



SHR

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Mindy Friddle

COWBIRD

Thomas's brother called him at three on a Tuesday morning to announce that he'd been evicted. As soon as he heard Eddie's voice, that familiar, scorched desperation tamped down by a practiced coolness, Thomas turned on the lamp, settled back onto his down pillows, and breathed a secret sigh of relief. A middle-of-the-night call could have been an ER doctor or his mother's nurse. It could have been tragic news—but it wasn't. It was just Eddie, on the edge, as usual.

"You're going to have to speak up," Thomas told his brother. "I can't understand you."

"I mean, they put all my shit on the sidewalk," Eddie said. "Just threw it out there. Aren't there laws?"

"There are agreements," Thomas said. "You agreed to pay rent."

Thomas's wife, Mary-Ward, sat up beside him, mouthed *Eddie?* Thomas nodded.

"You have a new phone number?" Thomas asked his brother.

"What gives you that idea?" There was an insuck of cigarette smoke.

"Either that or you changed your name to Unidentified Caller."

Eddie laughed. For a minute Thomas pictured him as the tow-headed elfin boy he used to be, charming his way out of principals' offices. "Maybe I did." Then, "Naw. I borrowed this phone." There was a murmur in the background followed by Eddie yelling, "Just calm down, dude."

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the bus station."

"*What* bus station?"

"Greyhound."

The conversation escalated in the background. Eddie told someone to fuck off.

"I mean . . . what city?"

"Dallas? I think?"

"Eddie, what's your plan?"

"Grab a hound in the A.M. Hang with you and Mary-Ward a few days. See my nieces. If that's okay."

Thomas looked over at Mary-Ward, who'd reclined, eyes closed, already nodding.

"And Mother," Thomas added.

"Yeah, sure. And visit Mother. Not that she'll notice."

The last time Eddie had come for a visit, he'd left after a big blowup with Thomas. That's how he always left.

"When is your bus arriving?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. I'll call you." Eddie hung up.

Thomas stared at the ceiling.

Mary-Ward wasn't asleep, just pretending. She turned away from him, one tanned shoulder out of the sheets, buttery gold in the dimness. He turned out the light, and then did something he'd wanted to do for weeks. He laid one hand on his wife's warm shoulder. She flinched. A tiny flutter of surprise, a stiffness barely perceptible, but still. A recoil. He kept his hand on her, yearning for that married skin, pretending it wasn't a luxury.

Eddie had three kids with three different women, all of them eight. "The kids, I mean," Thomas hastened to explain to the therapist the next morning. "The mothers are all in their twenties."

Dr. Turber tried to look unflappable, as therapists do. Sphinxlike. Eyes moving back and forth like one of those plastic cat clocks in Chinese restaurants. Dr. Turber was always checking the timer. Ca-ching! Another fifty minutes, another hundred bucks. Thomas kept such thoughts to himself, his resistance to couples therapy, as his wife called it, carefully hidden.

"Mary-Ward, how do you feel about your brother-in-law coming for a surprise visit?" Dr. Turber asked.

Mary-Ward shrugged. "We've always taken Eddie in when he needed it. He's no trouble, really."

Dr. Turber took off her glasses and cleaned them and put them back on. "I'm sensing a united front between the two of you. It sounds very . . . functional."

Thomas tried not to feel too excited about that. Dr. Turber's encouraging statements nearly always preceded devastating, dark observations about Thomas's marriage that made him wish he hadn't given up whiskey.

"He's a lousy father," Thomas said. "Sad to say about your own brother, but true."

Mary-Ward nodded in agreement, and looked down at her clasped hands. There was a shimmer of something dusty on her eyelids—it reminded him of a smudge from a moth's wing—and glossy shine on her lips. She'd taken to dressing up since last summer's weight loss. She'd discarded the beginnings of frump, peeled off pounds, and zipped herself into a new lean, tanned frame. Tantalizing him, because it was just window dressing. He could look but not touch.

"Eddie only sees one of his kids," Thomas said, encouraged, despite himself, by Mary-Ward's agreeing with him. "Barely."

Two of the mothers had refrained from legally naming Eddie as the father of their children, knowing as Thomas did that it would be more trouble than it was worth. The third, Sharon, did, though, hauling him in for child support. When Eddie had lost his job at Radio Shack two years previously, the wheels of justice rolled right over him. That was another three-in-the-morning call. Eddie hadn't shown up for his child support hearing, and Lady Justice had no mercy for a deadbeat dad on the lam. Thomas had flown all the way to Arizona and bailed him out. "Davey—that's my nephew—he stays with us summers."

"We don't want Eddie to have his court-appointed time with Davey taken away," Mary-Ward told Dr. Turber. "Even if Eddie doesn't see Davey some summers." She looked at Thomas for two delicious seconds. "Well, most summers. It's . . . sad."

"So you keep your brother's child every summer even though he doesn't even bother to visit his own son?" Dr. Turber's eyes widened in disapproval. Thomas caught her and she knew it. Therapists don't judge? Ha. Crock of shit. Dr. Turber had just decided Eddie was a poor excuse for a human. Never mind that she was right.

"Eddie had a different kind of childhood from me," Thomas said. "He's twelve years younger."

"Really?" Dr. Turber latched onto the "family of origin" thing, just as Thomas hoped she would. It was nice to have the spotlight on something besides his marriage for a change. In fact, it felt fucking terrific. He threw more meaty morsels to the therapist. Eddie was a change baby, born when their mother was forty-four and Thomas was twelve. Their father died when Eddie was an infant. Ironically, their

father's life insurance paid off the mortgage on the family home, and made things a little easier, materially. "Ah," Dr. Turber said, "I think I'm beginning to understand." Eddie had grown up without a father, doted on by his mother, bailed out by his big brother, both of whom enabled Eddie to behave without facing the consequences of his actions *blah, blah*.

What Thomas didn't say was that his father had been a drunk. Not even Mary-Ward knew how bad it had been. On numerous occasions, Thomas had stepped over his father, in the hallway or the kitchen, or—even now his face burned with shame at the memories—on the front porch steps—his father's boozy snores and snorts, his splayed legs and puffy face on view for the neighbors to see: a drunk lives here!

Please God let the time be up already, Thomas thought. He resisted the urge to look at his watch, instead let his gaze skitter over the misshapen pottery and nude sculptures of saggy, pocked bodies on the bookshelves, before he looked longingly out the window. There, in Dr. Turber's meditative shade garden, among the ferns and Buddha statues, a brown thrasher stabbed a block of suet with its beak, those fierce, predatory yellow eyes warning Thomas to stay alert.

Thomas's attention was then pierced by the tines of two dreaded words, "responsibility" and "passion." Dr. Turber awaited his response. With her doughy, rouged face, the eyeglasses perched at the end of her nose, she looked like a cheerful shoemaker.

"I'm sorry," Thomas said. "What was that?"

"I was saying that perhaps we should look at the poles of your relationship. Responsibility and passion. Impulse and order."

"Poles?" Thomas said.

"Sometimes in intimate relationships the poles tend to widen." Dr. Turber sketched out something on a legal pad and held it up. Thomas suspected she was a frustrated artist. Those lumpy nudes on the bookshelf were the work of a keep-your-day-job sculptor. "Opposites attract, but as time goes by we tend to grow more and more opposite from our partners." She pointed to her hand-drawn snarls, two bird nests on the lined page. "The poles divide. So here, on this side, we have contentment, responsibility, stasis, order. At the other pole we have turmoil, passion, impulsiveness, adventure."

Thomas was pretty sure Dr. Turber had just called him a bore. A static, responsible, unadventurous neatnik.

Mary-Ward looked off into the distance, no doubt struggling with her turmoil and passion.

"Look," Thomas said. "We've had four sessions now, and, no offense, but I don't really see how this is helping." Thomas turned to his wife. "We just need to go back to the way things were . . . before." The oxygen was now officially sucked out of the room.

"There is no going backward in a relationship. Only forward," Dr. Turber said.

Mary-Ward wiped away a tear.

"It's up to you," Thomas told his wife. "Everything is up to you." But of course she knew that.

Jesus, he just wanted their life back, and could she drop the new svelte suaveness and just go back to being a little chunky but happy? So they could stop being tortured about their "intimacy issues" by this insufferable shoemaker?

"I see our time is coming to an end," Dr. Turber said.

Ca-ching! Thank you, God.

Dr. Turber leaned forward, her mouth pinched. Thomas leaned back, braced himself. "As you know, after infidelity there are trust issues," she said. "Both parties have to take responsibility for what may have led to the affair. Next week, I believe you'll both be ready to discuss this."

After this devastating sneak preview, Dr. Turber stood to escort them out. "You were right about providing suet for the birds," she said merrily to Thomas. "I've had all kinds this week. Those little yellow birds—"

"Goldfinches," Thomas said, because, as Mary-Ward knew, generic descriptions drove him nuts. He and Lisa, their ten-year-old, had taken up birding, and Thomas had latched onto this new hobby with a zeal most ornithologists would envy. Thomas's interests ran deep, he plumbed depths. He stayed with things. He'd built a company from nothing, *nothing*—now the largest hose and fittings supplier in South Carolina. He'd planned every detail of their family vacations through the years, better than any tour guide, to Williamsburg, to Disney World, to the Grand Canyon. He was a damn good father. He was a one-woman man.

Was that too responsible? Too boring?

Outside, they blinked in the sudden spring brightness of the parking lot as if they'd just emerged from a matinee. He opened Mary-Ward's car door for her, then walked around to the driver's side.

"What time are you picking up Eddie?" she asked, looking out at the median.

"Four. I'll pick up Lisa after school and we'll meet him at the bus station." He looked over at her crossed legs, the wedding ring on her finger, worn for two decades. It was loose now on her slender hand, just as it had been the night they'd eloped. They'd both been nineteen, Mary-Ward already four months along with Chloe. He'd bought their wedding bands on credit. It had taken him three years to pay them off.

To his horror, he found himself tearing up. He coughed, said, "All this damn pollen." Then, "I'm going to take Eddie to visit Mother."

"Today you mean?" She almost smiled. "He'll hate that."

"Yep. But he won't have much of a choice." Eddie would be held captive once Thomas picked him up from the bus station. They'd stop by Rolling Hills on the way home. Their mother could go anytime. She needed to lay eyes on her youngest, even though she might not recognize him.

"I'll make fish tacos tonight," Mary-Ward said. "That's Eddie's favorite."

"We shouldn't make it too easy for him. I don't want him thinking this is the Ritz-Carlton." This was an old conversation between the two of them, replayed through the years like a tired hit song.

"I know," she said. "But he won't stay long. He never does."

At the stoplight, Thomas loosened his tie. In the distance, a murder of American crows dotted the power lines like music notes.

"Davey is coming in what? Two weeks?"

"Ten days," she said.

Last summer, Davey had arrived with outgrown shoes, no toothbrush, and atrocious table manners. It took two weeks to file down his sharp edges. Davey was a sweet kid, though, whose corn-silk hair, blotchy freckles, and frail frame made Thomas worry he'd soon be the target of playground cruelty. The boy needed a protector. A father. If Thomas could stand to keep his brother around for two weeks, maybe Eddie would spend a day with his own son. Mary-Ward

read his thoughts as usual. "You know he's going to be gone by the time Davey gets here," she said.

"We'll see about that."

They pulled up to Thornrose and the gate opened in slow approval, granting them entrance, before claspings protectively behind them. Sprinklers hissed and spat on the wide, emerald lawns. They passed the club on Thomas's left, and he looked straight ahead. He could not even glance in the direction of that hated place, could not even bear to see the Thornrose Country Club letterhead in his mailbox. Thomas had let their membership lapse. Mary-Ward hadn't said a word about it.

On eight consecutive Saturdays, when Thomas and his daughter had hiked through meadows and mountains, identifying water fowl, raptors, migrating flocks, woodpeckers, and songbirds—when they'd spotted ninety percent of the Eastern North American birds for Lisa's fourth grade science project—Mary-Ward had succumbed to a passionate liaison with her tennis instructor, and at least two of those trysts had been in Thomas and Mary-Ward's bedroom, on their own bed, between their Egyptian cotton sheets. And although Mary-Ward said the affair was over and never meant anything, and Thomas mostly believed her, she was not sure she wanted to, as she put it, "stay in the marriage." She did not say "our marriage." She said "the marriage."

They drove up their curved driveway now and the spacious garage door yawned open, another enchanted entrance. He parked the Lexus beside Mary-Ward's BMW. He turned off the ignition, and the garage door shuddered down behind them, and for a minute it was quiet, only the engine ticking. Mary-Ward looked as if she was going to say something, but she didn't. She got out. Thomas got out. He went upstairs to his home office and checked his e-mail, then left as she made out a grocery list, asking if he needed anything from the store. He didn't.

Men leave marriages for someone else, women leave for something else. Dr. Turber cracked that little chestnut at their first session. What exactly did that mean? That women were more complex? That Mary-Ward's dalliance was a symptom of existential restlessness? Mary-Ward wasn't sure what she wanted out of life anymore. Hence, Mary-Ward committed "the breach," as Dr. Turber

called it, which made Thomas think of flooded levies and hurricanes and waterlogged ruin.

And yet, and yet. He was willing to forget everything if they could just go back to the way things were before.

“Uncle Eddie! Over here.”

Every time Thomas saw his brother, he braced himself. Eddie often looked shabbier, more battered, more on the margins of life than the last time. Today, he looked older than his twenty-eight years, and thin, very tired, but not as bad as Thomas had feared. Then Eddie smiled.

“Jesus, what happened?” Two of his upper teeth were missing.

“I yanked the damn things out myself. Hurt like hell, man. Insurance doesn’t cover teeth. Medicaid neither. I mean, what’s up with that? Aren’t teeth part of the meat suit?” Eddie looked down at Lisa. “And who is the beautiful young woman? Excuse me, miss, have you seen my niece?”

“It’s *me*, Uncle Eddie.” Lisa laughed, hugged him, wrinkled her nose.

“I know, right?” Eddie said. “I need a shower.”

“And a dentist,” Thomas muttered. He’d call Dr. Swenson and finagle an appointment for Eddie this week.

Once they were in the car, and out onto the highway zipping at sixty, and Eddie was seat-belted and locked in, Thomas announced that they were heading to Rolling Hills.

“Dude. No way. *I stink.*”

Lisa’s peal of laughter made Thomas smile.

“It’s true, Daddy. Maybe we should see Grandma tomorrow.”

“Yeah, plus don’t you have to get back to work?” Eddie asked. “I mean, I wouldn’t want your paycheck docked on my account.”

“I own the company, Eddie.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right.” Eddie hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. “Still hoses and shit?”

“Language,” Thomas whispered, cutting his eyes to Lisa. “Hydraulic hoses and vacuum caps.”

“So on your company T-shirts, it says ‘We Suck!’ or ‘We’ll Hose You.’ That’s hilarious.”

“Fifteen million in annual sales,” Thomas said.

"Hey, where's Chloe, by the way?"

"She's at college," Thomas said. "University of Virginia."

"Damn. They grow up fast, don't they?"

Before dinner, Eddie took a long hot bath. He came down to the kitchen dripping, holding a towel around his waist, smelling of Mary-Ward's lemon verbena bath oil. "I'm doing your laundry. I hope you don't mind," Mary-Ward told him. Thomas looked up from his *Wall Street Journal* and told Eddie he'd find him some clothes to borrow. Mary-Ward beat him to the punch. "Here." She handed over Thomas's freshly laundered sweat pants, underwear, and shirt.

"You got to be kidding," Eddie said, holding up Thomas's golf shirt, then the underwear. "Tighty whities? *Moi?*"

Beggars can't be choosers, Thomas almost said, but caught himself. With his gap-toothed smile, his gaunt, fish-white chest, and shaggy hair, that's exactly what Eddie looked like. A beggar.

"You have a dentist appointment tomorrow morning," Thomas told him.

"I do?"

"You do."

Eddie opened the refrigerator, scouting for beer, and, finding none, settled for vitamin water. He took a swig, made a face.

"Maybe you can stop by a barbershop tomorrow, too," Thomas said. "Then we'll go by and see Mother."

"Maybe," Eddie said, fingering his damp tresses, batting his eyelashes. "Get my nails done, too. And a nice waxing."

His clowning frustrated Thomas even more. "Look presentable and who knows? You could have a job by Monday."

"In this economy?" Eddie laughed, then bent over with a vicious cough.

Mary-Ward met Thomas's eyes. He shrugged.

"Supper in five minutes," Mary-Ward told Eddie.

"Say no more, my lady," he said and headed back upstairs to the guest bedroom to change into Thomas's clothes.

"I'll drive him to the dentist tomorrow," Mary-Ward told Thomas. It was a given that Eddie couldn't be trusted behind the wheel. He'd had his license suspended repeatedly, and even Eddie didn't resist

being driven around like a child. "I just pretend I'm a rich dude," he'd told Thomas.

"Thanks," Thomas said. "I was hoping you could. I have the weekly staff meeting tomorrow until noon."

They were a tag team. A wonderful tag team. Thomas basked in the warmth of that familiar efficiency.

"But only if he wants to go," Mary-Ward added. She stood at the sink with her back to Thomas.

"He won't."

"Then I won't drive him. He's an adult. He can decide."

"It's not like you'll have to handcuff him and drag him off to the dentist, but he won't go cheerfully," Thomas said, as if Mary-Ward didn't know that. "Wait. Is this about 'responsibility' again? The poles?"

"It's about accepting people the way they are. Not trying to fix them."

"I'm trying to fix my brother's teeth."

"Did it ever occur to you that the ne'er-do-well is the role he plays in your family? He's the slacker. You're the good son."

He sighed. "This is about the poles."

She began to scrub a pan with steel wool. Her bare hands reddened. Thomas could see the steam rising from the water. Did she know how lovely she looked there, her honey-colored hair tucked into a ponytail, the kitchen window reflecting her downcast eyes?

"I think we should take a different tack with him this time," she said. "Let him make his own decisions, even if they're bad ones."

"I thought that was exactly what we were doing."

"No," she lowered her voice to a whisper. "It's the same thing over and over. Eddie shows up, you try to fix him. One of you gets pissed off, he leaves."

"Okay," Thomas said slowly, anger swelling in his chest. "Okay, so you want to do, what? Tough love? No visits in the guest room, no fish tacos, no dentist, no child support payments, which I continue to make on his behalf? We'll just . . . cut him loose."

"That's not what I'm saying at all." She began peeling a tomato on the cutting board and did not look at him. "Welcome him without expecting that he's going to screw up—"

"But he is."

She began chopping the tomato, cradling the pulpy tenderness. "Hand me the cilantro, please?"

"The what?"

"The green herb on the counter behind you."

Thomas picked up the bundle of leaves and stalks, took a sniff—they smelled strange, like soap—and handed them over. He didn't want to eat that, but he wouldn't complain. He hadn't complained about any of the meals she'd taken to cooking lately. Mary-Ward was fixated with food now, appalled by how their family had eaten all these years. Their coffee was shade-grown from a women's cooperative in South America, delivered by mail every Friday. It had been months since Fruit Loops, Pop-Tarts, or Pringles had graced their kitchen pantry shelves. His own digestion was still adjusting to all the extra fiber and otherworld grains and greens she'd introduced.

"Look. I just want to get my brother to a dentist," he said numbly. "Help him find a decent job and spend some time with his kid. You think that's selfish?"

"Since when has anything you've done for Eddie made him more independent? In your heart, Thomas, you don't really believe he'll ever stop needing you, do you?"

"I'm trying to help him be . . . happy." He almost said "responsible," but stopped himself just in time.

"Happy?" She sighed and wiped the tomato juice from her hands. "You can't make someone else be happy."

An awful silence fell between them.

"You married an upstanding responsible guy," Thomas said finally, sounding indignant despite himself. "A man who honors his vows and loves his family. With a work ethic that gave us all this—" he gestured wildly around the kitchen.

"I married too young, Thomas. So did you."

He was too stung to taste dinner. The quinoa and fish tacos and Swiss chard and carob brownies tasted like Styrofoam peanuts. Probably that was a blessing. He chewed but said little as the playful bantering between Lisa and Mary-Ward and Eddie rose like water around him, filling his ears, making everything sound distorted and far away.

The next day, Thomas arrived home after work to find Eddie on the back porch, in the hammock, drinking beer. "How was the dentist?"

Eddie smiled his broken grin, shrugged.

"You didn't go," Thomas said sadly. Nor had he shaved or had his hair cut. Eddie couldn't see their mother looking like this.

"Nah. It would've cost a bundle."

"I'm paying for it, Eddie."

"Yeah, well, thanks for the offer. I'm pretty sure it was gonna hurt like hell, and I'm the one who was going to have to feel a man messing around in my mouth with an ice pick."

"An ice pick?"

"Those sharp hooks they use. You see them? And those cold little mirrors. Rubber gloves. Giant needles." He shuddered.

"You said you pulled your own teeth. How did that feel?"

"Not too bad, thanks to Jameson."

"For Christ's sake. You said you wanted to go to the dentist."

"I don't recall that."

"You said teeth should be covered under insurance, remember?"

"True that." He barked a laugh and opened another can of beer.

"But I'd never use dental insurance anyway. I hate dentists."

"Where did you get that beer?"

"From the getting place," Eddie said, suppressing a belch. "Why? You want some?"

"No. I don't keep beer in the house."

"Yeah, I noticed."

"We never have. You know that."

"Why not? You're not a drunk."

"Exactly."

Eddie shrugged and drained his beer in one wet gulp.

"I don't like what drink does to me," Thomas said. "It changes me."

"That's the point, man."

Thomas found Mary-Ward upstairs. She'd just showered after her pre-supper run and wore nothing but a towel. He closed the bedroom door, emptied his pockets, clattered his keys and change on the dresser.

"Eddie offered to wash the windows today," she said. "He did the whole first floor. He didn't want to take money for it."

"Sure he didn't."

"I insisted he take a twenty." She sounded proud of herself.

"Did you drive him to the store?"

"No. He walked. I think he went to the gas station."

Thomas let the silence speak for itself.

"So what if he wanted to buy some beer?" Mary Ward said. "It's his own money. He's exercising his own judgment. It's like a muscle, a weak muscle getting stronger."

When Mary-Ward said "muscle" Thomas pictured Ned, the tennis instructor, knotted arms flexing, standing beside Mary-Ward whispering into her ear about her backhand, and then he pictured Ned, naked, behind Mary-Ward, pumping away. He closed his eyes, rubbed his chest, sat down on the bed. Mary-Ward wiped the steamy bathroom mirror.

"Of course, I don't agree with his decision about avoiding the dentist," she said. She squinted at her reflection, then began to brush something on her eyelids. "But I respect his right to say no. He's stretching, feeling his own strength."

"Jesus, enough with the muscle analogies. I get it," Thomas mumbled. Only he didn't. This would never work. He reclined across the bed and heaved a sigh. His brother would do something infuriating and leave within a week and the next time he'd see Eddie, he wouldn't have a tooth in his head. He might be in an orange jumpsuit again, behind bars. Or living on someone's porch. With Eddie, you never knew what kind of circumstances he'd find himself in—only that they'd be unfortunate ones.

Mary-Ward walked over to the bed. "You have to let go." Thomas felt the mattress give as she perched on the end of it. He didn't dare move—she was like a fawn he didn't want to scare off. "I know it's not easy for you either." Oh, God. Her hand on his ankle burned like a fireplace poker.

"I want to do what's best for him," he said, not knowing what he was saying, not caring. Her skin above the plush green towel was freckly from sun. Her gold-flecked hazel eyes darkened. She nodded.

He wanted to grab her, hold his hand over her mouth and give it to her right here, with Eddie downstairs getting drunk and Lisa in her room practicing her flute. She'd fight him off at first but he'd pull

a Rhett Butler on her—pick her up kicking and screaming, throw her down on the pillows.

It wasn't as though he was an ogre. Women still looked. He had most of his hair. He was meaty and solid and looked good in a suit. He got the eye at conventions, at the dry cleaner's, at PTA. He'd feel women's stares, most of them stopping when they saw his wedding band, some of them not. He'd had opportunities to cheat but he'd never taken them. Didn't that count for something?

Mary-Ward stood up and Thomas's heart sank. She returned to the bathroom mirror, her thin body leaning forward in the green towel, like a flower stalk, as she brushed her yellow hair.

After dinner, as soon as Mary-Ward sat on the porch swing to call her sister and Lisa was taking a bubble bath, Thomas went upstairs to his office, whirled the new combination lock on his file cabinet, counted out a thousand dollars, and put it in an envelope. Then he knocked on the guest room door.

"Yeah," Eddie said. He was in bed eating a bowl of cereal, watching television.

"Still hungry, huh?"

Eddie shrugged, his mouth full. "I like eating cereal at night," he said after he swallowed. "Even these twigs and sticks."

At dinner that evening, Eddie had mentioned he might soon "light out and hitch." It was a veiled threat. He knew Thomas frowned upon his occasional hitchhiking. In this day and age, riding with strangers was practically a suicide attempt. Eddie needed bus money to get to Seattle, but he wouldn't come right out and ask for it. That might mean he'd have to consent to an honest conversation about his plans.

"All these channels you have are awesome," Eddie said, holding up the remote. "You must have the premium package. Cartoon Network, comedy stations, sci-fi."

Thomas pulled out the fat envelope from his pocket.

"Hey," Eddie said. "Would you mind? You're in my way." He waved Thomas to the side.

Thomas sat down the wicker chair beside the bed. "We need to talk."

"So talk."

Thomas showed him the envelope, took out the cash, fanned it. Tangibles were important with Eddie.

"I have here a thousand bucks," he said. "How would you like to earn it?"

"Earn it?" Eddie's eyes followed the money as Thomas tucked it back into the envelope. "Earn it . . . how?"

"First, you stay for ten more days. That's one hundred dollars a day."

Eddie turned down the sound with the remote. "So if I stay, on the tenth day, I get a grand?"

"I said 'first.' You stay for ten days and every day you do something for me. Not impossible things, just responsibilities."

"Like what?"

"Like you get your teeth fixed. You get a haircut. You come along with Lisa and me birding on Saturday morning, you visit Mother for her birthday on Sunday, you spend a day with Davey."

"I don't know. That's a lot of demands."

"Demands?" Thomas said, then lowered his voice to a whisper. "They're your duties. And you'll be getting paid for doing them."

"Yeah, I'm not so good with duties."

Thomas waved the cash like a hunk of meat in front of a tiger. "Fine. I'll put this back, then."

"Wait. That's not fair. This is America."

Occasionally, Eddie's robust sense of entitlement flabbergasted even Thomas. "No one owes you anything, Eddie. Not even me."

"I just want my share."

"You have to work for what you earn. Everyone does."

"No they don't." Eddie lifted up the cereal bowl, slurped milk.

"It's your choice. You can earn this and be on your way to Seattle with some serious cash, or—"

"Fine. Okay. I'll do it."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. I'm sure."

"There's one more thing. And this is important. You are not to breathe a word of this agreement to Mary-Ward. Not a word. When I suggest your daily duty, you say 'yes.' Happily. In front of her. Got it?"

Eddie nodded. He looked scrawny and vulnerable in Thomas's baggy borrowed pajamas. Thomas felt more than ever that he was doing the right thing.

"What's up with you and Mary-Ward, anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come on. Do I look like an idiot?" His brother laughed. "Don't answer that. Anyway, I'm sensing a chill. I know women."

"Maybe you should be a couples therapist. You'd make plenty of money."

"Huh. I'll think about it."

"I'm going to get you an appointment with the dentist tomorrow. You're going to be happy to go. And don't tell—"

"Don't tell Mary-Ward. Yeah, I get it."

"All right." Thomas stood up and opened the door. "Good night, then."

Eddie watched Thomas under hooded eyes. "Hey. How about every day I get a hundred? I'd prefer that over the lump sum."

"No short cuts. You get it all on day ten. Most people would think that's a hell of a bargain."

"I'm not most people," Eddie said.

"Your friend in Seattle. What kind of job did you say he had for you?"

"She." Eddie put the empty cereal bowl on the bedside table with a clatter. "She thinks she can get me a gig at the fish market."

The best job Eddie had ever held had been his two years as an assistant manager at Radio Shack. Thomas thought that was a dream opportunity for Eddie compared to his recent long stretches of poorly paid manual labor or joblessness. "What do you know about fish?"

"They swim," Eddie said. "See, I want to work outside. You know, in the elements. I could never go back to a cramped store with fluorescent lights."

"You're telling me you're going to be a fisherman?"

"Nah. I'll be selling fish, not catching them." He glanced at Thomas and, with the barest hint of sarcasm, added, "Who knows, management opportunities could arise."

"That sounds . . . promising."

"Yeah, don't it?"

Thomas closed the door. He had no intention of adopting a *laissez-faire* attitude with Eddie. His brother needed structure, a push. And Mary-Ward would see how ten days of increasing responsibility would appear to turn Eddie around. The trick would be

to convince Mary-Ward that it was Thomas's firm but kind guidance prompting Eddie's improvement, not a wad of cash.

The next day, Eddie kept his word and spent the afternoon at the dentist's office being fitted for a bridge. On Friday, he didn't even complain when Thomas suggested they drive to the barbershop. In fact, Eddie's false exuberance verged on parody. He consented to Thomas's suggestions with a secret resentment that glittered, and made his eyes hard and glassy.

Mary-Ward was puzzled. Thomas tried not to gloat.

"I knew he'd come around with a little firm encouragement," Thomas whispered. "I'm not very hands off, Mary-Ward. Forgive me."

"Well, I guess it's working," Mary Ward said sadly. "So far." She squinted at the back of Eddie's head, studying his new buzzed haircut. Eddie and Lisa were playing a video game. That was one of the reasons Eddie's nieces were fond of him—he loved any video game, no matter how silly or girlish or boring, and he would play it all night if Thomas didn't put his foot down. Right now, Eddie and Lisa waved their Wii wands around, growing virtual beets and carrots for something called Harvest Moon. Eddie appeared riveted.

"They cut his hair way too short," Mary-Ward said, and then went out to the back patio to water her herbs and tomatoes. Thomas followed. "He looks like a prisoner," she said. "Like he's on chemo."

"He's going to come along with Lisa and me tomorrow morning," Thomas said casually, already savoring her surprise.

"Eddie *bird-watching*? Are you making him go?"

"Making him? I merely invited him. It's better than sleeping until noon."

"And he agreed?"

"He did."

Mary-Ward said, "I think I'll go, too."

Thomas and his daughter always left at six sharp on Saturday mornings, so it was frustrating when they didn't leave the next day until nearly seven. Unfortunately, Mary-Ward insisted on packing a picnic, which disappointed Thomas, though he acted happy about it. He and Lisa routinely stopped at a diner for a huge breakfast

midmorning, on the way back home from their hikes, stuffing themselves with fried meat, cheese grits, doughnuts—food Mary-Ward wouldn't approve of. Now they'd have to eat bran flax muffins and honeydew melon.

Eddie settled himself in the backseat of Thomas's car with a pillow, grumbling. "Why do we have to go so damn early? I mean, even the birds are just waking up. They'll be flying around all day, right?"

"You have to beat the crowd," Thomas said. "When people start hitting the trails, the birds make themselves scarce."

"Wake me up when we get there," Eddie said. "Or don't."

They were heading to a cypress swamp forty miles south. It was their best chance of seeing a pileated woodpecker.

Eddie began to snore. Even Mary-Ward nodded off in the front seat beside Thomas. Lisa and Thomas were wide awake. They were morning people. He caught his daughter's eye in the rearview mirror and winked. She smiled. She was freckly and plain, smart and focused, like Thomas. His oldest, Chloe, had Mary-Ward's looks, and he'd always felt protective of her, but not particularly close. But he and his youngest had a bond, and he dreaded when Lisa would turn giggly and obsessed with clothes and boys. By next year, she wouldn't want to spend Saturdays hiking with her father anymore.

As they got closer to the park, Lisa sat up in the backseat. "Daddy, the best place to see a pileated woodpecker is at the edge of swamps. Look for dead trees." She was reading from their bird identification book.

"To the swamp we will go."

Thomas turned onto a gravel road, jostling them. Eddie sat up, moaning, holding his head.

"The pileated woodpecker is one of the biggest forest birds in North America," Lisa read. This was how they started their hikes, with Lisa's briefings. "It's black with bold white stripes down the neck and a bright red crest. Pileated woodpeckers rely on large dead trees and fallen logs."

They came to a clearing with several picnic tables, and Thomas parked the car. Mary-Ward sat up and yawned.

"They are mono—" Lisa stumbled over the word. "Ga-mouse?"

"Monogamous," Mary-Ward finished.

"Monogamous and hold large territories. What does monogamous mean?"

"It means they are honorable, fine birds," Thomas said.

"Pileated woodpeckers have declined in the South," Lisa read.

"That's a damn shame," he said.

Thomas and Lisa hopped out of the car. Lisa put the binoculars around her neck. Thomas took out the camera and water bottles. There was a fine mist rising from the lake near the picnic tables. The morning air was warm and humid with a hint of swamp musk. Birdsong filled the tree-tangled sky on the horizon. Thomas pointed in the direction of the cypress swamp. "We'll head there first."

Eddie appeared to go back to sleep, so Thomas rapped his knuckles on the window. Eddie stirred and opened a sluggish miserable eye, like a zoo animal.

"Don't," Mary-Ward said. She stood by the passenger door, stretching. "Just let him sleep."

"Sleep?" Thomas wanted to get Eddie's attention and glare a warning. "What's the use of coming all the way here and then just sleeping in the car?"

Mary-Ward took the thermos of coffee from the floorboard and sat at one of the picnic tables.

Thomas and Lisa studied the trail map. "We'll take the red trail, go by the swamp here, circle back on the yellow trail here," he said. Lisa nodded.

"Ready?" Thomas asked Mary-Ward.

"No, I'm staying here," she said, stretching out her beautiful legs. "This is a peaceful spot."

"But—"

"Come on, Daddy." Lisa started down the path, the binoculars hanging nearly to her knees. He would have to adjust the strap again. "Hurry!"

Thomas had pictured all four of them setting out companionably as he pointed out belted kingfishers and blue herons. That Mary-Ward and Eddie would refuse to properly participate had never occurred to him. "There are miles of trails for walking," he told Mary-Ward.

"I'm going to enjoy this blissful silence," she said, inhaling the air, and then pouring herself a steaming cup of coffee. "Oh, shoot. I forgot the soy milk."

"Well, this is ridiculous," he said, and walked over to the car again. He rapped on the window. This time Eddie didn't even stir.

"For God's sake, Thomas," Mary-Ward said. "Why do you try to control everyone?"

"Eddie, you better be behind us," Thomas hissed to the squashed, stubbly cheek pressed against the window. "You hear?" He pounded the top of the car.

"Daddy, *shhhh*," Lisa said, pulling at his elbow now. "Don't yell. You're going to scare the birds away."

Thomas stomped off down the path. Lisa followed. At the swamp, they paused to take pictures of the cypress knees. But the more bucolic the setting, the more Thomas seethed. It was as if his wife and brother were in cahoots. Did they enjoy his misery?

When he and Lisa had nearly circled back around to the picnic tables an hour later, a figure appeared in the distance, slouched and furtive, before scurrying behind a rhododendron.

"Eddie," Thomas said when they got closer. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, hey." Eddie said, emerging from underneath the shrub. "I'm admiring the flowers. Ain't this something?" The sprawling rhododendron was covered in pink blooms. Thomas admitted it was something to admire.

"So. Did you check off your bird from your thing-a-ma-jiggy list?" Eddie asked Lisa.

"No," she said, shrugging off the disappointment much better than Thomas could. They'd seen plenty of woodpeckers—red-headed, red-bellied, downy, and hairy, but no pileated. And it was the final woodpecker on her list. See a pileated, and she could turn in her project on Monday. "We looked hard, too."

"Huh. What's this bird look like?"

"It's big as a crow with a red crest."

"I seen a big old bird around here somewhere. Like that one yonder?" Eddie asked, and they turned to see a pileated woodpecker hop up a dead tree at the edge of the water.

"Oh, look!" Lisa whispered. "Look, Daddy." She peered through binoculars while Thomas took pictures. "I can't believe it. He's big."

"She," Thomas said. "She's a beauty."

"Thanks, Uncle Eddie."

After the bird flew away, Thomas reviewed the pictures he'd taken. He'd managed to get three good ones.

"Ya'll hungry?" Eddie asked. "Mary-Ward laid out breakfast. Go on. I'm right behind you." He turned around, fumbling for something under the shrubbery. Lisa ran up the path, but Thomas stayed.

"Don't tell me that's a flask," he said when Eddie stood up.

"Canteen."

"It's not even nine in the morning."

"People drink screwdrivers in the morning."

"Yeah, but yours is a screwdriver without the OJ." Thomas started up the path.

"It's first aid," Eddie said, following him. "I saw that once on *The Wild Wild West*. Someone got snake bit and they poured liquor on it."

Thomas was still ravenous after two flax bran muffins and his allotted melon. What he would give for a cathead biscuit and milk gravy right now! He felt his mood grow dangerously dark. And no wonder. Eddie thinking he'd get away with napping in the car and nipping his flask in the woods. Mary-Ward assuaging her guilt with her torturous fiber-filled picnic.

"This has been a fine morning," Eddie said. He moved to the next picnic table and tapped out a cigarette. "Yep. Real pretty place here."

Mary-Ward shook out the tablecloth and packed up their dishes.

Thomas wanted to tell Eddie he wasn't going to pay him for today. He hadn't earned his one hundred dollars.

"If you like it so much, maybe you should bring Davey next weekend," Thomas said. "Take a father-son hike."

Mary-Ward looked at Thomas, her eyes wide with astonishment.

"Right, Eddie?" Thomas said.

"Maybe," Eddie said. His eyes went squinty and he sucked hard on the cigarette.

When they were on the highway, Eddie tried to sleep again, burying his face in his balled-up shirt, ignoring Thomas's poisonous stares in the mirror. An insidious quiet fell in the car. A few raindrops plinked on the windshield.

"We have seen nineteen different species of birds this month," Lisa said. She was adding today's bird to her notebook. "I hope I get an A."

"I'm sure you will, honey," Mary-Ward said.

"My favorite is the ruby-throated hummingbird," Lisa said. "Because they're so tiny and they come all the way from Mexico. Daddy, what's your favorite?"

"The woodpeckers."

"Mommy, what's your favorite?"

"Oh, robins, I guess. Because that means it's spring."

"Uncle Eddie," Lisa said.

"Hmmm?"

"Wake up. What's your favorite bird?"

"Your uncle's favorite is the cowbird, I bet," Thomas said. "They've got a lot in common."

"Daddy," Lisa said. Even at ten, she recognized the insult.

"What's a cowbird?" Eddie said, sensing, as usual, when he'd been disparaged.

"It's nothing," Lisa said. "I bet you like owls," she said, diplomatically. "We saw a screech owl one night. It sounds like a woman screaming."

"Naw, I guess your daddy is right."

"No, he was just teasing. Weren't you, Daddy?"

Thomas shrugged.

"What's wrong with a cowbird, anyway?" Eddie asked.

"They're bad birds," Lisa said. "They lay their eggs in other birds' nests in secret and the other birds feed and raise the baby cowbirds like their own."

"That sounds like a smart bird," Eddie said.

"No, cowbirds are terrible birds," Lisa said. "Sometimes when they leave their eggs in nests, the other birds are small and can hardly feed the baby cowbirds and their own baby birds die. And if the birds figure out the cowbirds eggs don't belong in their nest and try to throw them out, the cowbirds come back and dive bomb them and kill them. Cowbirds don't even know how to build their own nests. They're parasites. I wrote a whole paragraph on them already."

Thomas sensed Mary-Ward glaring at him as he drove, but he looked straight ahead, hiding his smile.

When they arrived home and began to unload the car, Thomas couldn't resist announcing, "Remember, tomorrow is Grandma's birthday."

Eddie scowled.

"I already made her a card," Lisa said.

"What about that red velvet cake she likes?" Thomas asked Mary-Ward. "I was thinking we could bring that."

"I don't know, Thomas. That cake is just full of fat and sugar."

"It's her birthday."

"Well, it's the rest of us I'm worried about."

"Really? Birthday cake is off the menu now?" He followed her into the kitchen. "It may be her last birthday. Can't we just be normal for a day? Have a regular cake with frosting and candles?"

"I'll make a nice prune tart."

Eddie guffawed. Mary-Ward turned to hide her smirk.

"Eddie?" Thomas said. His brother was slinking toward the stairs, trying to make his escape.

"Huh?" he said in a drowsy voice.

"Tomorrow is—"

"Yeah, I heard you the first eight times. Jesus F-ing Christ." Eddie's face flushed with anger, and his pink scalp reddened through his shorn bristly hair.

"Where you off to?"

"A nap. I'm wore out."

"A nap? It's barely noon."

"Thomas, we're all tired," Mary-Ward said.

Eddie continued his slow slog up the stairs to the guest bedroom.

"We'll take the cake to Mother around noon tomorrow and have lunch with her," Thomas called out to his brother.

"That right?" Eddie said. He paused on the landing and looked down at Thomas. "I think I'm going to take tomorrow off and take it easy. I'll go Monday. She won't know the difference."

Thomas stomped up the stairs after his brother. "Tomorrow is her *birthday*," he said in hoarse whisper.

"Well, with her Old Timers disease it don't matter. I guess you could say that's the silver lining."

"You think this is funny? There is no silver lining with Alzheimer's," Thomas said, thinking of his mother's vacant eyes, her agitated pacing. "As you will see for yourself tomorrow."

"You can deduct my hundred if you want. Like I said, I'm taking tomorrow off." Eddie stepped inside the guest bedroom, and tried to close the door. Thomas used his foot to stop him.

"You're not getting paid for today either, by the way," Thomas said, following him into the bedroom. "And there is no taking tomorrow off. That's not an option."

There was a new sly look on Eddie's face and it occurred to Thomas that he'd unwittingly handed him a weapon: telling Mary-Ward about their agreement. Mutually assured destruction was not beyond his brother.

Eddie's wallet and keys were on the bedside table. Keys to what? What did Eddie even own? Nothing. "Let me have your wallet," Thomas said.

"What? Why? There ain't nothing much in it."

"Let me have it." There was his revoked license, his Social Security card, the only documents of any legitimacy that Eddie bothered to carry. You couldn't get food stamps or work without them. Even Eddie knew that.

"Is this a stick-up?" Eddie was holding up his hands.

"No, it's a guarantee you won't get any ideas about taking off and not keeping your promise. You'll get this back on the tenth day, along with any money you earn."

"My own brother is sticking me up. That is some sad shit, man." Eddie sat on the bed, and exhaled a long, ragged, patient breath. "Real sad."

"It's not a stick-up. It's collateral."

"You know the difference between a stick-up and a hold-up, don't you?"

Thomas stuck the wallet in his back pocket and turned to leave. He'd lock it up in his file cabinet. He should have thought of this sooner.

"Age," Eddie said and cackled, coughed, cackled some more. Thomas closed the door. Hard.

Eddie skipped supper that night, and did not come downstairs all evening, except to fix his customary bowl of cereal to eat in bed. Lisa went to a slumber party. Mary-Ward and Thomas ate supper by themselves on the back porch, balancing plates on their knees. It had

been Thomas's suggestion to eat out there, and he'd even lighted citronella candles ostensibly to keep the mosquitoes away, but mainly because flickering candles were romantic.

"That thing you said to Eddie today," Mary-Ward said. "Don't you think you owe him an apology?" *And here we go*, Thomas thought.

"Which thing?"

"*Which* thing? Really?"

Thomas finished chewing his braised kale and shrugged.

"You called him a cowbird. That's one of the meanest things I've ever heard you say to him."

"It was a joke, Mary-Ward. And it's a bird, okay? A bird. I could have called him worse things, believe me."

"And in front of Lisa, too."

For a few minutes there was nothing but the tinkling of the wind chime and their silverware.

"Thomas, when did you become so . . . cynical?"

When you let a tennis pro pork you on our Ethan Allen rice planter bed, he thought, but stopped his fury before it spewed. This anger had to be caught, corked, and shoved down deep or it would erupt and ruin everything. He had no doubt that whatever fine silk fibers held Mary-Ward here with him would be torn and "the marriage" would be over if he showed a modicum of the rage he felt. He held his napkin to his lips, pressed his mouth as if he were applying pressure to a wound. "I'm sorry," he said finally. "I'll talk to him. He'll be okay." How much that took out of him!

"It's just . . . It breaks my heart. You don't see how funny and sweet your brother is."

"He's always been a charmer." That was the best he could do right now. Admit his brother's talent for manipulation.

"Are you finished?" she asked, but took his empty plate before he could reply. He rose and followed her into the kitchen.

She rinsed their dishes in the sink, and, as he did most evenings, he found himself staring at the tender nape of her neck, one of the parts of her he loved most. The other parts he'd been denied access to. "You want to see a movie?" he asked. Dr. Turber had been firm about their cultivating "couples activities" again.

"There's nothing at the multiplex I want to see."

He'd unwittingly stumbled into another conflict. Was there nothing so simple as the old dinner-and-movies they used to be

content with—hell, thrilled about? They'd spring for a babysitter when they could barely afford it. Cheap pizza and Big Gulps. Dumb comedies and car chases. Now, Mary-Ward had cultivated a taste for weird movies in a shabby art house theater the next town over. Short, foreign, subtitled films. Thomas did not like to read when he was watching a movie. And he liked a little plot, too.

She began putting up the leftover food. Lisa's absence gave them no reason to fill the silences.

In Dr. Turber's waiting room, Thomas had skimmed over a magazine article about how a sense of danger united couples. Apparently, something about being in peril together stimulated endorphins and adrenaline, and created a chemical bonding.

"What would you think about river rafting? Just me and you," he said. "At Nantahala. I hear they have guided river rafting up there."

"Rafting? You hate the water."

Indeed. They both knew it was desperation that propelled him to suggest such a thing. That was how much he loved her.

"They provide life preservers and helmets," he said, trying to make himself feel better, but failing. She was right. He would hate it.

"Look, I'm sorry," she said, rubbing her forehead. "I have a horrible headache tonight that won't go away."

"Why didn't you tell me? I would have ordered us take-out. I'll finish cleaning up."

For once, she looked grateful for his suggestion. He insisted she stretch out on the sofa in the living room. She turned to the Travel Channel, something about the Himalayas. He finished loading the dishwasher, but then he wasn't sure which cycle to select. Short wash. Hot wash. Pot scrubber. Normal. Rinse. Plate warmer. Sterilize. Since when did washing dishes get so complicated?

He stepped into the living room. "Which buttons do I push?"

She gave him a blank look.

"On the dishwasher?" he said. "I've seen airplanes with simpler controls."

She buried her face in a throw cushion. The cushion began to shake.

"Mary-Ward?" he said.

Muffled sounds began to emerge. Sobs.

"Sweetheart?" he said. "Are you all right?"

"It's just," she said finally, sitting up, her face red and slick, "you don't know how to run the dishwasher, Thomas." She swiped away her tears with a manicured pinky, and he understood she hadn't been sobbing, she had been laughing. Was still laughing. At him.

"This new one is pretty fancy."

"New? It's not new. We've had it for five years."

He went back into the kitchen, pressed the normal cycle, and hoped for the best.

When he joined her again in the living room, they both promptly fell asleep. When he woke up past midnight, she told him she'd be up soon. He fell asleep upstairs in their bed, waiting.

The next morning, Thomas overslept. It was past seven when he looked at his watch. He hated to miss the dawn, to waste the day like that. He smelled coffee and knew Mary-Ward was up. He passed the guest bedroom. The door was open, the bed stripped. There was not a sign of his brother. Not in the closet. Not even under the bed. Thomas ran down the stairs, calling for him.

"Eddie?" he shouted as he burst into the kitchen. Mary-Ward sat at the table, both hands gripping a mug of coffee.

"He's gone," she said.

"Gone?"

"He left about an hour ago."

"Left . . . how?"

"I dropped him off at the bus station. He made it just in time."

Thomas turned and ran up the stairs to his office. The lock on the file cabinet didn't appear to be broken, but when he checked the drawer, Eddie's wallet was gone. And the cash. He slammed the file door. How had Eddie opened the combination lock?

He went downstairs into the living room where Mary-Ward was pulling sheets and blankets from the couch. He realized she'd slept down here and hadn't come up to bed after all.

"You want to tell me what the hell is going on?"

"You tried to *bribe* him," she said. She tugged viciously at a sheet and looked at him with naked disgust.

"I'm sorry if that shocks you. That I would try to help—"

"It doesn't shock me, Thomas. Nothing you do surprises me. I know what you're going to say before you say it. Eddie didn't even have to tell me about your little scheme—I knew it. I gave him the money you promised. His wallet. You tried to keep his wallet!"

"But the combination lock—"

"Our wedding anniversary. My first guess."

Thomas sank down into an overstuffed chair, trying to absorb this. What was wrong with knowing everything about somebody? Wasn't that love? He looked over at her. "The worst thing is not knowing someone," he said. "One day you wake up and find yourself living with a stranger. *That's* the worst thing."

"You'll probably want to make a fresh pot of coffee," she said, walking past him with her stack of linens. "I'm taking a shower."

"I'm not going to Dr. Turber's tomorrow," he told her slim, strong back. She paused on the staircase, but did not turn around. He stood and walked closer. "Or any other day. I'm done with all that." There was the sweet release of his escaping anger, and though he knew he'd bite down hard on the bitterness of regret, he could not stop himself. "I'm not wasting any more of my time and money there. It's pointless. I'm done." His heart beat like a fist on a door. "I'm through with it all."

She began her slow ascent and he could see nothing now but her bare feet. "I know that, too," she said.