

Lake Henry, New Hampshire

Like everything else at the lake, dawn arrived in its own good time. The flat black of night slowly deepened to a midnight blue that lightened in lazy steps, gradually giving form to the spike of a tree, the eave of a cottage, the tongue of a weathered wood dock - and that was on a clear day. On this day, fog slowed the process of delineation, reducing the lake to a pool of milky glass and the shoreline to a hazy wash of orange, gold, and green where, normally, vibrant fall colors would be. A glimpse of cranberry or navy marked a lakefront home, but details were lost in the mist. Likewise the separation of reflection and shore. The effect, with the air quiet and still, was that of a protective cocoon.

It was a special moment. The only thing John Kipling would change about it was the cold. He wasn't ready for summer to end, but despite his wishes, the days were noticeably shorter than they had been two months before. The sun set sooner and rose later, and the chill of the night lingered. He felt it. His loons felt it. The foursome he watched, two adults and their young, would remain on the lake for another five weeks, but they were growing restless, looking to the sky lately in ways that had less to do with predators than with thoughts of migration.

As he watched now, they floated in the fog not twenty feet from his canoe, not ten feet again from the tiny fircovered island in whose sheltered cove they had summered. The island was one of many that dotted Lake Henry. Between the clarity of the water, the quiet of the lake, and the abundance of small fish, those islands lured the loons back year after year - because they didn't do well on land. Their feet were set too far back under large, cumbersome bodies. So they built nests on the very edge of these islands, where they could more easily enter and leave the water. John found it painful watching them lurch even those precious few inches from water to nest.

In all other respects, though, the loons were a sight to behold. Since the chicks' birth, in July, he had watched their plumage go from baby black to toddler brown to a rather drab juvenile gray, but they had their parents' tapered beaks and sleek necks, and a promise of future brilliance - and those parents, ahhhh, those parents were brilliant indeed, even in fall, with their plumage starting to dull, even this morning, through the veil of an ashy mist. They were beauties, with crisp checkerboards of white-on-black backs, white-stripe necklaces around black necks, solid black heads, distinctive pointed beaks. As if that weren't impressive enough, they had riveting round red eyes. John had heard that the red enhanced underwater vision, and he could believe it. Those eyes didn't miss much.

The birds lay low in the water now, swimming gently around the cove, alternately rolling and contorting to groom themselves and submerging their heads to troll for fish. When one of the adults compressed its body and dove, a webbed power propelled it deep. John knew it might fill its belly with up to fifteen minnows before resurfacing a distance away.

He searched the fog until he spotted it again. Its mate continued to float near the island, but both adults were alert, those pointed bills tipped just a little higher as they scoured the fog for news. Later that morning they would leave their young, run laboriously across the surface of the lake, and lumber up into the air. After circling a time or two until they gained altitude enough to clear the trees, they would fly to a neighboring lake to visit other loons. Breeding was a solitary time,

and with two fledglings to show for months of vigilance and work, this pair had done well. Now they had to refresh their social skills in preparation for wintering in larger groups on the warmer Atlantic coast.

For an eon, loons had repeated this ritual. The same intelligence that had assured their survival for so long told the current crop of birds that September was halfway done, October would bring colder days and evening frost, and November would bring ice. Since they needed an expanse of clear water for takeoff, they had to leave the lake before it froze.

And they would. In all his years growing up on the lake, then returning as an adult to watch again, John hadn't seen many icebound loons. Their instincts were good. They rarely erred.

John, however, erred - and often. Hadn't he done it again this morning, setting out in a T-shirt and shorts, wanting it to be summer still and finding himself butt cold now? He sometimes had trouble accepting that he wasn't twenty anymore. He was over forty - and, yes, still six three and fit, but his body didn't work the way it once did. It ached around the knees, wrinkled around the eyes, receded at the temples, and chilled in the extremities.

But cold or not, he wasn't leaving. Not yet. There might not necessarily be the makings of a big best-seller in it, but he hadn't had his fill of the loons.

He sat rock still in the canoe with his hands in his armpits for warmth and his paddle stowed. These loons were used to his presence, but he took nothing for granted. As long as he kept his distance and respected their space, they would reward him with preening and singing. When the world was eerily quiet - at night, at dawn, on mornings like this when the fog muffled other noise that life on the lake might make - the loons' song shimmered and rose. And it came now - breathtaking - a primitive tremolo released with the shiver of a jaw, so beautiful, so mysterious, so wild that it raised the hair on the back of his neck.

It also carried a message. The tremolo was a cry of alarm. Granted, this one was low in pitch, which made it only a warning, but he wasn't about to ignore it. With the faintest rasp of wood on fiberglass, he lifted his paddle. Water lapped softly against the canoe as he guided it backward. When he was ten more feet away, he stabilized his position and quietly restowed the paddle. Hugging his elbows to his thighs for warmth, he sat, watched, listened, waited.

In time, the loon closest to him stretched his neck forward and issued a long, low wail. The sound wasn't unlike the cry of a coyote, but John would never confuse the two. The loon's wail was at the same time more elemental and more delicate.

This one was the start of a dialogue, one adult calling the other in a succession of haunting sounds that brought the distant bird gliding closer. Even when they were ten feet apart, they continued to speak, with their beaks nearly shut and their elongated throats swelling around the sound.

Goose bumps rose on his skin. This was why he had returned to the lake - why, after swearing off New Hampshire at fifteen, he had reversed himself at forty. Some said he'd done it for the

job, others that he'd done it for his father, but the roundabout truth had to do with these birds. They signified something primal and wild, but simple, straightforward, and safe.

A loon's life consisted of eating, grooming, and procreating. It was an honest life, devoid of pretense, ambition, and cruelty. The loon harmed others only when its own existence was threatened. John found that totally refreshing.

So he stayed longer, though he knew he should leave. It was Monday. *Lake News* had to be at the printer by noon on Wednesday. He already had material from his staff correspondents, one per town. Assuming that the appropriate bins held articles promised by local movers and shakers - 'movers and shakers' being a relative term - he would have a wad of reading and editing, keystroking, cutting and pasting. If those articles weren't in the bins, he would call around Lake Henry and the four neighboring towns serviced by the paper, take information on the phone, and write what he could himself - and if he still ended up with dead space, he would run more Thoreau.

There wasn't a book in that either, he told himself. A book had to be original. He had notebooks filled with ideas, folders thick with anecdotes he had collected since returning to town, but nothing sparked an urge to hustle - at least, not when it came to writing a book. He did hustle when it came to *Lake News* - but mostly between noon Tuesdays and noon Wednesdays. He was a last-minute kind of guy. He wrote better under the threat of a deadline closing in, liked the rush of a newsroom filled with action and noise, liked the perversion of keeping the managing editor on edge.

Of course, he was the managing editor now. And the production editor. And the photography editor, the society editor, the layout editor. *Lake News* wasn't the *Boston Post*. Not by a long shot, and there were times when that bothered him.

This, however, wasn't one.

His paddle remained stowed, and the loons continued to call. Then came a pause, and John dared mimic the sound. One of the loons said something in return, and in that brief, heady instant, he felt part of the team. In the next instant, with a resumption of the birds' duet, he was excluded again, a species apart.

But not cold. He realized he was no longer cold. The fog was burning off under a brightening sun. By the time patches of blue showed through the mist, John guessed it was nearly nine. He straightened his legs and, easing back, braced his elbows on the gunwales. Turning his face to the sun, he closed his eyes, took a contented breath, and listened to silence, water, and loon.

After a time, when the sun began to heat his eyelids and the weight of responsibility grew too heavy to ignore, he pushed himself up. For a few last minutes he continued to watch and absorb the whatever-it-was that these birds gave him. Then smoothly and silently, if reluctantly, he retrieved his paddle from the floorboards and headed home.

The beauty of a beard was that it eliminated the need to shave. John kept his cropped close, which meant occasional touch-ups, but none of the daily scrape-and-bleed agony that he used to endure. Same thing with a necktie. No need for one here. Or for a pressed shirt. Or for anything but denim down below. He didn't even have to worry about matching socks, since it was either bare feet and Birks in summer or work boots in winter, and then he could wear whatever socks he wanted and no one would see.

He still felt the novelty of showering, dressing, and hitting the road in ten minutes flat, and what a road. No traffic. No other *cars*. No horns. No cops. No *speed limit*. The road he drove now was framed by trees just shy of their peak of fall color. It wove in and out in a rough tracing of the lake and was cracked by years of frost heaves. Most other roads in town were the same. They imposed speed limits all on their own, and Lake Henry liked it that way. The town didn't cater to tourists as many of the surrounding lake towns did. There was no inn. There were no chic little shops. Despite a perennial brouhaha in the state legislature, there was no public access to the shore. Anyone who went out on the lake was either a resident, a friend of a resident, or a trespasser.

At that particular moment in time, with summer residents gone and only year-rounders left, the town's population was 1,721. Eleven babies were due, which would raise the count. Twelve citizens were terminally old or terminally ill, which would lower it. There were twenty-eight kids currently in college. Whether they would return was a toss-up. In John's day they left and never came back, but that was starting to change.

He made what he intended to be a brief stop at the general store, but got to talking national politics with Charlie Owens, who owned the store; and then Charlie's wife, Annette, told him that Stu and Amanda Watson's college junior, Hillary, was home for a quick day after a last minute decision to spend the semester abroad. Since Hillary had interned for John two summers before, he had a personal stake in her success, so he detoured to her house to get the story, take her picture, and wish her luck.

Back in the center of town, he turned in at the post office and continued on to the thin yellow Victorian that stood between it and the lake. Climbing from the truck - a Chevy Tahoe, one of the perks of the job - he reached across the seat for his briefcase, shouldered its strap, and scooped up the day's editions of four different newspapers, a bag of doughnuts, and his thermos. With the bag clutched in his teeth he sifted through his key ring as he crossed the dirt drive to the Victorian's side door.

He was still sifting when he shouldered open the screen. The door behind it was mahogany, highly varnished, and carved by a local artist. Between swirls on its bottom half were a dozen slots identified by small brass plaques. The first row, politely, was devoted to the neighboring towns - *Ashcroft*, *Hedgeton*, *Cotter Cove*, and *Center Sayfield*. The lower rows were Lake Henry-specific, with slots assigned to things like *Police and Fire*, *Congregational Church*, *Textile Mill*, and *Garden Club*. Eye-high on the door, with no slot attached, was the largest plaque. *Lake News*, it read.

The door moved even before John inserted his key. As he elbowed it the rest of the way open, the phone began to ring. 'Jenny?' he called. 'Jenny?'

'In the bathroom!' came the muted yell.

Nothing new there, he thought. But at least she had come.

Tossing his keys on the kitchen table in passing, he took the stairs two at a time, past the second floor and on up to the third. There were no dividing walls up here, which made it the largest room in the house. The addition of a slew of windows and skylights also made it the brightest. Most important, it was the only one with a view of the lake. That view wasn't nearly as good as the one from John's house, but it was better than no view at all, which was what the lower rooms in the Victorian offered. Three willows, arm in arm and more fat than tall, saw to that.

The attic room had been his office since he had returned to town, three years before. It was large enough to house the newspaper's sales department, the production department, and the editorial department. Each had a desk and a view of the lake. That view kept John focused and sane.

The phone continued to ring. Letting the papers slip to the editorial desk, he dropped the bag from Charlie's on top, stood the thermos nearby, and opened the window wide. The lake air was clear now. Sun spilled down the slopes of the east hills, setting fire to foliage in its path before running out over the water. A month before, it would have hit a dozen boats captained by summer folk who were grabbing precious last minutes on the lake before closing up camp for the year. The only boat on the water today was one of Marlon Dewey's prized Chris-Crafts. The sun bounced off its polished oak deck and glittered in the wake spreading behind.

He picked up the phone. 'Morning, Armand.'

'Took you long enough,' his publisher said in a rusty voice. 'Where you been?'

John followed the course of the handsome Chris-Craft. Marlon was at the helm, along with two visiting grandchildren. 'Oh, out and around.'

The old man's voice softened. 'Oh, out and around.' You give me that every time, John, and you know I can't argue with it. Damn lake has too many bends, so I can't see what goes on around yours. But the paper's my bottom line, and you're doing that okay. Long as it keeps up, you can sleep as late as you want. Did you get my piece? Liddie put it in the slot.'

'It's there,' John said without checking, because Armand Bayne's wife was totally reliable. She was also totally devoted to her husband. What Armand wanted done, she did.

'What else you got?' the old man asked.

John clamped the phone between shoulder and ear and pulled a handful of papers from the briefcase. He had dummied the week's pages at home the night before. Now he spread out the sheets. 'The lead is a report on the education bill that's up before the state legislature. It's a thirty-

inch piece, across the top and down the right-hand leg, photo lower left. I'm following it with opinion pieces, one from the local rep, one from the principal at Cooper Elementary.'

'What's your editorial say about it?'

'You know what it says.'

'The natives won't like it.'

'Maybe not, but we either put money into schools today or into welfare tomorrow.' The source of that money was the problem. Not wanting to argue it again with Armand, who was one of the wealthiest of the landowners and would be soaked if property taxes doubled, he pulled up the next dummy. 'Page three leads with a report on Chris Diehl's trial -- closing arguments, jury out, verdict in, Chris home. I have a piece on profit sharing at the mill, and one on staff cutbacks at the retirement home. The newcomer profile is on Thomas Hook.'

'Can't stand the guy,' Armand muttered.

John uncapped the thermos. 'That's because he has no people skills, but he has computer skills. There's reason why his business is worth twenty million and growing.'

'He's a *kid*.' Spoken indignantly. '*What's* he gonna do with that kind of money?'

John filled his mug with coffee. 'He's thirty-two, with a wife and three kids, and in the six months he's been here, he's tripled the size of his house, regraded and graveled the approach road, built another house for an office in the place where a god-awful eyesore stood, and in doing all that, he's used local contractors, carpenters, masons, plumbers, and electricians - '

'All right, all right,' Armand's growl cut him off. 'What else?'

Sipping coffee, John pulled up the next page. 'There's an academy update - message from the head of the school. New year starting, one hundred twelve kids, twenty-two states, seven countries. Then there's police news, fire news, library news.' He flipped open the *Wall Street Journal* and absently scanned the headlines. 'There's the week in review from papers in Boston, New York, and Washington. And ads, lots of ads this week' - he knew Armand would like that - 'including a two-pager from the outlets in Conway. Fall's a good time for ads.'

'Praised be,' said Armand. 'What else?'

'School news. Historical Society news. Tri-town soccer news.'

'Want some breaking news?'

John always wanted breaking news. It was one of the city things he missed most. Feeling a twinge of anticipation, he sank into his desk chair, brought up a blank screen, and prepared to type.

Armand said, 'They just read Noah Thacken's will, and the family's in a stew. He left the house to daughter number two, so daughter number one is threatening to sue, and daughter number three is threatening to leave town, and none of them is talking to the others. Look into it, John.'

But John had retracted his hands and was rocking back in his chair. 'That's private stuff.'

'Private? The whole town'll know by the end of the day.'

'Right, so why put it in the paper? Besides, we print facts.'

'This is facts. That will is a matter of public record.'

'The will is. Not the personal trauma. That's speculation, and it's exploitative. I thought we agreed - '

'Well, there isn't a hell of a lot of *other* excitement up here,' the old man remarked and hung up the phone.

No, John thought, *there isn't a hell of a lot of other excitement up here*. No fascinating book material in an education bill, a computer mogul, or a family squabble; and Christopher Diehl's bank fraud trial was a far cry from the murder trials he used to cover.

His eye went to the wall of framed photos at the far end of the room. There was one of him interviewing a source on Boston's City Hall Plaza, and another of him typing at his computer with the phone clamped to his ear in a roomful of other reporters doing the same. There were photos of him shaking hands with national politicians, and of him laughing it up with colleagues in Boston bars. There was one of a Christmas party - he and Marley in the newsroom with a crowd of their friends. And there was a blowup of his *Post* ID mug shot. His hair was short, his jaw tight, his eyes tired, his face pale. He looked like he was either about to miss the story of his career or severely constipated.

The photos were trappings of an earlier life, like the deactivated police scanner that sat on a file cabinet beneath them. Listening to police or fire reports had been a way of life once. No bona fide newsroom was without one. So he had started his tenure at *Lake News* by setting one up, but static without voices for hours on end had grown old fast. Besides, he personally knew everyone who would be involved in breaking news. If anything happened, they called him, and if he wasn't at his phone, Poppy Blake knew where he was. She was his answering service. She was the answering service for half the town. If she didn't find him one place, she found him somewhere else. In three years, he hadn't missed a local emergency. How many had there been...two...three...four?

Nope, no big best-seller would ever come from covering emergencies in Lake Henry.

With a sigh he dropped the phone into its cradle, pulled a doughnut from the bag, added more coffee to his mug, and tipped back his chair. He had barely crossed his feet on the desk when Jenny Blodgett appeared at the door. She was nineteen, pale and blond, and so thin that the big

bulge of the baby in her belly looked doubly wrong. Knowing that she probably hadn't eaten breakfast, he rocked forward in the chair, came to his feet, and brought her the bag.

'It isn't milk or meat, but it's better than nothing,' he said, gesturing her around and back down the stairs. Her office was on the first floor, in the room that had once been a parlor. He followed her there, eyed the papers on the desk, thought he detected what may have been separate piles. 'How's it going?'

Her voice was soft and childlike. 'Okay.' She pointed to each of those vague piles in turn. 'This year's letters to the editor. Last year's. The year before's. What do I do now?'

He had told her twice. But she worked sporadic hours, hadn't been in since the Wednesday before, and had probably lived a nightmare since then - or so the rationale went. She wasn't exactly competent, had barely made it through high school, and was trained for nothing. But she was carrying his cousin's child. He wanted to give her a break.

So, gently, he said, 'Put them in alphabetical order and file them in the cabinet. Did you type out labels for the files?'

Her eyes went wide. They were red rimmed, which meant she had either been up all night or crying this morning. 'I forgot,' she whispered.

'No problem. You can do it now. What say we set a goal? Labels typed and stuck on file folders, and letters filed in the appropriate folders before you leave today. Sound fair?'

She nodded quickly.

'Eat first,' he reminded her on his way out the door and went to the kitchen to collect the contents of the bins.

Up in his office again, he ate his doughnut at the window overlooking the lake. The Woody had disappeared and its wake been played out, but the water had lost its smoothness. A small breeze ruffled it in shifting patches. Beneath his window the willows whispered and swayed.

Shoving up the screen, he ducked his head and leaned out. Corned beef hash was frying at Charlie's. The breeze brought the smell across the street and down to the water. On his left, half a dozen old men fished from the end of the town pier, which jutted from a narrow swath of sandy beach. On his right, yellow-leafed birches angled out over low shrubs that led to rocks and then water. There were houses farther on, yearround homes too stately to be called camps, but most were tucked into coves, hidden around bends, or blocked from view by islands. He could see the tips of a few docks, even a weathered raft still anchored to the floor of the lake. It would be hauled in soon, and the docks taken apart and stored. The lake would be bare.

The phone rang. Letting the screen drop, he waited to see if Jenny would answer it. *LakeNews.*'

'John, this is Allison Quimby,' said a bold voice. 'My place is falling apart. I need a handyman. Everyone I've used before is still working up at Hook's. Is it too late to put in an ad?'

'No, but you want the sales desk. I'll transfer you.' He put her on hold, jogged across the room, and picked up the phone at the sales desk. 'Okay.' He slipped into the chair there and began at the computer. 'I'm pulling up classified ads. Here we go. Do you have something written?' He suspected she did. Allison Quimby owned the local realty company and was the quintessential professional. Of course she had something written.

'Of course I have something written.'

She read. He typed. He fiddled with the spacing, helped her edit it to make it work better, suggested a heading, quoted her a price, took her credit card number. As soon as he hung up the phone, he made a call of his own.

A tired voice answered. 'Yeah.'

'It's me. Allison Quimby needs a handyman. Give her a call?' When he heard a soft swearing, he said, 'You're sober, Buck, and you need the work.'

'Who are you, my fuckin' guardian angel?'

John kept his voice low and tight. 'I'm your fuckin' older cousin, the one who's worried about the girl you knocked up, the one who's thinking you may not be worth the effort but that girl and her baby are. Come on, Buck.. You're good with your hands, you can do what Allison needs done, she pays well, and she's got a big mouth if she likes what you do.' He read the phone number once, then read it again. 'Call her,' he said and hung up the phone.

Seconds later he was back at the window by the editorial desk. Seconds after that he had a grip on his patience. All it took was a good long look at the lake and the reminder that people like Buck and Jenny didn't have that. They had the Ridge, where houses were too small, too close, and too dirty to uplift anyone, much less someone battling alcoholism, physical abuse, or chronic unemployment. John knew. He had the Ridge in his blood as well. He would hear it, feel it, smell it until the day he died.

A movement on the lake caught his eye, the flash of red on a distant dock. He focused in on it; then, half smiling, took a pair of binoculars from the bottom drawer of the desk and focused through those. Shelly Cole was stretched out on a lounge chair, all sleek and oiled in the sun. She was a well-made woman, he had to say that. But then, Cole women had been sorely tempting the men of Lake Henry for three generations. For the most part they were kind creatures who grew into fine wives and mothers. Shelly was something else. She was heading back to Florida in a week, when the weather here became too cool for her to flaunt her tan. John wouldn't miss her. He might be as tempted as any man around, but he wasn't touching her with a ten-foot pole.

With a slight shift of the binoculars, he was looking at Hunter's Island. Named after its first owners, rather than any sport there, it was another of the tiny islands that dotted the lake, and it

did have a house, albeit a seasonal one. The Hunter family had summered there for more than a century, before selling it to its current owners. Those owners, the LaDucs, were teaching their third generation of children to swim from its small pebbled beach.

Strange family, the LaDucs. There were nearly as many scandals woven through its generations as there were Hunter scandals. Growing up, John had heard rumors about both families. Returning as an adult who knew how to snoop, he had done research, asked around, made notes. They were locked in his file cabinet now, along with the rest of his private stuff, but none were crying out to be a book. Maybe he hadn't read them in the right frame of mind. Maybe he needed to reread them. Or organize them. Or chronologize them. Maybe something would hit him. After three years he should have come up with something.

The phone rang. He picked it up after the first ring. *'Lake News.'*

'Hi, Kip. It's Poppy.'

John grinned. How not to, when conjuring up Poppy Blake? She was a smiling pixie, always bright and upbeat. 'Hi, sweetheart. How's it going?'

'Busy,' she said, making it sound wonderful. 'I have someone named Terry Sullivan on the line to your house. Do you want me to patch him through?'

John's eye flew to the wall of photographs, to one of the prints in which he was partying with other reporters. Terry Sullivan was the tall, lean, dark one, the one with the mustache that hid a sneer, the one who always stood on the edge of the crowd so that he could beat the rest out if a story broke. He was competitive to the extreme, selfcentered to a fault, and wouldn't know loyalty if it hit him in the face. He had personally betrayed John, and more than once.

John wondered where he found the gall to call. Terry Sullivan had been one of the first to blow him off when he decided to leave Boston.

Curious, he told Poppy to make the connection. When it happened, he said, 'Kipling here.'

'Hey, Kip. It's Terry Sullivan. How goes it, bro?'

Bro? John took his time answering. 'It goes fine. And you?'

'Aaah, same old rat race here, you know how it is. Well, you used to. It must be pretty quiet up there. There are times when I think I'll retire to the sticks, then I think again. It isn't me, if you know what I mean.'

'I sure do. People up here are honest. You'd stick out like a sore thumb.'

There was a pause, then a snort. 'That was blunt.'

'People up here are blunt, too. So, what do you want, Terry? I don't have long. We have deadlines here, too.'

'Okay. Chuck the small talk. I'm calling journalist to journalist. There's a woman named Lily Blake, born there, living here. Tell me all you know.'

John slipped into his chair. Lily was Poppy's sister, the elder, but barely, which would make her thirty-fourish. She had left Lake Henry to go to college and had stayed in the city for a graduate degree. In music, he thought. He had heard she was teaching. And that she played the piano. And that she had a great body.

Folks around town still talked about her voice. She had been singing in church when she was five, but John wasn't a churchgoer, and long before she would have been old enough to sing at Charlie's back room Thursday nights, he had left town.

She had been back several times since he had returned-once for her father's funeral, other times for Thanksgiving or Christmas, but never for longer than a day or two. From what he heard, she and her mother didn't get along. John might not know Lily, but he did know Maida. She was one tough lady. For that reason and others, he was inclined to give Lily the benefit of the doubt when it came to who was at fault.

'Lily Blake?' he asked Terry, sounding vague.

'Come on, Kip. The place is tiny. Don't go dumb on me.'

'If she doesn't live here, how in the hell am I supposed to know about her?'

'Fine. Tell me about her family. Who's alive and who isn't? What do they do? What kind of people are they?'

'Why do you want to know?'

'I met her. I'm thinking of dating her. I want to know what I'm getting into.'

Thinking of dating her? Fat chance. Lily Blake was a stutterer-much improved from childhood, he understood, but Terry Sullivan didn't date women with problems. They demanded more than he wanted to give.

'Is this part of some story?' John asked, though he couldn't imagine what part Lily could play in a story that interested Terry.

'Nah. Purely personal.'

'And you're calling *me*? They might have been colleagues, but they'd never been friends.'

Terry missed the point. Chuckling, he said, 'Yeah, I thought it was pretty funny, myself I mean, here she comes from this tiny town in the middle of nowhere, and it just happens to be the same place where you're hiding out.'

'Not hiding. I'm totally visible.'

'It was a figure of speech. Are we touchy?'

'No, Terry, we're pressed for time. Tell me why you *really* want to know about Lily Blake, or hang up the goddamned phone.'

'Okay. It's not me. It's my friend. He's the one who wants to date her.'

John knew a he when he heard one. He hung up the phone, but his hand didn't leave the receiver. Waiting only long enough to sever the connection with Terry, he snatched it back up and signaled for Poppy.

'Hey, Kip,' she said seconds later in her sassy, smiling voice. 'That was fast. What can I do for you now?'

'Two things,' John said. He was on his feet, one hand holding the phone to his ear, the other cocked on his hip. 'First, don't let that man speak to anyone in town. Cut him off, drop the line, do whatever you have to. He's not a good person. Second, tell me about your sister.'

'About Rose?'

'About Lily. What's she been doing with her life?'

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