.

Regarding transplant surgery, Dr. Xong was convinced that obesity could actually confer certain advantages. Obese patients tended to have grossly enlarged hearts. This was particularly true in the case of Dan Cayle, whose heart had swollen to almost twice its normal size. As a result, an over-sized pig heart could be used to replace it, without causing inflammation to the pericardial sac.

With the larger organ in place, Dr. Xong had the option of suppressing the heart rate with muscle relaxants, while still maintaining an adequate supply of blood. This would reduce stress on the sutures, and allow them to heal.

Dolores Unyon would have a chance at least.

“Come on, Cindy. Think about what we’re trying to accomplish, here. When was the last time you had the chance to save someone’s life?”

“Oh, all right,” she finally relented. “What do you want me to say?”

Dwayne dictated a brief letter, provisionally offering Ms. Unyon a new heart. He added the request that she consult her doctor, and ask him to respond as soon as possible.

“Send it under my name, of course. And put ‘Xenogenics’ in caps, underneath.”

“Got it.”

“Where was she from? Do you remember?” Dwayne asked.

“New Jersey. Newark, I think.”

Damn. He could have sworn it was New York. But what the hell. New Jersey was close enough.

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Dwayne also called his brother, Malcolm, to let him know that he’d signed up Cayle.

“Yeah, no trouble, at all. He’s thrilled to death, that he might be on TV. But I wasn’t too impressed with that contract you sent. Seems as if you’re slipping a bit.”

“Why? Something wrong with it?” Malcolm asked.

“The guy’s just a booking agent.”

“Yeah. So?”

“Well, what’s our slice come to? A whopping two percent. Hardly seems worth it, does it? Didn’t it occur to you that Cayle needs more than a booking agent? He’ll need a manager, won’t he?”

Malcolm had no answer.

“Well, I took care of it,” Dwayne said. “I signed him to a management contract with us, for another fifteen percent. Of course, since you’re the one with the plush office in New York, you’ll have to look after him while he’s out there doing the talk shows. Hire him a limo, or whatever.”

“Yeah. I can do that. But what gives? Last time we spoke, you said the guy was as good as dead. Why the sudden change of heart?”

“Yeah. Well, I might have been wrong about that,” Dwayne replied.

Admittedly, Cayle’s odds had shortened, somewhat.

But he was still a longshot.

Cayle hadn’t struck him as the sort of man who would arise miraculously from his hospital bed, as if from the ashes, and suddenly embrace health foods. He’d be more likely to celebrate with a pepperoni

pizza. Maybe a few quarts of beer. Seemed a shame in a way. Dwayne had rather liked the guy.

“You wouldn’t believe these pigs, Malcolm. Christ. You should see them. They’re impressive animals.”

His brother was curious, naturally, so Dwayne briefly summarized what he’d uncovered over the weekend. He deleted any reference to Dolores Unyon, however. Malcolm could remain in the dark about her for the time being.

“Get any footage?” Malcolm asked.

“Yeah. I’ll send the tape when I get back.”

“Well, then. I’d say we’re sitting pretty.”

Dwayne was inclined to agree.

“Heard anything from Cayle’s old doctor?” Malcolm inquired.

“What’s his name...Bernie? How’s he taking all this?”

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When Dwayne deplaned at San Francisco International airport, Bernie Eisberg was waiting for him at the gate. Dwayne assumed that it wasn’t simply to give him a lift home.

Christ. He hated being surprised like this.

“You’re late,” Bernie said.

Dwayne had taken the last shuttle flight out of San Diego, as he’d planned. He vaguely recalled discussing his schedule with Bernie, but felt certain that he hadn’t mentioned anything specific.

Bernie hadn’t come alone, as it turned out. He introduced the burly, crew-cut fellow who was standing next to him, dressed all in black.

“Dwayne? Meet Herb Garnisch. He’s the guy I was telling you about. Designed my security system.”

Dwayne set down his bag, and shook the man’s hand. It was alarmingly cold. So were his eyes.

“This all your luggage, Dwayne?” Herb asked, amiably. He snatched Dwayne’s overnight bag off the floor, and reached for the shoulder strap of his camera bag, as if he intended to carry both.

Dwayne wasn’t about to relinquish the camera case. He kept his private line in there, his contact numbers, palm organizer...everything. He transferred the strap to his far shoulder. “That’s okay, Herb. I can manage.”

Bernie nudged him on the arm, and three of them started walking together toward the exit. “Sorry to ambush you on your way home like this,” Bernie said. “But we need to talk. I hope you don’t have any plans.”

“No, not really. Not unless you count going to sleep. Which I wouldn’t mind doing, by the way. Can’t this wait until morning?”

Bernie firmly shook his head. He continued walking rapidly. “No. Something’s come up. Herb’s leaving town in the morning, and I wanted him to talk with you first.”

“About what?”

Bernie glanced around rather nervously. He moved a step closer. “Our strategy against Xenogenics,” he said, under his breath. “If they think we’re going down without a fight...well, they’ll just have to think again.”

Dwayne grabbed hold of his sleeve, and dragged him to a halt. “Bernie! Christ! Are you out of your...”

Bernie yanked the arm free, and threw up his hands, making it clear that he was unwilling to discuss the matter any further. Not inside the terminal building. He turned on his heels, and resumed walking toward the exit. Dwayne had no choice but to tag along. Herb had his suitcase.

He caught up with them once they reached the street.

“So where are we going?” he asked resignedly.

“There’s a Denny’s next to the Marriott. We can talk there. It’s not far. We’ll take Herb’s car.”

Herb was already fishing for his keys. He approached a car parked at the curb, directly opposite the exit in a posted no-parking area. A blue, police vehicle light was mounted slightly askew on the roof. After unlocking the driver's side door, Herb snapped off the light, and tossed it onto the back seat.

"This is crazy," Dwayne complained. "Why can't we go to the coffee shop in the airport?"

"There's no place to get your film developed."

Christ. The film from Xenogenics.

It suddenly became clear why Bernie had been so anxious to meet his flight. He was dispatching his detective to Oregon, and wanted him to see the photos of the breeding facility before he left.

Dwayne swallowed hard. He acquiesced, and allowed himself to be bundled into the front seat. The restaurant was located on the airport frontage road, less than a mile from the terminal. There was scarcely any traffic at night, so the trip took only a couple minutes. Bernie asked for the film as they entered the parking lot.

By the time Dwayne retrieved the film canisters from his camera case, Herb had pulled up to entrance and stopped. Bernie had arranged for Herb to have them developed at an all-night drug store nearby.

"Half an hour, max," Herb promised.

The dining room was virtually empty, except for a few people seated at the lunch counter. Bernie opted for a large booth, off in the corner. As soon as they'd taken their seats, he made an announcement, of sorts.

"Dr. Xong's surgical team is flying into Tijuana, early Tuesday morning. From China."

Dwayne was impressed. "How'd you hear that?"

"Herb used to work in drug enforcement. He still has contacts, down there. Customs and Immigration."

"I see."

"It doesn't leave us much time," Bernie said. "Xong will wait until they've gotten over their jet lag, I would imagine, so we're probably looking at Thursday. Friday, at the latest."

Dwayne saw no reason not to tell him. Given the circumstances, it made sense to remind Bernie that he could sometimes be mistaken. "It's scheduled for Wednesday morning, actually. Nine o'clock."

Bernie's jaw dropped. He appeared to have completely forgotten where Dwayne had just come from.

"Charlie Xong told me, himself," Dwayne added.

Bernie began peppering him with questions. Dwayne refused to be drawn in.

“Honestly, Bernie, I can’t see what you’re getting so worked up about. Dr. Xong more or less admitted that Cayle’s surgery is little more than an experiment. He doesn’t give the guy much of a chance.”

“He said that?”

“Yeah. Something about his blood pressure being too high.”

Bernie wouldn’t buy it. “Well, of course he’d say that! Don’t you get it? He’s just trying to throw you off. Cayle’s blood pressure should be manageable, with proper medication. It was never that high to begin with.”

Herb Garnisch soon returned with the developed prints. He tossed the pair of envelopes onto the table - in front of Bernie, Dwayne noticed - then sauntered off to find a waitress, and order himself a cup of coffee.

Bernie started flipping through the photos.

The first roll consisted entirely of shots of the breeding facility, which Dwayne had taken from the window of his rental car. Considering the atrocious conditions - the steady drizzle, and rapidly fading light - Dwayne thought they’d come out rather well.

Bernie paused halfway through. He shook his head.

“Well, you were right about one thing. Their farm isn’t too impressive, is it? You’d think Xenogenics would at least clean up the trash.”

Dwayne tried to encourage that line of thinking.

“Their clinic in Ensenada isn’t much to brag about, either. You should see it. It’s a dinky little place.”

Herb returned carrying his coffee, and slid into the booth. He’d also bought himself a piece of cream pie. Coconut, looked like. Bernie handed him the prints from the first roll, and immediately turned his attention to the second, which contained photos of the pigs, and the interior of the pole building.

Bernie spent a little more time with those. He showed one to Dwayne.

“Who’s the kid?”

“Name’s Caroline. Her father owns the place,” Dwayne explained.

“Nice kid. She helps out with the animals.”

Herb Garnisch leaned across the table, and examined the photo of Caroline, as well. “This little girl? She lives there?”

Dwayne nodded.

“What’s she doing?” he asked, obviously puzzled.

“Exercising the pigs. She’s trained them to run on a treadmill.”

“Looks like a pretty big pig.”

Herb reached into the inside pocket of his leather jacket, and pulled out a small spiral notebook. Then, fished inside a second time,

searching for his pen. His jacket front fell open, and Dwayne noticed that Herb was wearing a shoulder holster.

Which presumably meant a gun.

Once he had the chance to think about it, Dwayne wasn't all that surprised - the man was a private detective, after all - but at first sight, the weapon came as quite a shock. He squeezed the edge of the formica table, to steady himself.

Bernie had finished studying the photographs. He turned to Herb.

"Well, what do you think?"

Herb shrugged. "I'm not sure, Bernie. Shouldn't be a problem getting in. That's plain enough. Nobody in their right mind would bother with a security system on a place like that. We could gain entry just about anywhere, with a decent sheet metal nibbler. Easy as opening up a can of soup.

"But there's too many animals. How am I supposed to know if I've got the right pig? I can't tell them apart. Let's face it. It could get messy."

Dwayne suddenly felt dizzy.

He closed his eyes, and took a few deep breaths, hoping to get a grip. Instead, he pictured Herb Garnisch, disguised in a black balaclava, approaching the pig shed under the cover of darkness, carrying his sheet metal nibbler. Then, cutting through the side of the breeding shed.

Peeling back the loosened flap of pastel yellow sheet metal. Inserting a clip into his gun. Stepping through the hole.

Dwayne opened his eyes, as the pigs began to squeal.

Bernie was staring at him.

“Man. I’d better order something to eat,” Dwayne said, before yawning, and pausing to rub his eyes. “I’ve been running on caffeine, all day. You want anything?”

Bernie declined.

Dwayne got unsteadily to his feet, and went over to the take-out counter to order himself a bacon burger. And consider his options.

Dwayne couldn’t simply walk away. Like it or not, he and Bernie Eisberg were irretrievably linked together as partners, as a result of their viatical deal. Which meant that they would most likely be prosecuted together, as co-conspirators, if Bernie unleashed his hired gun.

Dwayne had literally gone out of his way to incriminate himself. He’d spied on the pigs, and taken photographs of the breeding facility in Oregon. Then, flown to Ensenada, and gathered intelligence about Cayle. There seemed little doubt about who would come out the loser, if accusations started flying inside a courtroom, and he found himself pitted against a well-respected heart surgeon.

Bernie would surely bring in more hired guns.

The man was more paranoid than ever. So it seemed pointless sticking with the old strategy of trying to downplay the threat posed by Xenogenics. Not with the surgery only a few days away, and Herb Garnisch scheduled to leave for Oregon in the morning. Dwayne suspected that Bernie might even ask him to tag along, in order to finger Xenia.

Still. Even though Bernie had apparently made up his mind about the pigs, perhaps Dwayne could convince Herb to reconsider. Seemed worth a try, at least. He prepared himself.

When he returned to the table, Bernie was still discussing the photos with Herb. They had separated out the shots of the pigs, and lined them up on the table top. Comparing their markings, apparently.

“Did you find out which animal they’ve got earmarked for Cayle?” Bernie inquired.

“Why do you ask?” Dwayne replied.

He took a big bite out of his bacon burger, and felt himself gathering strength. Bernie was visibly irritated by his flippant response.

“Do you know which pig it is, or not?” he snapped.

“Yeah, Bernie. I know which one. But tell me something. I’m a little curious. How much have you told Herb here, about these pigs?”

Bernie eyed him menacingly. More significantly, Herb instantly turned to Bernie, looking concerned, and no doubt confused about what was going on.

Dwayne promptly continued. “These aren’t your ordinary, barnyard pigs, Herb. Far from it. In scientific terms, they’re more properly referred to as ‘transgenic donor animals’. Do you know why?”

Bernie cut in. “Herb doesn’t need to...”

Dwayne interrupted right back. “Oh, I beg to differ, Bernie. We have a clear ethical responsibility, here. Herb has the right to know exactly what he’s getting himself involved in. Christ. It seems only fair. He could find himself facing some pretty serious charges, over this.”

“Don’t listen...”

Herb interrupted, this time. “Hey! Hold on, Bernie. I want to hear him out.”

Dwayne had Herb’s complete attention.

“You see, Herb, these particular pigs are being raised for their internal organs. Special, genetically-engineered organs, as it happens, which can be surgically transplanted into people. Now this one, here...”

Dwayne reached over, and pointed out one of the pigs, in the row of photos. He had no idea whether it was Xenia, or not. He couldn’t tell them apart, either.

“This pig belongs to a critically-ill man named Dan Cayle, who’s almost certain to die, unless he receives a heart transplant. According to the law, if we injure this pig with the intention of preventing this Cayle fellow from getting his new heart, we’re liable to be charged with attempted murder.”

“That’s crap!” Bernie fumed.

Dwayne ignored him. He lifted the top half of the bun from his burger, and reached for the ketchup. “Bernie mentioned that you used to work in law enforcement. That right, Herb?”

“Yeah. I carried a badge, a few years.”

“Well, then you’ll know how it works. Criminal charges often hinge on intent. Now, Bernie might not have mentioned this, but he stands to collect over half a million dollars insurance money, if this guy croaks. How’s that for intent? I imagine there’s plenty of prosecutors who’d be willing to go the distance, and press for charges of first degree murder, if Cayle dies because we killed his pig.”

Herb considered it for a moment. Then, calmly folded up his little notebook, and slipped it back into his inside coat pocket.

“Sorry, Bernie. No hard feelings. But I’m gonna walk on this one.” He promptly slid out of the booth, and stood at the end of the table, buttoning his leather jacket. “Either of you like a lift back to the terminal?”

Bernie angrily waved him off.

Dwayne motioned toward the remainder of his unfinished burger, and politely declined.

“Suit yourself,” he said.

“Nice to have met you, Herb,” Dwayne offered.

“Likewise.”

With that, Herb headed for the exit, and never looked back. Even though he hadn't been a very talkative sort, the corner booth seemed deathly quiet in the wake of his departure.

Dwayne heard an airplane taking off outside. The roar reminded him of where his car was parked, and he briefly regretted having refused Herb's kind offer of a lift. It was a long walk back to the long-term lot.

But what the hell. The bacon burger wasn't half bad. He was hungrier than he realized, and thought he'd follow it up with a piece of that coconut cream pie.

Herb had left behind his black silk scarf, Dwayne noticed. One corner was wedged into the seam of the vinyl upholstery. Dwayne hooked the cloth with his finger, and pulled it free. Then slid the scarf across the seat. He examined the label. K-Mart. His detective business wasn't too brisk, looked like.

When Bernie finally spoke, there was considerable venom in his voice.

“You’ve gone over to them, haven’t you? You traitorous bastard! You’re working for Xenogenics!”

There was some truth to the accusation, of course.

Yet Dwayne’s conscience was clear. Bernie had forfeited any claim to his allegiance by hiring a hit man to take out the pigs.

Dwayne played by the rules. Always had. He had nothing but contempt for cheats. And, as far as Dwayne was concerned, killing the pigs was cheating.

You couldn’t have a game without rules. A mutually agreed-upon set of rules, which applied equally to everyone. In Dwayne’s particular game - venture capitalism - there was only one rule. The rule of law.

Admittedly, there would always be gray areas. The rules of accounting, for example. Or, the tax laws. But learning how to negotiate those particular obstacles was an integral part of the game. The challenge lay in pushing it right to the edge. Choosing the proper line through those gray areas as if they were slalom gates, and making a clean run to the finish, without once straying outside the rule of law.

Bernie’s problem was that he had no love for the game. He hated to lose, but lacked the basic skills required to win. So he cheated. Like

an incompetent fisherman, who can't face the indignity of going home without any fish, and resorts to using dynamite. Or, a hopelessly inept handicapper, whose only chance of picking a winner is to start doping the horses.

“You ought be ashamed of yourself, Bernie. That’s all I have to say. Christ. Gunning down defenseless pigs. That’s really low, man. Low, indeed.”

Bernie responded with a few obscenities.

Dwayne ignored him. He really had nothing further to say, and tried to convey the point by taking an unusually large bite of his bacon burger, and filling his mouth with food.

“You haven’t heard the last of me. I swear. You, and your buddies at Xenogenics,” Bernie snarled, as he stumbled out of the booth. “You tell them. Their pig is going to Mexico over my dead body!”

With that, Bernie stalked off, and stormed out of the restaurant without even calling a cab.

Christ.

His dead body no less.

The guy was really losing it.

Dwayne was just getting started on his cream pie when Herb Garnisch returned, hoping to fetch his scarf. He paused inside the entrance, looking morose, and glanced around the Denny's as if he'd forgotten the location of their booth. Dwayne caught his eye, and held up the scarf.

Herb came sauntering over.

"Sorry if I cost you a client," Dwayne said.

As it happened, Herb wasn't mourning the loss. "No need apologizing. Fact, I oughta thank you. Guy's a nut case."

"Still. A whole weekend's work..."

Herb shrugged it off. He smoothed out his scarf, and draped it around his neck. Before he could turn to leave, Dwayne took the opportunity to sound him out.

"Tell you what. Perhaps I can make it up to you. Assuming you're free, of course."

Herb was all ears.

"It's the nut case," Dwayne said. "Think you could keep an eye on him? Just for the next day or two?"

Even though Dwayne doubted that Bernie would act on any of his threats, tracking his movements seemed like a sensible precaution. At least, until Xenia was safely delivered to Mexico.

Dwayne balked when Herb told him how much it would cost.

“Christ! Thirteen hundred dollars a *day*?”

“Plus expenses, of course,” Herb was careful to add.

“Seems pretty steep.”

“Yeah. Well, I can’t exactly do it, myself. For a twenty-four hour tail, we’re looking at three eight-hour shifts. I use reliable people. They don’t come cheap.”

Dwayne wondered if he could coax another thousand or two out of Malcolm.

Probably not.

As it happened, Herb needed the work more than he cared to admit. Sensing Dwayne’s reluctance, he promptly switched to a second option.

“Maybe you’re right. It might be overkill doing the full surveillance,” Herb suggested. “I could do a partial, and beacon his car. How’s that sound? Let the electronics do the leg work. That’d save you a few bucks.”

“What? You’d put something on his car?”

“Yeah. Satellite navigation receiver. Transmits the coordinates by cellular phone. I could drop by Bernie’s place on my way home, and have it up and running tonight.”

“Won’t his car be locked in the garage?”

Herb dismissed it. "I'll just activate the door opener. Won't matter if the noise wakes him up. I'll be long gone before he can even get out of bed. Takes all of five seconds to install the thing."

Dwayne had forgotten that Herb had designed Bernie's security system. The little twist of fate made him seem predestined for the job. Herb could rent surveillance equipment even after midnight, apparently. He pulled out his little notebook, and began jotting down some figures, working out the new estimate.

"Okay, let's see...two hundred sixty should cover the hardware. I've already got the digital maps, so you won't have to hire any software. That'll save you a hundred right there. Then add five. Comes to seven hundred sixty a day. Call it seven and a half."

Dwayne gave him a thumbs-up.

"You're the doctor."

## CHAPTER 13

### INSOMNIA

Late Saturday Night

Rosalind couldn't sleep.

The upstairs room was too dark.

The only illumination came from the window which faced the river. But there were no lights at all, on the opposite bank. Nor any moonlight, due to the thick clouds and rain. The only light entering the room was a faint glow from the mercury vapor lamp in the parking lot, reflecting off the raindrops falling into the river.

She couldn't even see her pillow.

The effect was claustrophobic.

Rosalind felt a sudden flush of vertigo. The reaction surprised her, since she could readily sense the cavernous nature of the room, even in darkness, just from the quality of the sound inside it. The dull thumps of rain hitting the roof. The water sluicing through the gutters. An annoying staccato trickle from one of the downspouts. The sounds of steadily dripping water completely enveloped her, and echoed from every dark recess in the attic.

She pressed her hands against her face, and tried to calm herself by focusing on her breathing.

Instead, she envisioned herself trapped, in some sort of subterranean cavern. Stalactites were forming overhead, and growing alarmingly longer with every falling drop. The sharp spikes hung ponderously, ready to impale her as she slept.

Her vertigo disappeared as soon as she turned on the reading light. But then, of course, the room was too bright.

Nigel arrived shortly after midnight to mop the floor. She heard him shift a few things around inside the janitor's closet, then the sound of the casters on the mop bucket, rolling squeakily across the floor. She gave him a few minutes to get started, then slipped into her bathrobe, and went downstairs.

Nigel had begun out front. He'd turned all of the chairs upside down atop the tables, and was already working on the floor. The dining room reeked of marijuana. He halted his mop in mid-stroke, looking a little concerned.

“Cripes. Did I wake you up?”

Rosalind dismissed it. “Couldn't sleep. I thought I'd make myself a cappuccino. Interested?”

As it happened, Nigel had just cracked open a beer. So she fetched only enough milk for one, and switched on the espresso machine. He'd stoked up the woodstove, she noticed. The logs crackled noisily.

"What's it like, living out on the river in weather like this?" she asked.

"A little damp, at the moment," Nigel sighed, as he resumed mopping the floor. "We've got mildew everywhere."

"Mildew...?"

"Yeah, the condensation's a bitch. Not much you can do about it with all the hatches closed. She's a steel boat, eh?"

Rosalind wondered what the steel had to do with it. Helen's old Honda had quite a bit of mildew inside, she recalled. So, maybe the rust encouraged its growth. Nigel's boat was in somewhat better shape, she hoped.

She sprinkled some cocoa on her cappuccino, and carried it over to the woodstove. The dry heat felt marvelous. She raked her fingers through her hair, spreading it out, allowing the warm air to flow through it.

Nigel's head was turned, she noticed. His eyes were following the mop. She loosened the belt of her bathrobe, and spread open the top to expose some cleavage. Then struck a revealing pose, bent at the waist,

and leaning out over the heat. When Nigel swung his mop back toward the bucket, he couldn't help noticing her breasts.

Rosalind lifted her chin, and shook out her hair. The bathrobe fell open further, exposing rather more than she intended. She smiled coquettishly. "Terrific fire, Nigel. Feels so good."

Nigel blushed, and averted his eyes. He resumed mopping, furiously. "Yep. Been a mite cold, eh?"

Rosalind straightened, and stood huddled by the stove. "God. Is it ever. My bed is freezing."

Nigel appeared determined to continue working. She watched quietly as he wielded his mop, thrusting it back and forth between the table legs, in long fluid strokes. He used it skillfully, she thought.

He seemed charmingly shy. Whenever she made eye contact, he would smile self-consciously and turn his attention back to the floor. His janitor's bucket was still parked next to the woodstove. When he came over to rinse his mop, she reached out and lightly stroked his arm.

"You know what would help me get back to sleep?" she asked.

"Well, no I, uh..."

"Tell me a sailing story?"

"Aww..."

"Come on. Please?"

“But it’s bloody late. I’ve still gotta do the kitchen, and empty the garbage...”

“Doesn’t have to be a long story. Oh, please!”

Rosalind was hoping for something romantic. A tale of swaying palm trees and secluded black sand beaches. Dolphins cavorting under the moonlight. Sailing ships gliding under the stars. Instead, Nigel told her a story about spiders.

She hated spiders.

The tale pre-dated Sophie, apparently. Nigel had been sailing single-handed at the time, making a passage from New Zealand to Rarotonga in the Cook Islands.

“So after all this rough weather, I’m completely becalmed. That’s when I spotted him,” he said, referring to the spider. “Around sunset, as I recall. He was already spinning his web, suspended between the lifelines, right next to the cockpit. Considering all the green water I’d taken over the deck, it seemed a miracle that the little guy had somehow managed to survive.

“In the two weeks I’d been out, I hadn’t seen another living thing. No dolphins, or flying fish. Not even a single bird. So the spider really caught my attention. He spun a handsome web, and somehow, I felt as

if he were spinning it just for me. I mean, he wasn't going to catch any bloody insects out there. Not five hundred miles from land.

"Then I realized that the poor guy was probably starving. It had been far too windy to deploy a web. So I searched down below. Found him a dead fly. Half a dozen mozzies. But spiders suck the juice, I guess, and everything I tried to feed him was all dried out. In the morning, I opened a tin of bully beef, and let him have a go at that. And damned if he didn't like it.

"We spent the next two days becalmed. Each night I'd watch Vinnie spin his web..."

"Vinnie...?" Rosalind interjected.

"Yeah. Vinnie. I fed him with a pair of tweezers. I even found where he'd been hiding, in a coil of anchor rope that I kept lashed to the coaming.

"The wind returned as a light breeze, at first. Around noon, as I remember. The sun was still hot. So I decided to wash my hair, before getting underway again. And well, to keep the story short, I wasn't thinking when I emptied the wash bucket. I dumped it out over the rope, and next thing I know, there goes little Vinnie, swirling down the cockpit drain. Only friend I had."

"God. Poor Vinnie."

Nigel rinsed his mop, then plopped it into the wringer.

“It was the mop bucket made me think of it. The one on my boat was just like it. Actually, it’s the law in New Zealand. Every boat has to carry a galvanized steel bucket. Bloody Parliament has passed a law for everything, really. Useless sods.”

Nigel flipped the wet mop head back onto the floor. It landed menacingly close to her foot. Rosalind jumped.

“Better watch it,” he cautioned.

Rosalind tossed and turned the rest of the night. Either lying awake, or dreaming of spiders. She couldn’t understand it. She had slept so well the previous few nights. Her cleansing had gotten off track, she suspected.

She’d have to call Helga.

CHAPTER 14  
SURVEILLANCE

Sunday Morning

Herb Garnisch checked in at nine-thirty. Dwayne was still asleep, and answered the call in bed.

“Guy’s an early riser,” Herb said. “He’s been out running around since seven this morning.”

“Yeah? What’s he been doing?”

“Shopping. First he bought bagels. Then, he went to Safeway, and an auto parts store. Stopped briefly at his clinic. Now he’s home, sitting in the kitchen. Reading the Sunday paper, I imagine.”

Nothing unusual there, Dwayne thought.

“Just wanted to let you know I’m onto him,” Herb added, keeping it brief. “I’ll get back to you if there’s anything to worry about.”

Dwayne promised he’d stay close to the phone.

He set it on the nightstand, and went back to sleep.

Sunday November 13  
AT THE  
**CRAB POT CAFE**

Smoked Salmon Soup

or

Wild Mushroom Soup

with mixed chanterelles, boletes, and black trumpet mushrooms

Green Salad of the Day

with asparagus, asiago, and lemon vinaigrette

Garlic Crusted Pork Loin

with braised Northern Spy apples  
over collard greens and applewood smoked bacon

or

Mango Chicken Satay

grilled over charcoal, in toasted sesame and mango glaze  
with oyster mushrooms, lemongrass, and crispy bean thread

or

Crab Pot Bouillabaisse

Dungeness crab, halibut, black mussels and divers scallops  
in clam nectar reduction and crème fraîche  
with fresh fennel bulb

Barbecued Chinook Salmon

grilled over alderwood, in honey and lemon glaze  
with hickory nut and corn bread stuffing

or

Roast Rack of Lamb

with braised brussels sprouts and chestnut polenta

or

Fricassee of Ruffed Grouse

with baby carrots and morel mushrooms  
over wild rice pilaf

Baked Forelle Pears

with hickory nut brittle and crème brûlée

or

Hazelnut Cheesecake

with dark espresso chocolate sauce

PRIX FIXE \$60 / SERVICE NOT INCLUDED

## CHAPTER 15

### AN OVERDUE VACATION

Sunday

“Caroline just called,” Rosalind related, sticking her head inside the kitchen. “She had to take Clinton to the hospital for X-rays. Seems he’s broken his toe.”

Helen had been wondering. It wasn’t like Caroline to be late for work. “Is she still on the phone?”

Rosalind shook her head. “She’s still planning on coming in. They’re putting the cast on it now.”

“Damn...”

It couldn’t have come at a worse time.

Caroline was supposed to take the pig to Mexico in the morning. She obviously couldn’t go alone. Her mother wouldn’t make the trip. Not without her husband. She’d never set foot outside the state of Oregon, and was unlikely to venture into a place as alien as Mexico. Besides, she had to drive the school bus during the week.

The restaurant wouldn’t open its doors for another twenty minutes, and Helen had largely finished preparations for dinner. She

put the lid on the bouillabaisse broth, and went out front to discuss the matter with Rosalind.

Clinton couldn't just hire a cartage company. Not on such short notice. Numerous permits were required for the importation of laboratory animals into Mexico. Carriers had to be licensed, and the process had taken weeks.

Rosalind suggested a possible solution.

"Why don't you drive down with her? A little road trip would do you good. Get away from here for a few days."

"Me! Come on. I can't just leave the restaurant!"

"Why not? I mean, what are we looking at? Two days each way? You'll be back Friday. I can mind the store on Thursday."

"You can't be serious," Helen replied. Rosalind seemed unbelievably cavalier about it. But she had no idea what she'd be letting herself in for. No idea, at all.

"It's no big deal," she said. "Just one day."

"But the chickens come on Thursday!"

"So I'll get up a little early."

Helen was tempted. In the fifteen years the restaurant had been open, she hadn't missed a single day. Not one. The ocean would be

really warm off the coast of Baja, she thought. She could go swimming. Stroll barefoot on the beach.

“Honestly, don’t give it a second thought,” Rosalind insisted. “If it’ll make you feel any better, I’ll ask Izzy to come in a few hours early. I’m sure she’d welcome the overtime with Christmas coming up.”

“All right. I’ll see what Caroline says.”

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“Wow! Are you kidding? Of course you can come!” Caroline agreed. “It’ll be a thousand times better than going with my Dad!”

Helen smiled. “How’s he feeling?”

“Oh, he’s being such a little baby. I mean, it’s like one toe, all right? But he’s like...helpless, you know? Totally.”

Faced with spending two nights on the road, Clinton had wanted to put the camper shell onto the pickup. But he couldn’t back underneath it, without removing a pair of oil drums that were supporting the front. He was replacing them with wooden props when the camper fell over, and landed on his foot.

“Are you bringing a swimming suit?” Helen asked.

## CHAPTER 16

### RECYCLING

Sunday Night/Monday Morning

“Our man’s on the move,” Herb said. “He’s abreast of Sacramento, headed north on the Interstate.”

Dwayne had difficulty accepting it.

Herb requested instructions. “You want me to keep following him, or what?”

“Well...yeah. What else?”

“You’re the boss. But just so you know, the mileage surcharge kicks in once I cross into Yolo County. It’s a dollar ten per mile. Plus expenses, of course. Adds up, if the guy’s actually going to Oregon.”

*Christ.* It was six hundred miles each way.

Dwayne opted to take up the chase, himself. Monetary issues aside, Helen would never forgive him if something were to happen to Caroline, and he had done nothing to prevent it.

He arranged to meet Herb in Vacaville. They could transfer the surveillance equipment there.

By the time Herb had finished showing him how to use it, Dwayne was almost two hundred miles behind. And Bernie was really moving. The monitor had him averaging eighty three miles per hour. Dwayne could keep up, but couldn't gain on him.

But Bernie would have to stop to sleep. That gave Dwayne the edge. Having slept all day, he could drive all night if he had to.

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As he drove in darkness along the freeway, Dwayne had plenty of time to think. And the more he thought about it, the more he was convinced that the pigs could be huge.

Their potential went beyond providing organs for transplant purposes. Once the transgenic pigs began saving human lives by the hundreds, they were virtually assured of becoming *celebrities*. With the right sort of marketing campaign in place, the public's perception of pigs as greedy, gluttonous creatures could be turned on its head.

People might begin flocking to see them. The families of those who'd been saved might come bearing gifts - watermelons, heads of lettuce and cabbages, bushels of apples - gifts of sustenance for the life-sustaining pigs.

Who knows?

If the practice caught on, it would certainly lower the feed bill.

There was no telling where the pig's celebrity status might lead. They could even become ennobled.

Why not?

What could be more ennobling than bestowing the gift of life, itself? It was miraculous stuff. The stuff of divinity. Whole religions had been founded on less. Founded on little more than *promises*, when it came right down it, while the pigs could actually deliver.

The decor of the breeding farms could encourage a metaphysical line of thinking. Xenogenics would need high-tech facilities, obviously, to comply with all of the government regulations. Sterile conditions, and so on. But they could easily add some trappings of spirituality, to enhance the experience of those making a pilgrimage to see the pigs. Arrangements of cut flowers, and an altar to receive the gifts of food. A memorial chapel to conduct ceremonial feedings of the animals.

Dwayne envisioned a series of theme parks.

Ultimately, the industry could take recycling to the next level.

Why not? Recycling was immensely popular. Almost a civic duty. The public had already acknowledged the virtue of donating their organs.

Why not recycle the rest? As Rosalind had pointed out, pigs would eat anything. Civic-minded people could bequeath their remains, as sustenance for the pigs. Why not? Memorial services could be held in the chapel on the grounds of the breeding farm. Donors would incur no funeral expenses whatsoever.

The elderly were excluded from the organ donation process. Transplant surgeons only wanted organs taken from younger people. Accident victims, and the like. So older citizens were denied the opportunity of donating, and thus bestowing life. Since the pigs had been expressly designed for the purpose, they could become the vehicle by which the donations were passed along.

The recycling vessels, as it were.

If the practice caught on, it might eliminate the feed bill altogether.

The public had only two options, in the end. Either cremation, or burial. Yet neither practice was environmentally sustainable.

Take burial. The country was already running out of cemetery space. Considering the way land was being developed, the shortage was bound to get worse. The trendiest developments often included various amenities - community swimming pools, tennis courts, some open space set aside for RV storage - but you'd be hard pressed to find one that came equipped with a cemetery.

Burning the bodies was hardly an environmentally-friendly alternative. Cremation generated copious quantities of greenhouse gases, which contribute to global warming. Not only that. Incinerating animal protein also spewed out toxics - gases like nitric oxide and sulfur dioxide - which cause acid rain. Plus the heavy metals. Any furnace hot enough to produce a fine white ash would also vaporize mercury amalgam, and any residual lead.

Dwayne worried about the metals.

They might poison the pigs.

Some people were bound to be contaminated. Foundry workers, welders, metal polishers - donors who held occupations such as that would probably have to be tested before they could go into the trough. Farmworkers, too, he suspected. Pesticide poisoning could pose an even greater threat.

Xenogenics would have to conduct regular inspections, he imagined, similar to what the USDA was doing with sides of beef.

Dwayne wondered.

He knew from past experience that his ideas were often ahead of their time. His vision for the wind farms, for instance. And more

recently, his failed attempt to interest investors in tilapia farming ponds, which would have utilized human sewage as a food resource.

Still. He felt confident about the pigs. Perhaps his time had finally come.

Visionary new ideas always met with resistance, at first. Some would find it objectionable, no doubt, turning people into pig feed. Yet the bodies were being recycled for a worthy purpose. Seemed more dignified than treating them like toxic waste.

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After Bernie passed through Medford, and then Grants Pass without stopping, Dwayne was forced to conclude that he might be intending to drive straight through. If so, he'd arrive at the breeding farm just before dawn.

Dwayne decided that he'd better warn Clinton. He didn't have the number, and called the restaurant instead. The phone rang a dozen times.

"Come on, Rosalind," he muttered aloud. "Wake up! Answer the damn phone!"

## CHAPTER 17

### MEXICO OR BUST

Monday

Caroline was keen to get an early start. Helen rowed in at dawn, to pack a picnic lunch for the trip. The lights were already switched on, out front. Rosalind had made coffee.

“You’re up early,” Helen said, helping herself to a cup.

“Thought I’d see you off,” Rosalind replied. She gave a little sigh.

“Been up for awhile, actually. Got tired of tossing around in bed.”

“Couldn’t sleep?”

Roz shrugged. “Damn phone kept ringing downstairs.”

“Odd.”

Helen hadn’t slept all that well, herself.

For awhile, she had been too excited about the trip. Then she began to fret about leaving Rosalind in charge of the restaurant. So she’d stayed up late, drafting a detailed list of instructions for Thursday, by the light of her kerosene lamp. The recipe for smoked salmon soup alone ran three pages. Turned out there were quite a few steps.

“Did you bring over your cat?” Rosalind asked, having reluctantly agreed to care for it upstairs.

“No. Couldn’t find her,” Helen sighed. “Went hunting, I guess. I’m pretty sure I left enough food. But if you think of it, maybe you could row over and check on her in a couple of days. Just in case the mice get into it.”

Rosalind smirked. “Mice? I thought you didn’t have any mice.”

Helen merely grinned.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Rosalind said, producing a cellular phone from the pocket of her bathrobe. She slid it across the table. “Might be a good idea if you hung onto my phone. In case I need to get hold of you.”

Helen pushed it right back. “No. You keep it.”

“But...”

“Bad enough I have to put up with the damn things going off during dinner all the time. I’m sure as hell not taking one on my vacation.”

Caroline arrived towing an immaculate emerald green trailer.

“Hey. Nice-looking rig,” Helen said.

“Dad borrowed it from Tom Maitow,” Caroline said, clearly admiring it herself. She moistened a corner of her sleeve, and used it to

clean a tiny smudge off the paint. “It’s a horse trailer. He’s got Arabians.”

The trailer was fully enclosed. Helen couldn’t see inside it.

“Xenia aboard?”

“Yeah. All set.”

Helen stood by the door of the pickup, wondering where to put her suitcase. The space behind the seats was already claimed by two large ice chests.

“Are we bringing these?”

“Oh. Sorry.” Caroline leaned into the cab and removed the lid from one of the coolers. “Can you fit your stuff inside?”

Helen was traveling light. Her suitcase was about the size of a case of canned beer. It nestled nicely in the ice chest.

“Why are we taking an empty cooler?”

“They’re both empty. Dad wants me to bring back the hams.”

Helen winced. Leave it to Clinton not to waste anything.

“Here,” Caroline said, dutifully holding out her hand, and relinquishing the keys. “I’m not allowed to drive over the mountains.”

Caroline had been driving legally for less than a month. She had never towed a trailer before, and her father had forbidden her from taking the wheel on any twisting, two-lane roads.

Helen felt nervous hauling it, herself. Fortunately the traffic was light as she drove slowly through the coast mountains. She rarely had to pull over, and allow trailing vehicles to pass.

Caroline took over the wheel, once they reached the freeway.

Helen felt strangely out of place, sitting in the passenger's seat. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been driven anywhere. The enormous windshield provided a panoramic view. She sat back and took in the scenery.

She hadn't set foot in California since she'd opened the restaurant. Not even once. She felt delighted when she saw a sign announcing the approach of the border.

"We'd better stop for gas," Caroline said.

Helen couldn't see the point. They'd started off on a full tank.

"So soon?"

"Dad wanted me to fill the tank, you know...before we cross into California. Gas costs more down there. They have to put additives in it. It's a smog thing."

The truck stop was enormous, and surprisingly crowded. Perhaps other people were topping up as well. After filling the tank, Caroline suggested stopping at the mini-market.

“I packed a big lunch,” Helen reminded her.

“Sure. But what about road food? We’ll need peanuts, potato chips...stuff like that.”

The convenience store stood at the far end of the complex, across a vast expanse of blacktop. Caroline headed for it. However, halfway across, she began to have second thoughts.

“I don’t know. Looks pretty crowded.”

Caroline hadn’t yet mastered the art of backing the trailer. So the congestion around the convenience store naturally made her nervous. The wheel base of the pickup was rather long to begin with. With the addition of the horse trailer, the rig wouldn’t fit in the spaces allotted for passenger cars.

Caroline decided to stick with the trucks. She circled around, and parked alongside a moving van, where there seemed little likelihood of getting trapped.

“Won’t kill us to walk.”

Caroline had her hands full afterwards, dealing with the gooey fake cheese she’d poured all over her nachos. So Helen took the wheel for their run across the border.

She had driven only a few miles past it, when she heard an alarming thump, coming from the rear of the truck. For a second she thought they'd blown a tire. But the steering felt fine.

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

Caroline was incommunicado, however, having inserted a CD, and donned her earphones. Helen checked the rearview mirror, on the off chance she might have hit something. She strained to see past the trailer, and was still looking, when she heard an even louder thump than the one before. The entire trailer seemed to shudder.

She immediately pulled onto the shoulder. Caroline yanked off her earphones.

"It's Xenia," Helen told her. "Something's wrong."

As Helen brought the rig to a stop, Xenia began squealing, and throwing around her weight, rocking the trailer from side to side.

They ran back in tandem. A cloud of bluish smoke billowed from the trailer, when Caroline flung open the door. Helen instinctively drew back.

"What the hell...?"

They were both bewildered by the smoke, and for an instant forgot about Xenia. The pig was in a state of panic. It bolted for daylight.

"Look out!" Caroline yelled.

Helen had already moved out of the way, but Caroline stood her ground, and tried to grab the animal by the neck as it leaped to the pavement. But the pig bowled her over, and ran off down the freeway. Caroline scrambled back to her feet, then grabbed a rope from the trailer, and sprinted after it.

“Xenia! Stop!”

Helen briefly joined the chase. But after a few strides, she realized the futility of pursuing the animal on foot. The pig had been doing five miles a day on the treadmill. Helen couldn’t hope to keep up. She stopped, and was about to return for the truck when she froze in horror.

Xenia suddenly veered off the shoulder, onto the highway itself, directly in the path of an oncoming station wagon. The vehicle swerved sharply, with a screech of rubber, and narrowly missed the animal. The driver blared his horn going past. The pig stopped in its tracks, right in the middle of the lane.

A clutch of vehicles were closely following the station wagon. Fortunately their drivers had observed the near miss, and managed to brake and change lanes accordingly. Several of them sounded their horns, as well. Xenia paid no notice, and stood with her head down, sneezing and shaking her snout.

Caroline finally caught up with her.

She darted onto the highway during the break in the traffic, and gave the pig a slap on the rump. Xenia responded obediently and trotted off, across the shoulder and onto the grass verge, as two large trucks roared past, traveling side by side.

Helen heaved a sigh of relief.

She turned her attention to the trailer. The smoke had cleared, exposing its source. A short length of hose was lying on the floor at the front of the trailer. Helen had left the motor running. The exhaust smoke was puffing from the end of the hose.

She walked around to front of the trailer.

Someone had cut a hole in the sheet metal cowl, which wrapped around the front. Then inserted a hose, connected to the tailpipe. She bent down, and pulled it from the trailer. The rubber was hot.

They'd done a neat job of it. The hole in the sheet metal was remarkably smooth. The edge bore tiny teeth marks, as if it had been cut by a tool designed for the purpose. The hose wouldn't easily come off the tailpipe. The end had been securely fastened with a pair of worm-screw clamps.

Whoever had done it also worked quickly. The trailer had been unattended for less than ten minutes, while they were inside the convenience store.

Caroline was beside herself when she saw what had been done to the trailer. She kicked a flattened beer can that was littering the blacktop, and sent it cartwheeling off into the tall grass.

“Dad’s gonna kill me, for sure.”

“For heaven’s sake, Caroline!” Helen exclaimed. “Somebody tried to asphyxiate Xenia. Worry about that.”

Caroline furrowed her brow. “But...why? Why would anyone want to hurt a pig? I mean, wasn’t it just some sicko?”

Helen turned up her palms. “How should I know?”

She had her suspicions, however, since Dwayne was involved. Not that he would ever do anything so cruel. But his shady business dealings were bound to attract some unsavory characters.

“Probably thought it was a horse,” Caroline said.

“Is Xenia okay?” Helen asked.

Caroline was keeping a tight hold on one of the animal’s ears, as if she were afraid it might run off again. “Yeah, but she’s still a little skittish. We should get her back inside.”

The horse trailer was equipped with a boarding ramp that stowed underneath the floor. Helen set it up, then positioned herself to block

the route of escape, while Caroline tried to coax the pig up the ramp. But Xenia adamantly refused to go up.

“Give me your hand,” Caroline requested, extending her own. “Let’s try to get her moving.”

Standing either side of the platform, the two of them linked arms around the animal’s rump. Then pulled in unison. But Xenia dug in her heels.

“Once more! Heave!” Caroline grunted.

Xenia weighed over four hundred pounds. They couldn’t even budge her. When it became clear that the animal wasn’t going to cooperate, they paused to catch their breath.

“I can’t understand it,” Caroline said. “She’s never given me a problem with a ramp before.”

“Maybe she’s afraid of the trailer,” Helen suggested. “Can’t say I blame her, after what’s happened.”

Caroline thought for a moment.

“Food’s the only thing that works with pigs,” she said. “What did you make for lunch?”

“Aww...”

Helen had been looking forward eating the picnic lunch herself. She’d put together an assortment of bite-sized sandwiches - sliced mango

duck, sesame chicken salad, smoked venison - on some of the leftover dinner rolls from Sunday night.

She reluctantly went to fetch them.

“I’d start with the chicken,” Caroline advised.

Helen laid out a line of sandwiches ascending the ramp, spaced about a foot apart. Then placed one on the floor of the trailer itself. Unfortunately, she underestimated Xenia’s reach somewhat. The pig leaned forward and sunk her teeth into the first sandwich without having to set foot on the ramp.

The next one was well beyond her reach.

Xenia pawed at it, a few times, attempting to hook the sandwich with her hoof. Then began whining, and shuffling her feet from side to side. Yet despite her growing frustration, she was unwilling to mount the ramp.

The pig was not to be denied, however. She suddenly lowered her head, and bulled her way past Caroline, gaining access to the side of the ramp, where she could reach the food from the pavement. Caroline could do nothing, except to follow resignedly after her, hanging onto one of her ears, while Xenia devoured the whole line of sandwiches.

The animal briefly lingered by the door of the trailer, lusting after the last sandwich. Then it heaved a sigh, and sat down on the shoulder,

looking a bit sad. Caroline eventually let go of the ear, and kneeled down beside her, clearly at a loss.

“Well. What are we going to do now?”

Helen surveyed the expanse of freeway. She gave a little laugh. “I suppose we’d have a hard time getting a lift, hitchhiking with the pig.”

Caroline seemed really dispirited. She didn’t even smile.

Helen suddenly recalled: when Caroline had taken Xenia to the State Fair that summer, Clinton hadn’t borrowed a trailer. He had mounted his camper shell on the pickup, and taken the animal inside that.

“Couldn’t Xenia ride the back of the pickup?” Helen asked. “If she’s only afraid of the trailer, maybe she’ll use the ramp, once we move it around to the truck.”

It was their only option, really.

Helen had one venison sandwich left.

Caroline aroused Xenia’s interest by allowing her to smell it, then began backing slowly up the boarding ramp, holding the food slightly out of reach. Xenia readily followed the bait, and walked calmly up the platform, right onto the bed of the pickup.

“Good girl!” Caroline gushed, before rewarding the pig with the last of their lunch.

They couldn't allow Xenia to ride untethered in the back of the truck. So Caroline began fashioning a harness, with some rope from the horse trailer. Helen took it upon herself to make a bed for the animal. She spread out some straw behind the cab, and covered it with a horse blanket to keep it from blowing around in the wind.

Xenia promptly laid down on it, and went to sleep.

Caroline volunteered to drive.

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Dwayne finally caught up with Bernie near the Oregon border.

According to the digitized map, the vehicle was less than a tenth of a mile from the freeway, on an unnamed small road. It hadn't moved for half an hour.

The area was sparsely developed, with relatively few places to park a car. He spotted Bernie's black Lincoln parked on the shoulder of the access road, in plain sight from the freeway interchange. Dwayne drove right past it, and took the first available turn, which led into the parking lot of a pancake restaurant.

He found an inconspicuous place to park, which afforded an obstructed view of the access road. Then sat back and watched.

Bernie appeared to be doing the same, and was observing the freeway with the aid of a pair of binoculars. Dwayne dug into his camera case, and found his own.

Then it was spy versus spy.

Bernie had stamina. Dwayne had to give him that. The man kept staring through his spyglass as if he could do it forever. Dwayne had to stop every few minutes, and rest his eyes.

Fortunately he was watching, when Bernie suddenly threw the binoculars aside, and hurriedly reached down to start his engine. Dwayne promptly did the same.

The Lincoln continued to sit motionless. Dwayne moved first, and began driving out of the parking lot, to take up a better position on the street. As he was turning onto it, Bernie accelerated down the frontage road, leaving some rubber, and turned onto the freeway.

Dwayne sped after him.

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The attempt on Xenia's life had cast a pall over the trip. Helen couldn't help feeling nervous, imagining that their truck was being followed. Even if Caroline were right, and their trailer had been selected

at random, the perpetrator was still at large, and might be intent on finishing the job.

The sabotage had obviously been well planned. The carefully machined hole through the cowling, and the double clamping on the hose - those were the work of someone methodical. Demented, as well. It was a scary combination.

Caroline, on the other hand, couldn't stop worrying about her pig.

"Her ears will get sunburned, for sure."

"I have a tube of sunblock," Helen offered. "We can rub some on when we stop for lunch." Helen was starting to get hungry, anyway.

"I'm more worried about tomorrow," Caroline said. "She'll really bake out there, when we get to southern California."

Helen hoped to have the pig back in the trailer long before that. With a little luck, they could find a few extra hands, willing to help load her. Or failing that, a family bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken would probably do the trick.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, Helen saw a black sedan merging onto the freeway, traveling at an excessively high speed.

"Watch out!" she cautioned.

Fortunately Caroline had already seen it. She eased off the accelerator, and even braked slightly, making it obvious that she was

yielding the right of way. But the driver of the speeding car suddenly slowed down as well.

The black car began to fall back.

“Come on, buddy! Make up your mind!” Caroline growled. She stepped on the gas.

Helen briefly made eye contact with the man in the sedan, and knew they were in trouble. His face was contorted with rage. It was *him*. He accelerated rapidly once his lane opened out onto the freeway. Then swerved right toward them. She braced herself for the impact.

“Hold on! He’s going to hit us!”

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Dwayne was too far back to do anything.

The bumper of Bernie’s Lincoln struck the corner of the trailer, just behind the wheel well. The entire panel crumpled like cardboard, as the rear wheels lifted off the pavement. The door flew open. Dwayne couldn’t spot the pig.

The force of the collision had spun the trailer almost ninety degrees. When the wheels touched down, they were pulled crosswise by the truck. The chassis of the trailer distorted violently, and it jerked back, flipping onto its side. The impact sent up a shower of sparks, and

dislodged the rear axle, which flew dramatically in the air with both wheels still attached. It landed on one tire, and bounced end for end, at least twice, before rolling off the roadway and down the embankment onto the median strip.

Bernie sped off.

The pickup was now towing wreckage. The appendages of the trailer tore off almost immediately - the fenders, tail lights, some sort of platform from the undercarriage - littering the roadway with debris. When one of the large side panels ripped off, the twisted mass of sheet metal effectively blocked the lane. Dwayne had to brake sharply, then swerve onto shoulder to avoid it. By the time the truck ground to a halt, the trailer had largely disintegrated.

Poor pig. The animal had surely perished.

Sadly, Dwayne's chance at a promising future with Xenogenics had perished right along with it. Not to mention Cayle's chance at having a future, at all.

Still. Dwayne preferred to look at the bright side. At least he'd collect on the viatical.

He stopped to offer his assistance.

Caroline's knuckles had turned white, clamped around the steering wheel. She was shaking uncontrollably. Helen was concerned.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah...I guess.”

Caroline slowly relaxed her grip, then draped her arms over the top of the wheel, and rested her forehead against them. She took a few deep breaths. “Just give me a minute.”

Helen twisted around in her seat, and checked on the pig. The animal had woken up, and was sitting calmly on its bed of straw, watching the traffic.

“Xenia seems just fine.”

Caroline wanted to confirm it for herself, but wasn't quite ready to move. She managed to tilt back her head, and observed the animal through the rearview mirror. Then she gave a little shudder.

“That was like...so scary. I've never been in an accident before.”

“You handled it just beautifully,” Helen said, with real conviction.

“But, uh...believe me. That was no accident.”

Caroline drew out the corners of her mouth. “The sicko...?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you get a look at him?”

Helen recalled the demented demeanor on the man's face. “Afraid so. Talk about scary. The guy sure looked the part.”

Caroline steeled herself, then unlatched her seat belt and stepped outside to assess the damage. Before starting for the wreckage, however, she briefly stuck her head back inside.

“Someone’s stopping,” she announced.

“Well, thank goodness for that,” Helen sighed, most grateful for the help.

Naturally, she felt differently once she found out who it was.

“You! Oh, damn you, anyway!”

Dwayne had been expecting Clinton to emerge from the truck. Having already been stunned by the sight of the pig, sitting nonchalantly in the back of the pickup, the sudden appearance of Helen on the scene momentarily rendered him speechless.

Helen approached with clenched fists. “Well? Let’s hear it! I swear, if you had anything to do with this...”

Dwayne retreated a step. “Hey! Hold on! I was trying to stop him!”

She maintained an accusatory stance.

“Helen, please! I’ve been following the guy. But it happened so fast...” Dwayne gestured his helplessness. “There was nothing I could do.”

“You were *following* him!?”

“Yeah. All night.”

“Then, how come you didn’t stop when he attacked us the first time?”

“What!?”

Helen glowered at him. “You heard me.”

“Christ...” Dwayne swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, Helen. I just caught up with the guy. Honest. I found him parked over there, watching the freeway.”

He pointed toward the access road.

Helen sensed a contradiction. You couldn’t follow someone, without finding them first. “I don’t understand. You just found him? I thought you’d been following him all night?”

“I have. There’s a surveillance beacon on his car. My detective wired it up yesterday. But I let it get away from me.”

Helen was still trying to make sense of it, when a car squealed its tires, dodging the debris on the roadway. After what had just transpired, the sound made her take fright. She latched onto Dwayne’s arm.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he said, pulling her close, nuzzling her hair. “I’m here now.”

Helen forcibly disengaged herself.

“Yeah. Well, then make yourself useful. Help me clear the road before someone gets killed.”

The trailer body had been fabricated from light gauge steel. Working together, they were able to drag even the largest panels onto the shoulder. Then, they spread out and cleaned away the smaller pieces. Helen found Xenia's toy muskrat next to a tail lamp. She carried it back.

Dwayne escorted her over to his car, and showed her the surveillance monitor.

Bernie hadn't stopped, and was still headed south.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"Name's Bernie. He used to be Cayle's doctor. You know, before Cayle checked into the clinic in Mexico."

Helen vaguely recalled the name. "Is this the same Bernie that you mentioned the other night? One of your own clients...?"

"Bernie? Did I say Bernie? Christ. That's odd. I don't have any clients named Bernie," Dwayne insisted, trying to cover his gaffe. "Wait. You must be thinking of *Benny*. Yeah, that's got to be it. Benny Romaine. The two of us go way back. He's thinking about buying into Xenogenics."

Helen let it pass.

"Why does he want to kill Xenia?"

"Revenge, I suppose. Cayle owes him a lot of money."

"I don't get it. Why the pig? Why doesn't he just go after Cayle?"

“Well, amounts to the same thing, doesn’t it? Besides, he’d be less likely to be charged with murder, killing the animal. Bernie’s a nut case, Helen. He’s gotten it into his head that Xenogenics is plotting to destroy his medical practice. The pigs are part of the conspiracy.”

Helen seemed satisfied with the story, and finally stopped peppering him with questions.

“Can I use your cell phone?” Helen asked, having noticed it on the passenger seat.

“Now...? Who do you want to call?”

“The police.”

Dwayne winced. Needless to say, he had no interest in being grilled by the police. He tried to think of a way to make her reconsider, and stalled for time.

“What for?”

“Are you kidding! It’s the law! I have to report the accident.”

“That only applies to injury accidents.”

“Dwayne? Come on! Lend me the phone,” she demanded impatiently.

“I’d rather not,” Dwayne said.

Helen was taken aback. “But...why?”

“You’ll regret calling in the cops, Helen. I won’t be a party to it.”

“This is ridiculous! We know exactly where he is. We’ll tell the police. They’ll go arrest him. End of story.”

Dwayne shook his head. “That will hardly be the end of it, Helen,” he sighed. “I’m afraid there might be some serious, uh...repercussions.”

“Is that so? For whom?”

“Well...you friend Caroline, for one.”

Helen suddenly looked worried.

“Caroline...?”

Dwayne felt confident that he’d finally struck the right chord. He played it up.

“All right. Let’s say Bernie gets arrested. What can the authorities charge him with? Reckless driving? Come on. His lawyers will have him bailed out within the hour. Then what? He’ll use the case to further his crusade against Xenogenics.

“Bernie might be delusional, but he’s not dumb. He knows about Cayle’s criminal record, and the unsanctioned experiments in Mexico. He’ll try to turn it into a cause célèbre. I seriously doubt if Xenogenics could survive a spate of bad publicity right now. If the company can’t raise the capital it needs, well...that’s the real end of your story, Helen. And a rather sad ending for Caroline, I should think.”

“Sorry. No dice,” Helen said, reaching across the seat, and grabbing the phone for herself. “I’m calling the police. This guy is dangerous. He shouldn’t be on the street.”

Helen immediately dialed 911. Then, upon holding the receiver up to her ear, she realized that the phone wasn’t working.

“Is there a trick to this thing?” she asked.

Dwayne noticed that she’d failed to switch it on. He didn’t mention it. “Try dialing ‘one’, first,” he suggested.

Helen tried it. Of course, the cell phone still wouldn’t work.

“Looks like we’re in the shadow of those hills over there,” Dwayne said. “Damn. For what they charge for these things, you think they’d provide better coverage.”

Helen dropped it on his lap in disgust, and stalked off.

She found Caroline crawling around on the asphalt, inspecting the rear end of the truck. She was dragging a hydraulic jack.

“How’s it look?” Helen asked, squatting down beside her.

“The frame seems all right,” Caroline said, withdrawing her head from underneath the fender. “But look what that creep did to our bumper. It’s like...totaled.”

Helen could see that it had bent out of shape. On closer inspection, she noticed a couple of hairline cracks in the middle, either

side of the trailer ball. The attachment was too severely weakened to risk towing another trailer, she realized.

Which unfortunately left the pig stuck out in the cold.

Or the heat, as the case may be.

Helen realized that she was still carrying the plush toy muskrat. She tossed it into the pickup next to the pig. Caroline began positioning the jack underneath the towing bar, which was also beyond repair, but tethering them to the wreckage.

“Is there a problem?” Helen asked.

“It won’t come off,” she complained. “The hitch seized up.”

Dwayne stepped in to assist. “Here. Allow me.”

Three or four pumps of the jack handle were sufficient to free it. No great feat, Helen thought. Yet, from the gleam in Caroline’s eye, it was apparent that she’d found herself a hero.

She also had eyes for his vehicle. As the three of them stood on the shoulder, wondering what to do next, she kept admiring it.

“Do you have the towing package on your Trooper?” she asked.

He nodded.

When Dwayne decided on the four-wheel-drive, he had pictured himself taking it down to Baja, and spending a winter with his deep-sea fishing boat in tow. Except that he couldn’t afford the boat.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” he asked.

Caroline regarded him hopefully. “Could we?” she replied, almost in a whisper.

Dwayne smiled chivalrously. “At your service.”

“What are you talking about?” Helen asked.

“We’ll tow Xenia with Dwayne’s Trooper!” Caroline enthused.

“It’s only fifteen miles to Yreka,” Dwayne observed. “We should be able to find a trailer there.”

“Then what?”

“Well, it’s silly taking both vehicles to Mexico. We can leave the pickup in Yreka, and all drive down together. There’s plenty of room. What d’ya say? Seems like the best option, if you ask me.”

Helen was reluctantly forced to agree. Even so, she couldn’t help feeling resentful that Dwayne had managed to invite himself along. But delivering the pig had top priority. And Caroline was thrilled. She’d always wanted to drive a sport-utility vehicle.

Dwayne took the first Yreka exit. Helen followed suit in the pickup. At the first stoplight, he turned into the parking lot of a Burger King. She pulled up alongside.

“Are we stopping for lunch?” Caroline asked.

Helen hoped not. Not at Burger King. They would do better stopping at a supermarket. Buy some mangoes, or something.

“We’d better get Xenia squared away first.”

“Gotcha. I’ll see if there’s a phone book.”

Caroline thought their best chance of locating a livestock trailer was through the local chapter of 4-H. At the very least, they’d know where to rent one.

When Caroline hopped out, Helen felt the truck lurch, as the pig suddenly shifted its bulk in the back, and scrambled to its feet. The animal watched intently as Caroline walked toward the entrance, then whimpered a few times when she disappeared inside.

Maybe it smelled the hamburgers.

Helen noticed Dwayne coming over, and rolled down her window.

“Bernie stopped up ahead,” he said. “I thought you’d want to know.”

She cringed. “Where?”

“Center of town. The car hasn’t moved for awhile. He must be having lunch, or something.”

Helen didn’t respond. She wondered if Bernie might have noticed Xenia, riding in the back of the truck. If so, he could be waiting in

Yreka, prepared to strike again, knowing that the animal had survived.  
“We’d better call the police.”

Dwayne sought to calm her. “Christ, Helen. We’ve been all through that. Bernie’s no threat to us, anymore. He doesn’t even know where we are.”

“Yeah? What makes you so sure?”

“Well, how could he? He’s miles from here.”

“What if he’s using a monitor? Just like the one in your car?”

Dwayne was no electronic genius. If he could come up with sophisticated equipment like that, she imagined that Bernie could do so, as well. He had ample opportunity to install it, when he was alone with the vehicle, rigging his exhaust hose.

Helen jumped out of the truck. Then prostrated herself on the pavement, and began inspecting the underside of the chassis.

“Come on. This is silly,” Dwayne protested.

“What do they look like?” she asked, shimmying further underneath.

Dwayne sighed.

She wasn’t going to find anything. If Bernie had placed a beacon on the truck, he wouldn’t have been staring through binoculars, constantly watching the freeway. But Helen seemed determined, and was unlikely to listen to reason.

“A little black box,” he told her resignedly, getting down on his hands and knees to join the search. “About the size of a paperback book.”

The truck was clean.

Helen soon abandoned the effort.

Caroline came skipping back from the Burger King. She’d bought herself an order of fries. “We’re all set,” she announced gaily.

The woman who answered the phone at 4H happened to raise llamas, and had kindly offered to loan them a trailer. Caroline had arranged to pick it up at their farm - fifteen miles east of town, nestled in the hills north of Mount Shasta. They could leave the pickup there.

She pointed it out on the map.

It was slightly out of their way, Helen noticed. Yet they needn’t retrace the route. They could continue on, and make a loop on the county roads, eventually rejoining the freeway at Weed. Helen was all for it. Taking the detour would also bypass Bernie.

“There’s only one hitch,” Caroline added, while feeding a few of her french fries to the pig. “We can’t pick it up until three o’clock. She has to drive out there herself, and unlock the machinery shed.”

Helen checked her watch.

Another hour wouldn't really matter. Having lost so much time already, it was looking as if they'd have to drive straight through. They wouldn't need to stop at a motel. Not with three of them sharing the driving.

"So let's have lunch," Helen suggested, resigning herself to the idea. Caroline was clearly in favor, and the pig was obviously hungry. The fries had whetted her appetite, and Xenia was straining against her harness, whimpering for more. Unfortunately, they had nothing to give her. The bag of pig feed had been stored in the horse trailer, and scattered all over the freeway.

Caroline went inside to buy her some burgers.

"How would it be if I meet you out there?" Dwayne asked.

Helen regarded him suspiciously.

"I thought I'd check on Bernie," he explained.

"What for?"

Dwayne couldn't come up with a plausible reason. So he told her the truth. "Well, it's this, uh...tracking device, actually. There's an eight hundred dollar deposit on it, and I'd like to get it back."

She seemed unimpressed.

"Come on, Helen. It'll only take a few minutes. We've got plenty of time."

“Which vehicle would you take?”

“Does it matter?”

Helen figured they could manage without Dwayne. But she was unwilling to part with his towing package. “You can’t have the Trooper.”

“Fine. I’ll take the truck.”

“No way! Not with the pig in the back!”

Dwayne had somewhat better luck with Caroline. When he proposed transferring the pig to the Trooper, she agreed to give it a try.

The vehicles were reasonably well-matched. The rear carpet in the four-wheel-drive was almost level with the bed of the truck. Caroline took one of the hamburgers, and climbed into the back of the Trooper. When Helen released her harness, Xenia bolted after the food.

Caroline hadn’t expected the animal to respond with quite so much enthusiasm.

“Whoa, sister!”

She dropped the burger in panic, and dove for cover behind the seats, just before Xenia leaped across the threshold. The cheeseburger had fallen on the carpet. Xenia devoured it whole. Wrapping paper, and all.

“Good girl!”

Dwayne took the pickup into downtown Yreka.

According to Herb Garnisch, the surveillance monitor was accurate to within fifty feet. The digital maps were less reliable, but nonetheless narrowed the location to two city blocks. Dwayne drove along each of them, but failed to find the Lincoln.

The city center was crowded with cars, however, so it seemed likely that he might have missed it. He circled around, and searched the indicated area once again, with the same result. As he rounded a corner for the third time, he spotted a narrow alley, which ran between the two streets. A large truck was blocking the entrance. Judging by the number of cardboard boxes stacked on the pavement behind it, the driver wouldn't be finished with the delivery anytime soon. Dwayne drove on, and took the first available parking place he could find.

Then returned on foot.

The driver of the truck was still unloading his cartons. Dwayne squeezed past his dolly, and entered the alley.

It was somewhat wider than he had thought. Numerous cars were parked in the alley, recessed into alcoves on either side. Most of the spaces were posted with signs, warning off the public, and reserving the parking for various downtown businesses. Four vehicles were grouped together, near the middle of the block. The one nearest him looked suspiciously like Bernie's black Lincoln. He hastened his step.

Only the rear end of the vehicle was visible, protruding slightly into the passageway, but the license plate confirmed it. Dwayne moved a bit closer to the building, and crept along the wall until he could peer around the corner. All four of the cars had their windows rolled up tight.

No one was in sight.

Dwayne felt apprehensive about possibly being trapped in the alley. Most of the stores had security doors, which opened directly onto it. If he set off one of the car alarms, he stood a good chance of being intercepted before he could reach the street.

But the beacon was worth eight hundred bucks.

Herb had attached the device on the passenger side. Dwayne stepped into the alcove, and squatted down next to the Lincoln. Then moved deliberately toward the front door, taking care not to touch it, nor the red Chevy Blazer parked next to it.

He ran his fingers inside the wheel well and found the antenna, exactly where Herb had said it would be. The beacon itself was clipped behind it. Dwayne had to kneel on the asphalt in order to reach the release lever. When he pulled it, the transmitter fell right into his hand. He slipped it into his jacket pocket.

Herb Garnisch knew his stuff. They could use someone like him at Xenogenics, Dwayne thought.

As he stood up to leave, Dwayne had his first good look at the Lincoln. His mouth fell open. The front end was smashed all to hell.

It hadn't occurred to him that Bernie might have damaged his car in the collision. After chasing him onto the freeway, and seeing him swerve toward the pickup, Dwayne had shifted his focus onto the trailer. And then been transfixed, watching its spectacular demolition.

The right fender had suffered the worst of it. Dwayne walked up to inspect the damage. The headlamp assembly was crushed beyond recognition, and crumpled up against the hood. Even more significantly, the shattered grille had gouged gaping holes in the radiator. Dwayne was surprised the vehicle made it as far as Yreka. It appeared undriveable.

Still, it didn't quite sink in.

Not until Dwayne noticed a sign, affixed to the brickwork behind the vehicles.

RESERVED PARKING

Avis Car Rental

VIOLATORS WILL BE TOWED

*Christ.*

Bernie had rented another car. In his anger, Dwayne slapped an open hand onto the hood of the Blazer. Its alarm went off.

He ran like hell.

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Helen wondered if they really needed a trailer, after all. Shortly after leaving the city limits, Xenia curled up on the carpet, and contentedly went to sleep. Since she seemed so comfortable, perhaps they could dispense with the trailer entirely.

Just use Dwayne's car.

Caroline clearly enjoyed driving it. The county road wound its way through some lovely pine forest, with numerous twists and turns after it crossed the Little Shasta River. Her father's prohibition regarding such roads no longer applied, Caroline felt. She wasn't towing a trailer.

Caroline briefly took her eyes off the road, and glanced over.

"Xenia's not exactly housebroken, Helen."

"Ahh..." Helen noted the plush carpeting in back. The soft leather seats. "Good point."

Caroline braked rather abruptly, approaching one of the sharper turns. An object slid out from underneath her seat. She leaned forward

and peered along the steering column, then reached down to retrieve something at her feet.

“Looks like Dwayne forgot his phone,” she said.

Helen scowled. “Doesn’t work.”

Caroline couldn’t resist trying it for herself. She briefly held it up to her ear. Then took a closer look at the phone, and flicked a small switch on the handset. She pivoted it around, allowing Helen to hear the dial tone.

“Seems okay,” Caroline observed. “Want to try calling Rosalind?”

“Damn him! Let me see that,” Helen insisted.

After experimenting with the switch, Helen was sorely tempted to place a call. Although not to Rosalind. She was tempted to call the police.

Nab the pair of them.

Too bad she didn’t know where they were.

The llama woman arrived as promised, and helped them hitch up the trailer. She seemed in a bit of a hurry.

“Lovely pig,” she said. “Hope she’s easy to load. My daughter has soccer practice.”

“She’s no trouble at all,” Caroline said.

Fortunately, Xenia was still digesting her hamburgers. When they urged her into the trailer, she was as cooperative as could be, and walked into it like a sleepy little lamb.

They sat down to wait for Dwayne.

Caroline began fiddling with the cellular phone. "I should probably call my Dad," she said, without much conviction.

Helen thought the news might be more bearable in the morning, when they could soften it with some real progress in getting the animal to Mexico.

"Yeah. Eventually."

Caroline thought better of it. She folded up the phone, and slipped it into her pocket.

The machinery shed lay at the edge of a pine forest. Helen was struck by how sparse and brown it appeared, compared to verdant cedar and redwood forests on the coast. Yet the openness of the pines was inviting. They were certainly easier to walk around in.

She noticed some white mushrooms, growing just beyond the tree line. Large ones, it appeared, pushing through the pine needles on the forest floor. The rain might have brought on a flush.

Helen wondered. White matsutakes were known to grow under ponderosa pine. Their scientific classification was *Armillaria ponderosa*, in fact. She wandered over to have a look.

They turned out to be common white russulas. Rather nice specimens, actually, but inedible - acrid and peppery tasting. She noticed several other species on the ground, a little further into the woods.

One of them was a bolete, she discovered. As she bent down to examine it, Helen heard a scream. Then Caroline's piercing cry.

"Help!"

Helen had gone less than a hundred yards. She ran as fast as she could. When she rounded the corner of the machinery shed, she almost collided with a white sedan, which had been parked in front of the door. Bernie was already headed down the driveway in the Trooper, with the trailer in tow.

"Helen...!"

She sprinted after it, and came within ten feet, before Bernie began to pull away.

"Caroline...!"

Helen rushed back to the white car. The keys had been removed. She could do nothing, but watch helplessly, as Bernie made a sweeping turn onto the highway, and drove off down the county road.

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With the surveillance beacon now tucked uselessly in his pocket, Dwayne had lost his edge. Bernie could be anywhere.

Even worse, he might have already made his move.

The shortest route to the llama farm led due east from downtown Yreka. Yet Helen and Caroline had been in jeopardy from the moment Dwayne left them at the Burger King, several miles north of town. So he returned to the restaurant, and followed the same county road that Helen would have taken, herself.

Bernie seemed capable of anything, at this point. Running them off the road. Even hijacking the pig at gunpoint.

Dwayne began noticing the skid marks. Then began fearing the worst. The road passed through some rugged country, and dropped off dramatically in places, down into deep ravines - few of which were cordoned off by a guardrail. He slowed and scrutinized each in turn, driving halfway onto the shoulder, while peering over the edge, searching the gullies for an overturned vehicle.

At one of the side roads, he momentarily thought that he'd spotted it, hidden behind a cluster of trees. Then realized that he was only seeing a rock, of a similar shade of silver gray. Shortly after the

odometer logged its fifteenth mile, Dwayne spotted the farm. Just as Caroline described it, the property was fronted by white picket fence. Helen was standing in the middle the road, next to the mailbox.

He pulled up alongside her, and began rolling down his window. But he'd barely opened it a crack, when she yanked open the door, ripping the knob right out of his hand.

"Hurry! Move over!" she cried, insisting on taking the wheel.

Dwayne had his seat belt fastened. "Hey! Wait..."

As soon as he released it, Helen violently shoved him aside. "Move, damn it!"

"Helen! What the..."

"He's got Caroline!"

As soon as her foot found the accelerator, Helen floored it. Dwayne had pulled onto the shoulder. The tires spun furiously on the gravel, spewing rocks all over the road. She never eased off, and fought the fishtailing truck onto the pavement, where the tires found traction with a frightening squeal.

"Take it easy, Helen. Slow down."

"Just shut up!" she snarled. "You're so fucking unreliable! If you'd gotten here on time, he wouldn't have grabbed her in the first place."

Dwayne held his tongue.

Helen eventually let out a despairing sigh. "If only I hadn't gone for a walk in the woods. He must have been watching. Waiting for us to split up, I guess. That's when he grabbed her."

"How long ago?"

"I don't know. Five minutes."

Dwayne immediately began studying the map. They hadn't lost him. Not yet. It was almost ten miles to nearest turn-off. He wouldn't have reached it.

"He's towing a trailer," Helen added. "We'll catch him."

It seemed unlikely. Not before the first fork in the road. They'd be reduced to guesswork, after that. What could Bernie be thinking, kidnapping a teenage girl? If Dwayne could only talk with him, he thought that he could persuade him to listen to reason.

*Christ!*

Why hadn't he thought of it before? Bernie had given him his cell phone number.

Dwayne hurriedly patted down his pockets, searching for his phone. Unable to find it, he immediately went for his camera bag, where he kept his private line. The case was stowed behind the seat, wedged

between the ice chests. He had trouble reaching it, and jostled Helen in the process.

“Damn it!” she cursed. “What are you looking for?”

“Can’t find my phone,” he said, still bent over the seat.

Helen just wanted him to keep still, so that she could concentrate on her driving. She replied off-handedly. “Stop searching, then. Caroline’s got it. You left it in the Trooper.”

Dwayne tried that number, instead.

Needless to say, Caroline was mystified when the cell phone began ringing in her pocket. She answered timidly, from inside the trailer.

“Caroline? It’s Dwayne. Are you okay?”

“Dwayne? How...how did you find me?”

Helen was flummoxed, as well. Her eyes had been glued to the road. She hadn’t even noticed that he was placing a call. Without really intending to, she instinctively hit the brakes.

“Caroline? You’ve got Caroline?”

Dwayne furiously motioned for her to keep driving. Then turned his attention back to the phone. “Don’t worry, we’ll get you out of this. Helen’s with me. We’re not far behind. Can you talk?”

“Yeah. The creep locked me in the trailer.”

“You okay?”

“It was really scary, Dwayne. I mean, I’m like...you know, just brushing the pig. When all of sudden, this guy comes up, carrying this big syringe, and I’m like...whoa sister! But no way I’m leaving Xenia...”

Helen kept eyeing him anxiously, pleading for more information. Dwayne placed his hand over the mouthpiece, and related some of what Caroline was telling him.

“Bernie’s got her in the trailer. She says he’s driving slowly, having trouble shifting. She thinks it’s because of his knee...” Then Dwayne winced. “Christ. She hit him with a tire iron.”

He interrupted to ask her a question. “Caroline? Can you see outside?”

“Yeah, everywhere. Except in front.”

“Okay. Here’s what I want you to do. Every so often, you’ll see a sign along the side of the road, with a little number on it...”

“The mile markers, you mean?”

“That’s it. Watch out for the next one, okay? It’ll tell us where you are.”

“Gotcha.”

Helen was no longer driving quite so recklessly. Dwayne passed her the phone, and began reexamining the map. The upcoming fork in the road seemed far less of a threat, now that they had an observer aboard. He felt as if he’d regained the edge.

“Caroline just saw mile eight,” Helen related.

Dwayne still hadn’t located Bernie’s cell phone number. He tore through the camera case once again, and found it on a slip paper in the side pocket. He wrestled the phone away from Helen.

“Caroline? I’m going to put you on hold for a minute. Hang in there.”

“Hi Bernie. It’s Dwayne.”

“You? You filthy traitor! What do you want?”

“Let’s talk.”

“I’ve got nothing to say to you.”

“Well then you’d better listen. Right now, I’m the best friend you’ve got. Kidnapping is a federal offense, Bernie. You either strike a deal with me, or you’re going to prison. It’s up to you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Look. Things got out of hand. So far, no one’s been hurt. Just give up the girl. Save your skin.”

Bernie said nothing.

“I’ll give you two miles to decide,” Dwayne went on. “You’re approaching mile marker number seven on Big Springs Road, am I right? When you reach five, I’m afraid that I’ll have to call in the police.”

“No...no way! You’re bluffing.”

“This can’t continue, Bernie. Not after you abducted the girl. Herb Garnisch is tracking your position, outside the Highway Patrol headquarters in Weed. I can’t hold him off much longer. He’s head of security for Xenogenics.”

He was slow to respond. “You just want the girl?”

Dwayne noticed a shift in Bernie’s tone of voice that indicated he might be ready to deal. “That’s all I ask. Give her up. Then we’ll talk.”

“What about the pig?”

“The pig...?”

Dwayne had backed himself into a corner. He’d soon find himself in the position of having to trade the pig for Caroline. No way. Not when Bernie seemed ready to crack. His paranoia about Xenogenics was an obvious weakness. Dwayne went after that.

“You want the pig? Hell. Keep it. It’s nothing but a Duroc-Jersey sow.”

“Don’t bullshit me! I saw the photos! It’s the same fucking pig you photographed at the breeding farm.”

“Christ. You wouldn’t know a transgenic pig if it bit you on the face. Xenogenics’ animals are snow white, Bernie, just like laboratory mice. Those photos I showed you were ordinary farm animals. Just like the one in the trailer. I hope you understand. When you began issuing threats, Xenogenics had to take certain precautions.”

Bernie was speechless.

Dwayne took it as a good sign. He pressed the advantage.

“You know, Bernie, when we first met, you impressed me as a businessman. Here’s one sharp guy, I said to myself. And now, here you are, acting like a common thug. I just don’t get it.

“What is it you want? Money? If that’s all it is, then let’s talk. These pigs are going to be huge, whether you like or not. Xenogenics will be saving lives by the thousands. Hard to put a price, on that. But I’d say we’re looking at an initial public offering in the neighborhood of three...maybe even four billion. Hell. Some of those Internet IPO’s did better than that, and they didn’t even have a product.

“There’ll be plenty to go around, believe me. And it wouldn’t be right, leaving you out of pocket on Cayle’s viatical. Not after his contribution, and all. I’m sure Xenogenics could provide some sort of, well...shall we say, compensation? Stock options, or whatever. Only give up the girl. You’re down to your last mile.”

Dwayne regretted using the word, viatical. Helen was quietly fuming.

“Last chance, Bernie. That mile five marker should be coming up.”

“Yeah. I see it,” he said.

“Then play it smart. Pull over next to it. We’ll talk business.”

“All right. But don’t try anything.”

Dwayne sighed with relief.

He estimated they were less than two miles behind. Helen had gained some ground. Caroline soon confirmed that the trailer had stopped.

“We’re on our way,” he reassured her. “Just two or three minutes. Have you got the tire iron?”

“Yeah. But I don’t think he’s getting out. The engine’s been off. So far he hasn’t opened his door.”

“Okay, then. Hang in there, kid.”

Dwayne suddenly felt as if he were riding the crest of a wave - totally in control, and on top of his game - with his board balanced precariously on the edge. He felt elated.

So much so that he went to give Helen a kiss. His timing was poor, perhaps. She shoved him back into his seat.

“Get off!” she snarled.

“Hey! I was just feeling...”

Helen wouldn’t let him speak. “Shut up! All right? You talk too much. One string of lies after the other. Just shut the fuck up!”

“There it is.”

They had reached a plateau, of sorts. The forest floor was hard and smooth. Bernie had parked under the pines. Helen came to an abrupt stop behind the trailer, and sprang out to free Caroline. The door was unlocked, although latched from the outside.

Caroline heard the latch mechanism moving. “Careful!” she cautioned from inside. “Don’t let Xenia out!”

When Bernie hobbled out from behind the wheel, he looked a beaten man. His knee was visibly hurting, but more telling was the way he carried himself. His arms hung limply at his sides. He hadn’t slept, or shaved, or combed his hair. In his wrinkled suit, he looked like someone who was accustomed to waiting in line for free soup.

Dwayne stole a glance inside the four-wheel-drive and spotted the keys, dangling from the ignition. Caroline and Helen were standing by the pickup. He caught Helen’s eye, and motioned for them to leave. Then pointed back in the direction they’d just come. She seemed to understand. They would meet at the llama farm.

For some reason, Bernie felt obliged to surrender his syringe. Dwayne was deathly afraid of needles, and handled it gingerly. The barrel was empty, he noticed.

“Fentanil,” Bernie said. “Enough to kill a horse. I squirted it on the ground.”

Dwayne nodded. "Good place for it."

Bernie looked him in the eye. "Tell me the truth. You've been working for Xenogenics right from the start, haven't you?"

Dwayne shrugged, as if it went without saying.

"Damn..." Bernie turned up his palms. "So? Now what?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said we'd talk."

"Oh. Yeah. So I did." Dwayne hopped into the Trooper and started the engine.

"Wait...!"

"Tell you what. Why don't you call my office. We'll have lunch."

Dwayne put the vehicle in gear, and began driving slowly in a circle. Bernie limped alongside.

"No, wait! My car..."

Dwayne was tempted to leave him, of course. But it didn't seem right, somehow, abandoning Bernie on the dusty county road, miles from his car. Not with his gimp knee, and all. Dwayne played by the rules. Always had. Bernie was already down. Dwayne wouldn't make him eat dirt.

Bernie had left his cell phone lying on the passenger seat. As Dwayne drove away, he tossed it out. Guy could call himself a cab.



## CHAPTER 18

### ENSENADA

Tuesday

“Caroline! How nice to see you!” Charlie Xong smiled affectionately, and took both her hands. Then he adopted a somewhat more serious tone. “You had an uneventful trip, I trust?”

Caroline misunderstood. She drew out the corners of her mouth, and averted her eyes to the ground. The driveway into the clinic was paved with seashells, bleached bone white in the sun. She began shifting them around with her toe.

“You can say that again,” she sighed.

Helen seemed intent on hovering in the background. So Dwayne stepped in, and extended his hand. “Hey, Doc! All safe and sound.”

Dr. Xong was most cordial. “Dwayne! A pleasure. I wasn’t expecting you until the end of the week.”

“How could I miss Cayle’s big day?” Dwayne replied jovially. Then he leaned forward, and added privately for Charlie’s benefit, “Seemed like a good idea to keep the girls company.”

“Yes. Yes, of course. I was expecting Clinton.”

“Dad broke his toe,” Caroline said, feeling called upon to explain her father’s absence. “Big toe,” she added, with a little sigh. “He dropped the camper shell on it.”

Word of the animal’s arrival had spread quickly. The housekeeping staff were naturally curious. Dr. Xong’s surgical staff even more so. After getting a glimpse of the pig, they gathered in a knot at the rear of the trailer, talking animatedly in Chinese.

The pigs in China were much smaller, apparently.

Caroline wandered off to pick some flowers, in advance of meeting Mr. Cayle.

The accommodations at the clinic were stretched to the limit, housing the surgical team from China. Dr. Xong was able to offer them only a single room. Helen carried her suitcase inside to claim it.

The small private room contained only one bed. Helen could comfortably share it with Caroline, however. Since Dr. Xong specialized in treating in morbidly obese, the clinic was equipped with extremely large beds.

She laid down and fell promptly asleep.

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“How’s our man doing?” Dwayne asked, finding Charlie alone in his office.

“He’s stable,” Dr. Xong said. “Anxious, of course.”

Dwayne could scarcely imagine. Some rather invasive-looking surgical instruments were laid out atop Charlie’s desk, in shallow stainless steel trays.

“I spoke with Dolores Unyon’s physician this morning,” Dr. Xong related. “The man seems quite knowledgeable. Assuming all goes well tomorrow, I believe he’ll recommend the procedure.”

“Excellent.”

“Actually, the woman appears to be in remarkably good health, considering the extent of her congestive heart failure. Her blood chemistry looks promising indeed. But first things first. I’m afraid that I have much to attend to, preparing for Mr. Cayle.”

“Yes, of course.”

Dr. Xong rose from his desk, and began gathering up the trays. “You’ll handle our press release, I hope?”

Having touted himself as a media consultant, Dwayne could hardly refuse. “Sure. Leave that to me. I’ve already given it some thought. Tell you what - I’ll jot down some of my ideas for the print media

campaign so you can run them past the partners. Wouldn't hurt to have their input."

Dwayne recalled the headline he'd penned for Cayle.

#### WIFE-BEATER GETS PIG HEART

Wouldn't do, obviously.

Dwayne wondered. Xenogenics' first press release could announce Ms. Unyon's impending surgery, instead.

#### MOTHER OF THREE SET TO RECEIVE GENETICALLY ENGINEERED HEART

The story would surely receive coverage in her hometown, Newark. With a push from Malcolm's agent, it might also play in New York. The tabloids, perhaps. The untried technology was almost certain to be greeted with skepticism.

Under the spotlights of the local media, Xenogenics could then release the dramatic news about Cayle, as a *fait accompli*.

#### TRANSGENIC SURGERY ALREADY PROVEN SUCCESSFUL TRUCK DRIVER HAS PIG'S HEART

The story could make the national news, after that. A scandal or two involving Cayle might even prove a blessing, and generate publicity for the plight of well-deserving Dolores Unyon.

## CONTROVERSY RAGES OVER TRANSGENIC HEARTS

### NEW JERSEY WOMAN AWAITS SURGERY

The stage would then be set for the pigs.

Dwayne thought he'd run it by his brother, Malcolm. They needed to address the financial aspects anyway.

In order to obtain a seat on the board of Xenogenics, Dwayne would have to bring more to the table than Dolores Unyon. Management of a high-tech company's IPO was a high-stakes game. Dwayne needed to put down a substantial ante, before they'd let him share the pot.

Most of the limited partnerships in the Xenogenics' proposed new breeding farm had gone unsold. Dwayne proposed to Malcolm that they buy the lot. If the pigs fulfilled their promise, the shares could be resold overnight. The total came to \$2.8M - more than enough to leverage himself into the game.

"I thought you were broke," Malcolm said disparagingly.

Dwayne took offense. “What’s that got to do it?”

“Well, I assumed you’d want to contribute.”

“Christ. Who said anything about going out of pocket? It’ll take awhile to draw up the contracts, won’t it? So it’s not as if we’ll have to cut them a check, or anything. Just a letter of intent.”

Dr. Xong anticipated operating on Dolores Unyon in about two weeks. They could easily stall that length of time, renegotiating the contracts. Then decide whether to sign them or not, after assessing the outcome of her surgery. As Xenogenics’ media consultant, Dwayne could hardly be in a better position to make the decision.

Malcolm was quick to calculate his ten percent.

“Oh, all right. What the hell. I mean, what are brothers for? Can’t very well let you starve to death, now can I? Where do you want me to send the LOI?”

“Their office in Oregon, I imagine. But fax a copy to Ensenada. Make it sound like a done deal.”

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When Helen awoke, the red light of sunset was streaming in the window. Caroline was standing next to the bed.

“Helen...?”

Helen yawned, and stretched herself awake. She mumbled sleepily, “What?”

“Do you know how to make chicken-fried steak?”

As it happened, Caroline had offered to cook a special dinner for Mr. Cayle. He’d chosen the menu himself. Chicken-fried steak with country gravy. Mashed potatoes. Apple pie ala mode. Nothing too difficult, really. Just basic truck stop food. But Caroline was clearly hoping for some help.

Under the circumstances, the man was probably within his rights, requesting his last meal. Even so, Helen couldn’t help being a little put off, picturing the meal on the plate. Seemed terribly drab. Everything was brown and white.

## CHAPTER 19

### CAYLE'S BIG DAY

Wednesday Morning

Cayle's surgery would commence at nine o'clock, and was expected to take five or six hours. Even then, Dr. Xong cautioned that an additional twelve hours would be needed before he determine if the new heart was functioning properly.

Helen saw no reason to stick around. She still hoped to make it back in time to help Rosalind on Thursday, which meant they'd have to leave by mid-afternoon at the latest. Which consequently meant leaving while the outcome was still in doubt.

But Caroline couldn't leave without the hams.

Caroline felt badly that Mr. Cayle had no one to support him during his hour of need. No family members wringing their hands in worry. Not even any friends. The waiting room was empty.

Except for Dwayne, who had been pacing back anxiously back and forth in the waiting room since breakfast. Even though his motives were suspect, Helen thought his presence would still count for something.

She suggested letting him keep the vigil.

Caroline nevertheless wanted to make a contribution. She picked another bouquet of flowers, and arranged a little shrine in the waiting room, centered around one of the photographs that Dwayne had taken of Mr. Cayle. Then lit a solitary votive candle, which she'd borrowed from one of the maids.

“That oughta do the trick,” she said, stepping back. “Let’s go the beach.”

## CHAPTER 20

### MAXIMUM EBB

Wednesday Afternoon

When Sophie rowed in to make her pizza dough, Rosalind was working upstairs, measuring the attic room for wallpaper.

She had completely forgotten that Wednesday was pizza night. So she couldn't help wondering what Sophie was up to, when she began making noise in the kitchen. When the big bread mixer began whirring, Rosalind went downstairs to investigate.

Sophie was cracking eggs into the mixer bowl.

Rosalind walked up beside her and peered over the rim. "What are you making?"

She replied cheerily. "Pizza!"

"Of course. Wednesday. I forgot."

Rosalind was fascinated for a moment, watching the dough hook spinning around. Sophie planned to make a lot of pizzas, looked like. She'd put close to five gallons of water in the bowl.

"Hope you're feeling better," Sophie said.

Rosalind was baffled. She felt fine.

"Nigel said that you were having trouble sleeping," she confided.

“Oh, that,” Rosalind sighed. “Happens now and then. I’ve kinda gotten used to it.”

She hadn’t seen either of them since Sunday night. Nor anyone else. The whole town had hunkered down, it seemed, waiting out the rain.

Now, after a dreary week of constant drizzle, the sun had come out at last. The long-awaited break in the weather probably accounted for Sophie’s sunny disposition. She’d finally been able to open the hatches on their boat.

Rosalind suddenly felt like getting outside. She decided to row across the river, and feed Helen’s cat. While she was over there, she could also harvest some mushrooms for Thursday night. She’d just about firmed up the menu, and two of the entrées called for chanterelles.

“Do you know where Helen keeps her tide book?” she asked.

Sophie was busy scooping flour into the mixer bowl. She answered over her shoulder. “It’s taped to the door of the fridge. Next to the calendar.”

Helen always stressed the importance of timing, when navigating on the river. So Rosalind knew enough to consult the tide tables. Trouble was, she didn’t really know how to read them.

There were rows of columns, with totally baffling headings. Mean lower high water. Mean higher low water. Mean lower low water. Mean higher high water. Fortunately, Helen had highlighted one of columns with yellow felt pen. Maximum ebb, the heading said.

That had to be it.

The ebb. When the tide was all the way out.

According to the tide tables, maximum ebb would occur at 11h39min. Rosalind checked her watch. It was approaching noon. Perfect, she thought. Just after the ebb.

She took one of Helen's mushroom-hunting baskets, and went to fetch the oars.

She couldn't have asked for a lovelier day.

The sunshine had even brought out the pelicans. The river was disappointingly dirty, though. A murky, muddy brown. They'd released more water from the dam, she suspected.

The tide appeared to be still going out. A raft of dead leaves and broken branches had collected in the cove where Helen tied up the skiff. Rosalind began clearing it all away, using an oar to pole the larger limbs out into the stream, where the current promptly carried them off. But not too fast, really.

She settled herself onto the thwart, and started rowing across, angling the skiff slightly into the current.

Rosalind hadn't rowed a boat in years. Helen's long oars were unwieldy, and she couldn't seem to find her stroke. She would manage to get the skiff moving smoothly, then catch the tip of an oar, and splash water all over herself. Or she'd accidentally pull one of the oarlocks from its socket, and have to stop rowing altogether, while she replaced it.

She hoped that Nigel wasn't watching.

The current seemed somewhat stronger as she cleared the bank. She aimed a bit further upstream.

As it happened, Rosalind had chosen the worst possible time to attempt crossing the river. After several days of heavy rain, the current in midstream was running close to three knots. Faster than she could row.

She had been mistaken about the term, 'maximum ebb', which referred to the strength of the *current*, not the state of the tide. Rosalind might have realized this had she taken notice of the companion column, which bore the heading 'maximum flood'. The tide tables included predictions for each - the time of day when the respective streams were

expected to reach their height. Precisely the reason why Helen had highlighted the entries for the ebb stream in yellow felt pen.

Yellow signifying caution.

By the time Rosalind realized that she might be in trouble, the current had already swept her past the pile moorings. She tried to row a little faster, but hurrying her stroke only made the oarlocks pop out more often. She had gone barely fifty yards from shore.

She decided to turn back.

Unfortunately, the river widened rapidly near its mouth. Despite her best efforts, the current kept her from getting any closer to the bank. Even so, the gravity of the situation didn't really sink in. Not until the current had carried her as far as the motel, opposite the bend in the river. From there, she could see both banks, curving boldly away from her, and merging with the sea.

She jumped up, and began frantically waving her arms. "Help! Help somebody!"

Sophie had planned to ask Rosalind to pick a few extra mushrooms, which she could use on her pizzas. So she was rather disappointed, discovering that she'd already left. Sophie had assumed that Rosalind would wait for slack water, still a few hours off.

Seemed odd that she would have chosen to buck the current. Rosalind wasn't the type. Sophie decided to check on her, and walked down to the wharf. The visibility was unlimited, under the recently cleared sky. She scanned downstream, and immediately spotted the skiff, all the way down by the motel.

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed. She angrily stomped her foot. "Stupid woman!"

Sophie set off in pursuit. She rowed swiftly to the pile moorings, and called out as she approached the boat, "Nigel! Hey!"

He appeared on deck within seconds, responding to the urgency in her voice.

"Hurry! Put Noah in the crib," she commanded, before pointing downstream. "It's Rosalind! She's headed for the surf!"

"Bloody hell...?" Nigel spun around, and checked for himself. Then quickly ducked below.

"We'll need the outboard!" Sophie shouted after him.

As Rosalind drifted out to sea, the water began to get rough. Small, curling waves at first, which occasionally sent a few dollops of water over the gunwale. Then frightening, rolling mounds of lumpy

water, which tilted the boat ominously, and threatened to capsize it completely.

She huddled down on the floorboards, and wrapped her arms tightly around the thwart. Several inches of water had already collected in the bottom. It sluiced back and forth between her legs. She started to shiver.

She lifted her head, and shouted feebly.

“Help! Help me!”

She began to despair.

No one ashore would hear her. Not above the noise of the surf. The sea was breaking violently on the outer banks. The shock of the crashing waves reverberated through the plywood hull of the skiff, and seemed to be growing louder, coming steadily closer.

She couldn't bear to look. Yet it was only a matter of time. Rosalind realized that she ought to prepare herself.

But she didn't know how.

In spite of the frigid water surrounding her, she felt herself starting to sweat. A pool of saliva had gathered in her mouth. As she lifted her head to spit it out, a wave of indescribable nausea swept over her, and she vomited violently into the sea.

Then again. And again, even when there was nothing left to come up.

Water continued to accumulate in the bottom of the boat; each succeeding wave adding another measure. Burdened by the growing weight of it, the skiff became progressively less responsive. When it rose sluggishly upon meeting one of the steeper waves, a huge sheet of green water sloshed over the gunwale. Rosalind let out a scream as it engulfed her. Then held her breath, thinking that she was going under.

But the sturdy little boat stayed afloat.

It was almost full of water. Helen's mushroom-hunting basket floated within reach. Rosalind grabbed it, and bailed for her life.

The tidal current dissipated rapidly, after the river opened out onto the sandbank. So the skiff hadn't traveled all that far after leaving the river mouth. When Nigel and Sophie caught up with it, the boat was a couple of hundred yards offshore, bobbing around in choppy three-foot waves. The wind was blowing onshore, fresh over the open water, and had kept it well away from the breakers.

Their cruising dinghy was an inflatable - a new one, in fact, bought with Sophie's tip money - and perfectly seaworthy under the conditions. Even so, Sophie felt constrained to take the waves bow on.

Helen's skiff was riding extremely low in the water, broadside to the waves, with only a few inches of freeboard remaining. But the wooden boat had built-in flotation, and wouldn't sink. Rosalind was bailing. When she heard the motor, she stopped, and began wildly waving her arms.

"Keep bailing!" Sophie hollered.

"There's an oar," Nigel said, spotting the white blade in the water, rising on one of the waves. "Eleven o'clock."

Sophie craned her neck, and steered for it.

"A little to port," Nigel said.

When the oar came within reach, Nigel leaned out, and plucked it from the water. Sophie circled around, and took up a position next to the skiff, a couple boat lengths off the bow. Rosalind seemed dazed, and disoriented. Dysfunctional. She suddenly stood up, as if she intended to jump into the water, and abandon ship.

"Rosalind! Keep bailing!" Sophie ordered.

"Reckon I'm gonna have to get wet," Nigel said resignedly. "Can you put me aboard?"

Sophie waited for a suitably flat trough, then gunned the outboard motor, and manoeuvred the inflatable alongside. Nigel swung his legs over the bow tube, and vaulted right into the skiff. Sophie immediately

peeled off, and resumed her position, with the bow of the inflatable headed into the wind. She threw Nigel a line.

Once he'd cleated it off on the bow, she motored forward, and kept the line taut. The prow of the half-submerged skiff slowly turned to face the seas, and water ceased coming over the rail. Nigel prised the basket from Rosalind's grasp, and began bailing. The sturdy wicker basket moved a lot of water, and he soon had the skiff rising smoothly over the waves.

Rosalind rapidly regained her strength once they reached the protected waters behind the sand spit.

Nigel and Sophie had rafted the boats together offshore, and were motoring back into the river, hugging the near bank, where the current was relatively weak. Although Rosalind hadn't the slightest recollection of having put it on, she was wearing Nigel's warm woolly jumper.

She vaguely recalled them talking about her on the way in, almost as if she hadn't been in the boat. Debating whether or not she had hypothermia. Nigel contending that she was merely seasick. Sophie worrying if they should take her to the hospital. Meanwhile, she herself had been unable to speak.

Something profound had happened to her. Yet, she couldn't find words to explain it.

Entering the river, she felt as if she were truly seeing it for the first time. Everything seemed fresh and new, and gloriously alive. The clear blue sky had brought out the color. The autumn hues of the oaks and maples. The blended shades of green of the ferns and the forest.

God. It was grand.

The river hadn't changed, of course. Rather something had awakened in her, as a result of her near death experience. She felt certain that it had changed her life.

"Hey look, you guys!" she exclaimed, finally breaking her silence. "There's the osprey!"

Nigel smirked. He turned to Sophie. "See? Just like I said. Seasick as a skunk."

## CHAPTER 21

### BRINGING HOME THE BACON

Wednesday Afternoon/Thursday Morning

When Helen and Caroline returned from the beach, Dwayne was sound asleep on the couch, having duly completed his vigil. Cayle was already out of surgery.

They found Dr. Xong on the verandah, relaxing with his surgical team over a cup of green tea. Charlie smiled broadly, and rose to meet them. He appeared rather weary. Caroline was still wearing the sombrero that she'd bought at the beach. Charlie put his arm around her.

"Went very well," he said. "We have every reason to be optimistic."

Caroline punched the air. "Yes!"

Charlie brought over one of his colleagues.

"Caroline, I'd like to introduce my anesthesiologist, Dr. Choy. He's the senior member of my staff. The two of us attended university together, isn't that right, Pak?"

Dr. Choy smiled amiably. "In our youth."

Charlie pointed out the pair of insulated chests, which had been stacked next to the Trooper. “I know that you have a long drive ahead of you. So I took the liberty of asking Dr. Choy if he could take care of the, uh...of your...”

Charlie simply couldn't find the words.

Dr. Choy spoke on his behalf. “You brought us a magnificent animal. You should feel very proud.”

For the first time, Caroline betrayed a hint of emotion over the demise of her pig. Her gaze lingered on the ice chests, then turned to the ground.

“Her name was Xenia, Six of Seven.”

Helen saw no reason to wake Dwayne, and cause a scene. She left him a brief note, instead.

Dear Dwayne,

Caroline and I have borrowed your car.

I'm grateful for what you've done, helping to deliver us from danger. I also appreciate that you had no intention of putting us in jeopardy in the first place. Then again, I still haven't forgiven you for lying to me.

Perhaps I'll feel differently, if everything works out for Caroline. But right now, I'm unwilling to spend another two days in your company. I hope you understand.

We'll leave the Trooper at the llama farm in Yreka. I realize that this might be rather inconvenient. Perhaps you can hitch a ride with Bernie.

Regards,

Helen

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The traffic was bumper-to-bumper through San Diego. Even worse around Los Angeles. By the time they reached Bakersfield, it was approaching midnight.

With Caroline already sound asleep in the passenger seat, Helen realized that it would be folly to continue, and stopped at a motel.

Caroline woke up at seven, and emptied both of the motel's ice machines, filling up the insulated chests.

Helen decided to call the restaurant. Rosalind would be well into the chickens, she thought. She asked how she was coping, filleting all the breasts.

“Oh, they’re done already,” Rosalind said.

Helen didn’t know what to say. It was impossible.

“I ordered them that way,” Rosalind explained.

“What? But how, uh...”

Helen couldn’t believe it. She had asked on more than one occasion if the poultry wholesaler could supply her with boneless, skinless breasts. She’d always been told that free-range chickens were only available by the bird.

“Frankly, Helen, I can’t see why you bother butchering them yourself. Hardly seems worth it. They’ll do them any way we want for fifteen cents a pound. They do a lovely job.”

“Uh-huh. You don’t say...”

Helen couldn’t resist doing the math. Last week, she’d spent over four hours, processing two hundred and fifty pounds of chicken. At fifteen cents a pound, the butchering costs would have come to thirty-seven dollars and fifty cents. About nine dollars an hour.

Not bad for menial work.

But Rosalind was right, of course. It was hardly worth it.

“Have you gotten the stock started?” Helen asked.

“Nigel’s browning the last of it, now.”

“Nigel...?”

“Yeah. Sophie’s here, too. They both came in at dawn. Nice of them, really. They were a bit worried, I guess. I almost drowned yesterday.”

## CHAPTER 22

### A BIRTHDAY PARTY

Six Weeks Later

The Crab Pot Cafe was unusually crowded for a Thursday night. Xenogenics had booked a table for twelve, for a birthday dinner for Mr. Cayle. Helen had even prepared a special entrée for the occasion.

Baked ham. Xenia, in fact.

Clinton had never cured a finer one. Helen scored it with a deep spiral cut, then baked it whole, with a caramelized Northern Spy apple glaze.

The company was represented by Dr. Xong, who had flown up from Tijuana; and Dwayne, who had recently taken over as Xenogenics' Chief Financial Officer. Accompanying them were Dolores Unyon's sister, Pearl, and her brother, Red, who had flown out from New Jersey for a photo shoot with the pigs.

Cayle had arrived in a limousine with an entourage of his own - his cousin Curly, a chauffeur named Herb, Curly's girlfriend Bobbie Jo, and Darlene, a cocktail waitress they'd picked up at a truck stop along the way.

Then Caroline and her parents, of course.

Helen was invited herself, and planned to join them at the table as soon as she'd added the finishing touches to the ham - sliced apples marinated in cognac, inserted into the slits in the meat, then run under the broiler with a coating of the apple glaze. She wanted the ham to be special. As far as Helen was concerned, the party was as much for Caroline, as it was for Cayle.

Rosalind was looking after the regular customers. She had decided to take an active role in running the restaurant, and was now working full-time. They had also hired two new cooks. Under their new arrangement, Helen officially had Thursdays off, and no longer had to row to work in the dark.

Surprisingly enough, Rosalind had taken a few pieces of her furniture out of storage, and moved in permanently upstairs. The spartan surroundings no longer seemed to bother her. She had arranged a comfortable place to meditate, right in front of the window, and would sit up there for hours, watching the river flow, and reflecting on the meaning of her near-death experience.

Rosalind had undergone some profound changes since the incident.

Helen hadn't quite gotten used to her ascetic, new look. She had ceased using make-up entirely. Hair spray and nail polish, as well. She'd also begun tying her hair back severely, and wearing uncommonly drab clothes - a plain white blouse, and navy blue knee-length skirt, at the moment - in which she rather resembled a nun.

Helen had witnessed sudden shifts in Rosalind's behavior in the past, particularly when she was in the process of switching therapists. Yet during each of those episodes, she was predictably dysfunctional, and desperately unhappy.

Now, she seemed remarkably serene.

Helen couldn't resist the temptation to put a religious spin on it. During one of their discussions of her near-death experience, Rosalind claimed that she'd been 'born again'. On another occasion she insisted that she'd 'seen the light'. Rosalind was vehemently anti-religious, however, and rather offended when Helen asked if she'd found Jesus.

Rosalind regretted using the borrowed expressions. Nevertheless, she felt they pointed to something. It wasn't her fault if the most appropriate, descriptive phrases had already been usurped by organized religion. Even the term 'near-death-experience' carried some unfortunate connotations - visions of bright lights, soft white clouds, or dreamlike visitations of angels and such - none of which had happened to her.

The meaning of her experience ran up against the bounds of language, Rosalind felt. She was still searching for the right words. Once she found them, she planned to write a book.

The research would take several years, she thought. She had already spent a month on the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and had barely scratched the surface of Buddhism. She hadn't even begun the existentialist philosophers. While she was at it, she could just as well live above the restaurant as anywhere else.

When the tips of the apples began to brown, Helen removed the ham from the broiler, and carried it over to the serving counter. Rosalind was busy arranging a couple of entrées. She cleared a space.

"Ready for the garnish?" she asked.

"Yeah. All set."

Helen had made some candied yams, with maple sugar and hickory nuts. They transferred the ham to a porcelain serving platter, and began arranging the yam wedges around it, on a bed of ruffled red chard.

"Well, I finally had a chance to talk with Cayle," Rosalind related.

"Ahh. What did he have to say?"

Rosalind had been dying to meet him. In addition to gathering material for her book, she suspected that their fates might be linked, as

a result of their shared, near-death experience. It seemed a remarkable coincidence that they had undergone their respective ordeals on the very same day.

Not only that. According to the log which Dr. Xong had kept during the surgery, Dan Cayle's diseased heart had been removed from his body at 11h39min. Precisely the time of maximum ebb.

"Doesn't seem as if our experiences have much in common," she sighed, clearly disappointed.

"Shame..."

"After everything he's been through, you'd think the man would have more on his mind than booze and sex. He tried to pick me up, actually. Seems he's spending the weekend in Vegas."

Dwayne hadn't skimped on the wine. He had ordered ten of the most expensive bottles on the list. On Xenogenics' dime, of course.

The company's future had brightened considerably following the string of successful surgeries, and the subsequent granting of the patent on their transgenic pigs. Malcolm had raised another \$75M, selling shares in a series of new breeding farms, slated for construction all across the cornbelt.

Most of the shares had already changed hands - many of them more than once - and they'd risen dramatically in value each time, from

an initial \$80K to over \$450K apiece. Each transaction necessitated a transfer of the partnership interests, and incurred a ten percent management commission. So far Malcolm had pocketed close to ten million dollars.

Half of which had gone to Dwayne.

Helen carried the enormous platter to the table herself.

“Happy birthday, Mr. Cayle!” Caroline cried.

“Come on, Dan. Let’s see a big smile,” Dwayne urged, crouching alongside the table, observing the scene through his camera lens. Cayle was glad to oblige, and struck several poses, then hunched down next to the platter for some close-up shots behind the ham.

Despite his natural affinity for the camera, Xenogenics’ had pulled the plug on Cayle’s talk show tour early on, and replaced him with Dolores Unyon, once she had fully recuperated from her surgery. Cayle didn’t really mind. He’d been on TV at least, and achieved a total of fifteen minutes and thirty seconds of fame, which was somewhat better than average.

Dwayne ushered the Unyon’s into the frame, and took a few shots of the pair of them with their arms around Cayle. Then he brought in Dr. Xong, followed by Caroline and Clinton, for photos of all the various permutations.

“Dwayne! Come on,” Helen chided. “The ham’s getting cold.”

Xenogenics hadn’t skimped on the food, either. Once everyone had taken their seats, Sophie began delivering the rest of the entrées. Fricassee of muscovy duck. A whole chinook salmon, poached in white port wine sauce. Roast loin of venison. A veritable feast.

Cayle could really pack it away, Dwayne noticed.

“Better save some room for dessert, Dan,” he advised, as Cayle extended his fork, and speared yet another slice of ham.

Cayle reconsidered, and let the slice fall back onto the plate. “Yeah. Wouldn’t want to miss that.” He patted his ample stomach. “Maybe I’ll take a little break. Where’s the pisser?”

Dwayne pointed toward the corridor.

Cayle pulled a small object from his pocket - something he wanted to show Dwayne in secret. He partially opened his hand, revealing a small, screw-top glass vial, half-filled with a white crystalline powder.

“Care for some blow?” he whispered, nodding his head toward the restroom.

Dwayne stared blankly at it for a moment. “Actually Dan, I, uh...I think I’ll pass.”

“You sure? It’s real good stuff.”

“No, I’d better not,” Dwayne said, thumbing his nose. “Hay fever’s been acting up.”

“Allergies, huh? That’s a bitch.” Cayle gave him a wink as he rose ponderously from the table. “Back in a flash. Hold the fort.”

Christ.

Herb Garnisch was supposed to be minding him. Dwayne rose from the table, and drew him aside. “What the hell’s going on, Herb? Cayle just flashed me a vial of meth.”

Herb didn’t seem all that surprised. “Hey. I can’t watch him every minute.”

“Where’d he get it?”

“The truck stop, I suppose. Or else the bimbo.”

When Cayle returned from the restroom, he was a man with a mission. He promptly climbed up onto his chair, and addressed the crowded tables in the restaurant.

“Hey, folks!” he shouted gaily. “Everybody having a good time?”

Heads turned at every table, and stared at him in utter silence. Cayle was not deterred. He raised his champagne glass high over his head.

“Helen! Bring on the bubbly! A bottle for every table. My treat. Nah, let’s make that two bottles! Come on everybody! What d’ya say? Let’s have us a *party!*”

With that, Cayle suddenly stiffened, and stood bolt upright atop the chair. His face was flushed red. The eyes bulged from his head.

Xenia had led a drug-free life.

Her heart was unaccustomed to stimulants.

Cayle began to sway, as his blood pressure continued to soar. He took a huge, deep breath. Then toppled over backwards, as stiffly as a tree felled in the forest. Dead before he hit the ground.