

Chapter One

If Lydia Vivaldi hadn't tried to read the Cape Cod Times Help Wanted ads while driving, she wouldn't have wound up on the side of 6A with a flat tire. Her yellow Morris Minor wouldn't have caught the eye of Alistair Pope, passing in his vintage Mercedes. Lydia wouldn't have joined Alistair at Leo's Back End for lunch; Leo wouldn't have hired her to replace his assistant cook, Sue, who had just stormed out in tears after Leo diluted her split-pea soup; and the murder rate in Quansett, Massachusetts, might have stayed at zero.

"Taste it!" Leo clunked down two cups. "On the house. Now tell me that's not perfect exactly how it is."

Lydia tasted. She was feeling dizzy—whether from not sleeping, skipping breakfast, or falling down a rabbit hole into Wonderland, she couldn't tell. Her mind groped for facts she could cling to. *Cape Cod is a sixty-mile peninsula which juts into the Atlantic Ocean south of Boston like a bent arm. The fingers are Province-town, the elbow is Chatham, the armpit is Bourne. Quansett, on the biceps, dates to the late 1600s.*

That patchwork wall behind Leo must be the Back End's menu: squares of colored paper hand-printed with today's specials ("SPESHULS"). And this must be the Splat P Soop. Its problem (in Lydia's opinion) wasn't thickness but flavor. If you didn't mind losing the vegetarians, as Leo clearly didn't, why not throw in a ham hock?

"I ask you! Any thicker you'd have to eat it with a fork." She fished unobtrusively, found only a few meaty shreds. If stinginess was what kept Leo so skinny, it hadn't

affected his customers. Of the twenty or so people in this two-room cafe, only the kid behind the cash register could be called thin. The mountainous aproned woman slinging burgers in the kitchen outweighed even Alistair.

Winters are milder than in Boston, thanks to the Gulf Stream bearing sea-warmth up from Florida and bouncing off the Cape toward Portugal. Springs are shorter, autumns longer. Golf is commonly played until Thanksgiving.

Her fingernails had gotten the worst of her battle with the flat tire. Yesterday's sparkly green polish was half chipped off. Green, like the streaks in her hair. Like her eyes, on the off chance anyone ever noticed.

Lydia set down her spoon and removed her sunglasses.

A stranger wouldn't even guess this place was here. She hadn't noticed it a year ago, on her first and only visit to Cape Cod. Its name she hoped was geographical: Leo's Back End stood at the far edge of a long parking lot behind a cluster of shops up on Main Street. She'd fallen in love at first sight with the dollhouse village of Quansett: ancient oaks and stone fences, gray-shingled shoebox houses, white porch railings, windowboxes overflowing with red geraniums and striped petunias—

No beach worth mentioning, Alistair Pope warned her, slowing the Mercedes. The nearest shopping mall is five miles away in Hyannis. Welcome to downtown: the post office, the drugstore, the firehouse, the Whistling Pig Tea Shoppe, the Frigate Bookstore, the town library, and one cluster of retail and office spaces. That's why we have the highest proportion of year-rounders on the Cape. Lunch is a social highlight.

Everybody in here did seem to know each other. Was it always this down-homey? Or had she arrived just in time—with Memorial Day over and June starting tomorrow—for one last Norman Rockwell moment before school let out and vacationers flooded over the bridge demanding lobster rolls?

No lobster on Leo's bulletin-board menu. Under Alistair's guidance Lydia took a slip to write down her order. Did he recommend anything? Her knight-errant smiled, shook his head. "It's a crap shoot." And added, "You don't come to Leo's for the food."

Back at her car he'd been more talkative. "I can see you've got this undah control," he'd begun graciously, "but I'm a Maw-ris fan from way back and it would be an aw-nah to assist you." His Massachusetts drawl recalled Jack Kennedy, although Alis-tayah had several years and at least fifty pounds on the late president. "I live just up the road. Pre-Civil War farmhouse, zealously guarded by our Historical Commission. You can stable horses in your back yard, but don't try to change your mailbox or paint your front door without a lawyer."

He'd kept up the flow of conversation while they worked, as if to reassure her of his intentions. What year was this beauty? Still the original engine? That was quite a load she'd packed in there. No wonder her tire blew. Moving to the Cape for the summer?

Lydia glanced at the suitcases piled beside the open trunk, the boxes crammed with books and clothes, lamps and plants, in the back seat. "Maybe. There's somebody I kind of need to find."

A raised eyebrow told her he wondered if he might be that somebody. Not a can of worms she cared to open.

He hadn't asked her the obvious question: "Is that your real name?" She'd braced for it, prepared to zing back: "It is now!" Instead he'd rolled the syllables around in his mouth, *Lydia Vivaldi*, like a sip of fine wine, and smiled at her: "Pleased to meet you." Then pushed up his sleeves and bolted on the spare tire faster than she'd been able to pry off the hubcap.

Alistair laid their slips beside the cash register. With a hand on her elbow he steered her to a bin of flatware. Armed with forks, spoons, and mugs, they slid into a booth. His leg pressed against hers. Was this why he'd brought her to Leo's?—because it gave

him so many chances to touch her?

And why, dammit, did each touch send an electric thrill along her skin?

On first sight she'd pegged Alistair Pope as a NFW. Too old, too hefty, too retro-suburban. His wavy salt-and-pepper hair was combed across a thin spot on top, splayed over his collar on the sides. His army jacket looked like it hadn't been washed since the Vietnam war. Who wore rugby shirts anymore? tucked into threadbare jeans? She did like his gold earring: small and simple, with a question-mark curve and an etched design.

Was her heart so shredded, was her betrayed body so starved, that any doofus off the street could get to her?

No. There was something about Alistair Pope—a presence, a magnetism she couldn't pin down. His eyes? Amused, curious, intelligent, flirtatious. His mouth? Wide and expressive, with a cryptic smile. When he spoke, husky and confiding, you felt he recognized qualities in you that no one else could see.

A big man with strong hands. Wrapped in those arms, you'd feel safe.

No wedding ring. Divorced? Maybe he'd bought the Mercedes to celebrate.

Maybe after lunch—

“Is this fella bothering you, young lady?”

A tall concave presence loomed beside their table. Lydia looked up at an electric shock of ice-white hair and eyebrows over icicle-sharp blue eyes.

Then: “Taste this!” And she and Alistair listened, with suitable expressions of sympathy, to the tale of the traitorous sous-chef.

Across the room, Edgar Rowdey skimmed the Cape Cod Times obituaries. Not (as a reviewer had once speculated) because he made his living from death. Yes, his miniature black-and-white books did follow one odd character after another through a dismal set of perils to a grotesque end. Edgar Rowdey's interest, however,

was not in death per se. What fascinated him was people's reactions to death.

Take that poor girl last month. DeAnne Ropes.

Local Artist Tragedy, the Times had trumpeted. Even if you'd never actually spoken to her, you could hardly be unmoved. However! *Local artist*? DeAnne had spent one semester taking art classes up in Cambridge before retreating over the bridge. Her job for the retired Broadway-musical team of Song and Penn was to answer their phones, open their mail, make coffee, and walk their dog, Arson. *Tragedy*? In such a retirement haven as the Cape, perhaps the Times slapped that label on any fatality before age 70. Still! Why not call her death *untimely* or *premature*? Why not *shocking*? There's the film crew waiting for her at The Whistling Pig, toasting the end of their shoot while DeAnne closes the studio, and suddenly medics are rolling her out on a stretcher. What about (for instance) *ironic*? Her parents drag her home to find a suitable job and/or husband, and the Barnstable County medical examiner rewrites her resume: Caucasian female, age 22, height five four, weight one thirty-nine, hair black, eyes brown, not a virgin but with no recent sexual activity. What about *heartbreaking*? After four months of doing as little work as possible, DeAnne decides to take down a heavy curtain alone, overbalances and crashes to her death.

Carlo Song had looked positively ashen over lunch. The news had spread through Quansett by then; still, everyone at Leo's wanted details. Head first? Died instantly? Damn! Hell of a price to pay for being in a movie. Not even Hollywood, either, just that PBS thing of Al Pope's. Poor kid, couldn't stop talking about it—dreaming of fame, her parents telling Oprah about her childhood while she cruised around in designer gowns and stretch limos.

Carlo's Egz Bennie congealed untouched on his plate. Caroline Penn had stayed home. Neither of them had slept. Headlights coming and going in the driveway all night. Gusts of blurred music

from car radios. Reporters? Rubberneckers? Looking for what? In the morning they found their boxwood hedge abloom with plastic-wrapped bouquets, photos, notes, even teddy bears.

Edgar Rowdey had squelched an impulse to go straight home to his drawing room and start a new picturebook: *A lack, A Lass, A Ladder*.

Over the month that followed, he'd watched as—ironically—one after another of DeAnne's dreams came half-true. A candlelight vigil was held outside Carlo and Caroline's studio. News teams from as far away as Boston interviewed her parents. So many people attended the funeral that St. Pius X had to open a side room. Before the ceremony, on closed-circuit TV, mourners watched De-Anne's family holidays, school picnics, senior prom, and her brief interview about working for Song and Penn. PBS urged Alistair Pope to include a clip in his documentary, and to wrap in time for their summer pledge drive. The police investigation, which had just wrapped last week, found no evidence that DeAnne Ropes's death could have been anything but a tragic accident.

Nothing in today's obituaries came close.

"Lydia, Leo. Leo, Lydia." Again Alistair's leg rested against hers. "Despite the evidence, Leo likes to think he runs this sorry excuse for an establishment."

"He can't stay away," Leo confided to Lydia. "Istair here can't get enough of our fine cuisine. And our distinguished guests. Present company included." He made her a small bow.

"We all only eat here because we feel sorry for him. Don't tell him, though. It would break his poor old heart."

"They ask me to keep him out because he lowers the tone. But I'm too soft."

They almost sound like they mean it, thought Lydia. Looking past them, she gave Leo a thumbs-up for decor. No fishing nets and

lobster buoys on the pine-plank walls, just local paintings: a sailboat, a flower garden. Bright red, blue, green, and yellow tabletops on the booths. A yard-sale assortment of wooden tables and chairs in the middle, like an old neighborhood bar. No liquor, though. The sign outside said Open 7 AM to 2 PM Except Sunday.

Alistair and Leo were still sparring. “It’s a toss-up which has a worse reputation, his so-called food or his so-called service.”

That shifted Leo’s wrath back to Sue. According to him, she alone was to blame for any problems at the Back End, including its marginal existence and his own white hairs. According to Alistair, she was a lousy cook anyway. According to them both, she had a maddening habit of quitting whenever she wanted time off and coming back, all smiles, before Leo could replace her.

Lydia listened with the sensation of having been dropped from the sky into a trout stream with a fishing rod poised to cast.

“So?” Leo demanded. “Am I right?”

“It’s thick enough,” she said. “What it needs is more meat. It’s kind of bland, don’t you think?”

Far from being offended, he beamed. “Did you hear her? This is a gourmet you’ve got here.” He patted her shoulder. “Why can’t I ever find a soup chef with such a discerning palate?”

Their lunch arrived. Lydia said, “Funny you should mention it, but I came to the Cape to look for a cooking job.”

Aha! Now Leo was the superstitious one. Coincidence nothing! This was Fate! The hand of destiny!

“Ahem,” said Alistair through his sandwich.

“Shut up, you,” said Leo. “Always claiming credit. Go answer your phone.”

“Pointless.” Alistair reached into his jacket, where a muffled doorbell was ringing. “No reception.” He slid out of the booth.

Leo perched on his vacated bench. How about it? Try the job for a week, no obligation. Help out Dinah during breakfast, make the soup, prep for lunch, serve meals, and pitch in wherever

needed. The pay wasn't huge, but neither were the hours.

Is this possible? wondered Lydia. Could the hand of destiny be cupping her in its palm for a change instead of flipping her the finger? A job! Friends! Maybe even health insurance! All this on the same day she'd thrown her things in the car and her keys in the mailbox, fleeing Greater Boston in a last-ditch attempt to escape the disaster her life had become.

"Have you got a place to stay?" Leo rose to make way for Alistair.

"I think so. A friend of mine moved back here from Cambridge last Christmas. Her folks live in Dennis."

Leo's smile went rigid, as if his face had frozen. A familiar unwelcome chill prickled the back of Lydia's neck.

"I came down partly to see her. She sent me a postcard . . ."

Alistair spoke lightly. "What's her name?"

"DeAnne Ropes." Silence. "You know her, don't you. What's the problem?"

"I'm sorry." Leo patted her shoulder. "Lydia, I'm so sorry."

Chapter Two

Well, well, Dinah Rowan thought as she slapped burgers on the grill. Pope scores again! Where the heck does he find ‘em? This girl couldn’t be much past thirty, and way too hip for a horny old snake like Al. Now he was showing her the menu, his hand on her back. What’s the matter, Al, can’t she read?

My prices are low, Leo liked to say, because I don’t pay babysitters. You want to eat? Write up your own damn order. You want the table set? There’s the cutlery. Soda machine, too. Be grateful we supply the grub and a place to park your back end.

Dinah swiveled to shred a purple cabbage with a cleaver. Back off, Al! She don’t need your big paws all over her just to find a spoon.

Even Edgar Rowdey was watching them over his newspaper. No wonder: Al had been lobbying all winter to do a documentary on him, and sometimes would trot over the girl du jour like a dog fetching slippers. Or (more likely) just to show off.

What it showed (Dinah shoveled the cabbage into a bowl) was Al’s lack of common sense. For one thing, Rowdey was as famous for living like a hermit as for his creepy stories and finicky drawings. For another, Al had shot himself in the foot when he tried to steal Rowdey’s gardener, J.D. Thought he’d grow some vegetables and get a dish named after him on the Back End’s menu, like the Rowdeyberry Tarte. What Al failed to figure was that squash, tomatoes, and corn don’t go wild in the sandy Cape soil like blueberries and blackberries.

Pope's plot failed, in both senses: J.D. turned him down, and Al barely could grow grass by himself.

Now, having plowed under his doomed garden, he pretended the whole thing never happened. Same as he pretended his name was Alistair when everybody knew he was plain Al, short for Albert, short for Fat Albert, till he went off to college.

Rowdey was too much the gentleman to bust him. Or tell him where he could stuff his documentary; so Al hung on like a bulldog, even though most of Quansett knew the Atlantic would have to freeze over before a camera crew ever crossed Edgar Rowdey's threshold.

With a precision that would make her the envy of bomber pilots if any should stray in from the base at Otis, Dinah flipped each burger in one swift swoop. Was Leo feeding soup to Al's girl? Hussy! He'd better get his buns over here before the burgers burned, with no Sue to man the toaster.

But it was Mudge who scrambled around the counter, all arms and legs. Hired as a part-time dishwasher, he'd expanded to all-purpose gap-filler. Right now he was cashier, which he liked because he got to honk the tip horn. Leo kept a bucket on the counter for his ill-paid staff. Spare change won a honk from a brass bicycle horn; folding green, a rousing clang from a firebell.

"Dinah!" Mudge grabbed buns; splayed them on the revolving toaster. "Did you hear?"

"What?"

"Leo's hired that girl to take Sue's job!"

It would have been beneath her to show shock. "Well. Can't really call it Sue's job when she didn't want it."

"She did, though. He named it Sue-Chef for her. She just—oh, you know. And he didn't even ask her!"

"Nor us."

"Nor us," he echoed.

As each browned bun fell from the toaster, Mudge forked it

onto a paper plate and slid it to Dinah. He lived—impatiently—with his family in Mashpee, where his father was some kind of chief in the Wampanoag tribe. His mother, now dead, was rumored to have hitched a ride to the annual pow-wow one summer from Roxbury and stayed. Nobody but Leo and the bookkeeper knew how old he was. Dinah guessed over eighteen but under twenty-one.

“She ever done any cooking?”

“Up in Boston. One of those chi-chi places—Legal Seafood?”

“Better be Durgin Park if she wants to work here. Where’s himself?”

Leo always delivered the burgers personally, one in each hand, manually anchored to their plates: the Back End’s famous Thumburger.

“Coming. He gave her back to Mr. Pope. He looks—both of ‘em—kind of . . .”

“Thunderstruck?”

“Well,” said Mudge. “Did you see her?”

“Don’t *you* start!”

But Mudge, Dinah wagered, could hold his own. As tall and lean as Leo, Mudge had the potent edge of youth. He didn’t go fetch women, retriever fashion, like the tireless and tiresome Pope; they came after him. As so would I, she admitted, if I was sixteen again. Never mind that he’d scare the bejesus out of you in a dark alley, with his look of a Cherokee in a John Wayne movie. It was his eyes you fell into, deep and dark as a kettle-hole pond. Bewitching eyes!—like a deer’s, like a dog’s, so that you felt you could tell him anything at all and he would understand and still trust you.

He was staring at that girl again. Those eyes of yours, she warned him silently, will get you in trouble some day!

Within a week she would recall this thought and wonder if she was psychic.

If you turn left out of Leo's, continue through Quansett center, and take a left onto Willow Street, you may notice a long, low L-shaped building with white vinyl siding, blue doors and shutters, and a faded sign: Blue Moon Motel. Vacancy. No Turnarounds Police Take Notice.

After Labor Day, when the tourists have gone home, the average Cape Cod motel has no jobs for the maids, busboys, launderers, and receptionists who gave its customers a carefree summer vacation. Workers who can't afford to head north, to the ski resorts, or south, to the Florida beaches, move into the empty motels and squeak through the winter on unemployment.

At nine o'clock on this last Wednesday evening in May, the Blue Moon parking lot was sparsely scattered with cars. Beyond it, the swimming pool in its chicken-wire cage lay empty under a blue tarp. The office window was lit, although no one could be seen inside. Along the rest of the row an occasional slatted yellow window shone; an occasional TV muttered to itself, loud and incoherent.

In Room 5, Lydia Vivaldi spoke into her cell phone.

"This is so fucked."

She had muted the sound on her TV and sat cross-legged on her bed. Blankets enveloped her legs. Beside her on the floor lay an open pizza box. A street light slanting through the venetian blinds lit up the white cardboard circle under the pizza's remains like a half moon.

"What's my procedure here? Do I go see them? Do I call them? Or what?"

"Why do you have to do anything?"

"Because she was my friend, Karin! My business partner! She was their daughter, and she's dead! At the age of fucking twenty-two! From falling off a fucking ladder for christ's sake!"

"Well, but, Liz—"

"Lydia. Please."

"Lydia, then. Am I right?—they don't even know you exist."

“So that lets me off the hook?” Lydia shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, if you want to talk to them, I’m sure they’d be glad to meet you.”

“To hear about DeAnne. Don’t you think? Her life in Cambridge, her artwork, the Fix-It Chix and all that. The house.”

“Yeah. I’m sure they’d appreciate that.”

“She sent me a postcard, Karin. A month ago. She wanted to patch things up. What was wrong with me? I should have called her!”

“You would have. How could you know?”

“I don’t even remember what she said! Something like Hey, sorry, things are great here—which at the time just pissed me off, with my life in a total train wreck—”

“Hey. Which was totally not your fault.”

“—And now I can’t find the friggin’ thing. I just spent like an hour searching through every inch of my stuff.”

“It’s OK. Stop blaming yourself.”

“How can I help it? Anyway, that’s not— Oh, hell.”

“What?”

“I don’t get it! How could that happen to her? DeAnne! With her, you know, spatial sense? Coordination?”

“You said it was night, a smooth floor, she was wearing clogs. It could happen to anybody. Her foot slipped, or the ladder. She fell and hit her head. Right? You said that’s what was in the police report.”

“Yeah, well. That’s what Leo said was in the police report. But I’m thinking, shouldn’t I ask the cops? Do I, like, owe it to her? To make sure?”

“How do you owe anything to anybody on this? It’s over. You’re right, it sucks. But, you know, we just found out. Everybody else, like her family?—went through this a month ago. Whatever there was to do about it, they did. Case closed. They’re

like five weeks along in their grieving process. You want to open that up again?"

"Fuck. I don't know."

"No need to decide right now. Go back to sleep. Think it over when your head's clear."

"Right. You're absolutely right, Karin. Hey, how are things up there? You, I mean. And Ricky?"

"We're good. He found your note. That was quite the big shock."

"To him? Everybody?"

"Well, sure. Paul and MJ just about flipped. Christophe doesn't know yet. He's working a double shift."

"Well, say hi for me. Just to them, you know? Not—anybody else."

"Got it."

"I don't even want to hear if he's alive."

"Course not."

"In fact I hope he isn't. I hope the shithead fries in Hell, the sooner the better."

"Yup."

"And his little bimbo, too."

"Especially her."

"So if he asks you if I asked about him, the answer is no. I didn't."

"No, you definitely did not."

"Karin, are you sure you're OK with breaking the news about DeAnne?"

"Well, it's not like I've got a choice, do I? Yeah, I'll go knock on doors tonight. Whoever's here. Dinner kind of fell apart without you here to, you know, rally the troops."

"Tell them I'm a professional cook now. That ought to get some laughs."

"Take care of yourself, Liz. I mean, Lydia. And don't worry

about her parents or the cops or whatever. Give yourself time to get settled. See how it goes.”

“Thanks, Karin. You’re a true friend.”

“Keep in touch, OK?”

“You too.”

But we won’t, she thought as she hung up. Liz is over. Dead as ashes, like her pal DeAnne.

On a side street in Hyannis, Mudge Miles sat on a barstool. His right hand gripped a beer bottle; his left arm was slung around the waist of a girl he remembered was cute but whose name he’d forgotten. Talk ricocheted around him like pool balls. Mudge was (as he liked to think of it) multitasking: laughing, joshing his buddies, drinking, teasing the girl.

In the privacy of his brain, two thoughts buzzed like mosquitoes.

One: beer bored him. He drank it because everybody did, and it was a hell of a lot cheaper than the tequila shot he’d kicked off with. But who picked this piss as the default drink for men? Why couldn’t a man order a sombrero, a Cape Codder, or a pina colada without getting laughed off his barstool?

If the girl pressed against his side had broken the rules, however, and asked what he was thinking about, Mudge would have said: my truck. That was a problem that verged on the eternal. It was a running joke among his buddies: Well, Mudge could pick us up in the truck, except she’ll be broke down. Tonight he intended to leave the worthless piece of shit in Leo’s parking lot. He’d hitched here from Mashpee; somebody would give him a ride back. Then, well past midnight, in beer-elevated spirits, plus some weed if he got lucky, he’d figure out how to get her running.

Or not. His father’s girlfriend had snapped at him worse than usual this morning. She hated being woken up, he knew that, but the house was so small that he couldn’t be as silent as he meant to. Some days she just yelled, some days she threatened. Today she’d ordered him to have his lazy good-for-nothing butt at the dinner

table by 6:30 or don't come home at all. Which meant either sneak in after they were all asleep, or go home with this girl, or sleep in the truck. He'd thrown a couple of blankets in the back just in case.

You'd think she'd give him credit for holding down a steady job. Most of these guys were in and out of work like a revolving door, jumping from restaurant to gas station to construction to unemployment faster than they switched girlfriends. You'd think she'd be glad he was saving up for college. If it pissed her off that he didn't put money in the kitty, let her bitch at his dad. The education fund was his idea. Let her just tell Lincoln Miles to get off his high horse about being the family provider, and see whose lazy good-for-nothing butt got kicked out the damn door!

The girl was ruffling his hair, tickling his ear with her long fingernail. He grinned at her. Darla, that was it. He could see she was drunk. Cute, though. He felt a little drunk himself.

Not liking beer didn't—couldn't—mean you were gay. Did it? You'd know that about yourself, wouldn't you, by the time you were old enough to drink? If you were gay, you wouldn't get hot around girls, which Mudge definitely did. You'd want to grope guys, which he definitely didn't. Wouldn't you? Homosexuality wasn't something that could sneak up on a person, was it?—like the cancer that had killed his mother, or the Alzheimer's that put his grandmother in a home. Even if you didn't always want to spend the night with the girl. Even if you secretly thought the coolest thing you'd ever done in your life was create the semi-famous Rowdeyberry Tarte. There had to be straight dessert chefs somewhere, right? OK, sure, fancy restaurants and Provincetown and gays, everybody knew that; but it wasn't, like, built into your genes, was it?

Oh, screw it. Sex was too fucking complicated anyway. Somewhere it had gotten twisted, from too many rules to none. From where you couldn't do anything, to where somebody gets hurt no matter what you do. Like that girl who worked for Caroline

and Carlo. DeAnne. Whenever he thought about her he felt guilty. Not that it could possibly be his fault what happened to her. They'd stopped seeing each other weeks before. Well, he'd stopped. She claimed to be fine with it, and after one awkward meeting at Leo's, she acted fine with it. The last time she came in for lunch, with the film crew, he couldn't tell if she was showing off or if she really thought somebody had turned that toad Alistair Pope into a handsome prince.

One of his buddies was into a shoving match at the far end of the bar with some redneck Irish asshole who'd made a loud comment about Indians and firewater. Darla nuzzled his neck. Mudge leaned past her and caught his friend Justin's eye. Two minds with the same thought.

Mudge fished out his wallet, disentangled himself from Darla, and braced for a cold cramped night in Leo's parking lot.

Chapter Three

The first day of June! Easing the Morris onto Route 6A, Lydia congratulated herself (since no one else was likely to) on being upright, dressed, clean, and functional at 6:45 AM. Now at last she could leave behind DeAnne Ropes, who'd haunted her all night. A new day! A fresh start! Time for simple, practical questions: Could she support herself as a sous-chef? Would she walk in the door to find Sue back and herself out? Would Alistair show up for breakfast?

Part of her hoped he would, part of her wished he wouldn't. She was curious to see him again, if only to find out what (if anything) he was up to, but she didn't want to go all distracted and klutzy while she was chopping vegetables.

Not much traffic at this hour. Colder than she'd expected. After an afternoon nap and a walk on the beach, she'd stayed up late, watching TV to drown out her turbulent thoughts; so once she finally got back to sleep, the alarm clock had beeped way too soon and catapulted her, shivering, into daylight.

Maybe she wouldn't have to stay at the Blue Moon much longer.

She'd asked Alistair over lunch what kinds of films he made. Documentaries, he said, mostly biographical. Was that as cool as it sounded? He'd laughed and described his day: Check e-mail, catalog footage, return calls, mow lawn, go to lunch, and—the high point—help a stranded motorist change her tire. Did he have coworkers? A family, anyone around through all this? He smiled and said no, so go ahead and order dessert. Which she did: a remarkably tasty Choklit Moose cake. Toward the end of lunch she tried again: Was he,

as they say, seeing anybody? His smile grew more enigmatic. He shook his head: “I gave that up.”

Meaning, she presumed, he’d loved too passionately and plunged too deep into disillusion and despair to keep an open heart. That was a problem she totally understood.

Which did not mean (she reminded herself then and now) they should plunge right in with each other. Talk about out of the frying pan! Just because her drawbridge was still down, and he’d gallantly rescued her, and this wasn’t Cambridge, didn’t make him a knight in shining armor.

In fact why was she even thinking about him? She hardly knew the guy. They’d spent—what?—maybe an hour together?—most of it focused on Leo or the Morris.

Because they’d connected. The hand-of-fate meeting? The electricity when they touched? And look at the 180-degree turnaround he’d triggered in her luck!

Then there was DeAnne.

Not a bond you’d wish for, but powerful. To Lydia’s frustration, Alistair had nothing to say about her death beyond the gist: filming, studio, ladder, accidental fall. Died instantly, Leo added. No pain. For Alistair apparently it hadn’t been so painless—a nightmare aftermath of cops and cordons, accusatory parents, intrusive paparazzi, upset employees. As for DeAnne herself, he claimed to have been too busy and distracted to pay her much attention.

Lydia tried again as they finished lunch and hit the same wall of silence. Why, dammit? Did she look like a cop, or reporter? Would it kill him to cough up a recollection? Couldn’t he see that for her this was a huge shock?

For whatever reason, after such a charged beginning their good-bys were abruptly formal. Midway through coffee Alistair announced that Edgar Rowdey was leaving and they needed to catch him. He’d hustled Lydia up to the cash register and out the

door, but too late; Rowdey had gone. OK, big disappointment. Still, she'd expected more from him than a stiff hug in the parking lot, mini-kisses on both cheeks like the French, and a wave as they drove off in separate cars.

He did ask "When will I see you again?" but the irony was obvious. She'd given the obvious answer: "You know where to find me."

6:58 AM. No Mercedes in the parking lot. Those few cars must be the regulars Leo had said might show up before the Back End opened. He left a hidden key rather than come down from his apartment (classic, Lydia thought, living over the shop) just to make coffee for insomniacs.

Really, it would be bad, not good, to find Alistair here. You don't want a man who's up with the chickens, do you?

The breakfast rush was so overwhelming that Lydia didn't get a chance until mid-morning, when the kitchen crew paused for bagels, to notice how miffed she was that he'd never appeared.

She whisked eggs, she chopped celery, she rang up customers. Ten-fifteen. She sensibly made cream of broccoli soup instead of curried cauliflower. (Next time.) Around her Mudge raced like Ben-Hur's chariot and Dinah moved with the slow majesty of an ocean liner. Eleven-fifteen. Leo praised her soup extravagantly. She suggested they divide tomorrow's chili, one batch with meat and one without. Twelve-fifteen: rush hour again. Chop, fry, toast, garnish, serve. Still no Alistair.

Two-fifteen. As they peeled off their aprons, Lydia asked Leo the question she'd been formulating since the first egg hit the griddle. "Does your friend Mr. Pope usually eat here, or did I just meet him on a lucky day?"

Leo groaned, dramatizing how hard he'd worked, how his old bones ached. "Istair? You never know. Mostly he comes in to stalk Edgar here." His hand flicked out and grabbed the writer's arm. "Edgar, meet my new second cook. Edgar, Lydia Vivaldi. Lydia,

Edgar Rowdey.”

She'd noticed the balding, white-bearded man sitting alone at a center table with a book. Cup of Brockli Soop and a Tooner Sallid, was it? He'd been here for breakfast, too. The Ing Muff she remembered; the Scram Egz had left their mark down the front of his faded blue sweatshirt. So this was the friend Alistair had so urgently wanted her to meet, the famous author of intricate, spooky little books that had given her nightmares as a child. Not dead, or English, or ghoulish, as she'd assumed. What to say?

“Hi. Good to meet you.”

He had an admirable handshake, firm and dry. “Welcome to the madhouse,” he drawled. “Your soup is a godsend, dear. Whatever you do, keep this skinflint here away from it, and please don't quit.” And to Leo: “Treat her with respect, will you? You're lucky a real chef is willing to set foot in this place. Don't go sucking her dry and cast her aside like all the others.”

Leo patted his arm. “My biggest fan,” he told Lydia. “You can tell by how he talks to me.” To Rowdey: “Why don't you keep your mouth shut if you can't say anything nice? Vicious brute.”

Under their harsh words was an affection Lydia had missed in Leo's exchanges yesterday with Alistair. This, she perceived, was a real friendship. Alistair, although he'd picked up the Back End's conversational style, remained outside its inner circle.

She looked with more curiosity at Edgar Rowdey. Would she have recognized him as a man renowned for deadpan tales of violence? Not a chance. Of course there was the egg-stained sweatshirt. But his face too looked more kindly than dangerous. His full lips were rosy as a baby's cheeks. Sparse white hair, unruly beard, half-glasses sliding down his aquiline nose . . . and blue eyes: not piercingly blue, like Leo's, but changeably, like the ocean. Like the faded jeans he wore with his once-white sneakers.

“Do you live around here?” she asked him.

“Oh, yes.”

“Just up the road. You can’t miss it,” said Leo. “Big old pile, looks like it’s falling down in a heap. Same as the owner. Whoops! Sorry.”

Rowdey ignored him. “And you?” he asked Lydia.

“So far, the Blue Moon Motel. Leo’s promised to find me a place if I last out the week.”

“Trust him no farther than you can throw him. Ta-ta,” he told them both, and strolled off toward the parking lot.

Lydia watched him leave the path and cross the grass to the Back End’s ornamental pond. On the far rim, where a branch from the giant beech tree beside the restaurant hung low over the water, he folded his arms and gazed into the pool.

The famous author. Possibly soon to be a friend of mine.

A surge of happiness washed over her. This is me, world! This is my new life!

“Gotta watch that fella,” said Leo. “He’s after my frogs.”

“Your frogs?” Lydia had spotted only three goldfish among the water plants.

Leo nodded darkly. “He studied French in college. Probably wants the legs.”

They moved to the kitchen to join the rest of the crew for a quick lunch of leftovers. Lydia helped Dinah store the remaining food while Leo and Mudge went over the day’s receipts. The dishwasher, Bruno, who spoke neither English nor French as far as she could tell, washed the floor, wheeling a tin bucket with rollers, pumping vigorously with a rag mop. Stepping around him, Lydia spotted a familiar profile through the window. Half hidden by beech branches, like a satyr emerging from a sacred grove, stood Alistair Pope.

Would he come in? No, the door was locked.

Why was he here? To see her?

She didn’t dare rush out on her first day. Anyhow, she didn’t want to give him ideas. Or give Leo and the others any excuse for

gossip. Surely nobody on earth had ever taken as long as Dinah to fasten a piece of plastic wrap around a bowl! Why didn't she get proper tubs with lids?

He was still there when Lydia, Dinah, and Mudge emerged, contemplating the frog pond with Edgar Rowdey. Greetings were exchanged. Dinah chaffed Alistair—whom she called Al—for missing lunch. He replied with an insult to her cooking that was too automatic to be offensive. Edgar Rowdey asked Mudge if he planned to make the Tarte again this summer. Mudge said you bet, if it was OK with him and Leo and Dinah. Dinah said it was fine with her as long as Al didn't get any. Alistair said that was harsh when he hadn't been getting any all winter. He didn't even glance at Lydia. It struck her that the Back End was its own kind of frog pond; but what this might mean, especially for him and her, she was too flustered to think.

After what seemed to her a very long and pointless chat, Dinah moved off to her blue Honda sedan and Mudge to his ancient multicolored pick-up truck.

“Mr. Rowdey,” said Lydia. “Leo thinks you're after his frogs.”

“Oh, too true.”

“Cuisses de grenouille?” said Alistair. “Revolting. But you must call him Edgar. Can't she? Since you've evidently been introduced.”

“By all means,” he murmured. “A pleasure.” Speaking to the frog pond. “I must be off.”

“But we haven't reached a conclusion,” Alistair objected. He explained to Lydia: “How they get here. Where they go. Some days there are several, some days none.”

She surveyed the little pond. Layers of slate and stones around it created plenty of sunning spots for frogs, in addition to the lily pads in the water. No frogs were visible.

“Do they hop off under the tree, or up into it?” Rowdey elaborated, miming with a gesture.

“Are there tiny caves in the rocks where they hide, like Al Qaeda?” Alistair one-upped.

“Or tunnels? leading to some distant unknown lake?”

“Or does Leo materialize them afresh every morning, like Moses?” Alistair flung up his arms. “Are they conceived in the clouds, heavenly tadpoles, to drop with the gentle rain upon the place beneath?”

Edgar Rowdey pushed up his glasses. “I must,” he repeated, “be off.”

“Well, off you go, then.”

And off he shambled. Lydia and Alistair stood where they were, watching, not looking at each other, until Rowdey and his black VW station wagon—license plate WARDOG—had gone.

Lydia turned first. “Wardog?”

“One of his pseudonyms. E. Dyer Wardog, putative author of his breakout book, *Hidden Turnips*. Thirteen weeks on the Times best-seller list, banned in three cities, including Boston. Bid on by three movie studios who wanted to turn it into, I don’t know, some kind of animated soft-porn comic thriller. That never happened, thank God, but the advance paid for his house.” He faced her; held out both hands. “Lydia. Come and see the rest of our Elephant Tree.”

She had never encountered a tree so enormous. Judging from its trunk, which truly was as gray, as wrinkled, and half as wide as an elephant, it must be older than Massachusetts. Branches taller than the Back End roof curved down to touch the ground and re-ascend. New leaves of vivid translucent chartreuse made a shimmering multilayered curtain above and around them. Within this magical bower, she and Alistair were completely concealed.

Staring upward, she felt his arms encircle her, his chest press against her back. Then they were kissing, mouths melting together, entwined in each other, kissing till the cows came home, till the mountains tumbled to the sea, till the stars fell from the sky like

tadpoles, till Lydia forgot where she was or who she was and only barely, occasionally, remembered to breathe.

Then they were standing apart, panting; still touching, gasping for air. Her hands were on his waist. His hands stroked her neck, her cheek, her hair.

“I have to go,” he said, with aching tenderness.

“You can’t.” Lydia pictured rolling with him on the damp brown leaf-strewn earth under the tree: Adam and Eve.

“I’m wretchedly late. For a meeting. This blasted film.” He pulled her close again and covered her mouth with his.

Lydia caressed his ear and the small gold ring that hung from it. She felt him shudder against her and draw back. “Oh, god! Lydia! You’re unbelievable. I can’t stand it. Please. Let me see you again. Soon. Very soon.”

He led her out into the world. It was so bright it hurt her eyes. Part of Lydia recalled that this was her workplace, as well as her boss’s home, with windows looking onto this very parking lot. There was Mudge, too, or the bottom half of him, working under his truck. She thrust a hand through her hair, ineffectually, and prayed to the tadpoles in heaven that luck was still on her side.

Wallace Hicks looked at the clock. Quarter to three. Ken had been shut in his office with that man for almost half an hour. What could they be doing?

He thought of him as *that man* because that was what Dinah Rowan had called him at lunch, so fiercely that Wally had to cough so as not to laugh. Really, it wasn’t funny. No, it really *was* funny. The other customers at the counter pretended it wasn’t, because they assumed Dinah’s agitation was over his fame, or his race, or his presumptuousness, or all three: a huge black football star, driving a car that cost more than some people’s homes, strolling into the Back End for the second time this week! But that (Wally knew) wasn’t what bristled Dinah’s hackles. Roosevelt Sherman was the only person in Quansett, man or woman, Irish or

Wampanoag or Cape Verdean, who outweighed Dinah Rowan.

His first appearance, on Tuesday, counted as a celebrity sighting. The regulars at the front counter had nudged each other in a wave as he passed: *Isn't that . . . ?* Neighbors murmured as they wrote their slips or ladled their soup: *Hey, did you see . . . ?* Only two tourists were gauche enough to ask him for an autograph. When he departed, the normal lunchtime ebb and flow closed behind him like the Red Sea behind the Israelites.

But when he came back this morning, he might have been Moses parting the waves. *What's he doing here? Does he mean to stay? Where? Why? For how long?* Fred Tiller actually walked up to Roosevelt Sherman's table and offered his card—whether hoping to funnel some of the man's riches into a Tiller Homes waterfront estate, or just to show off, no one was certain.

Wallace Hicks had explained to Mr. Sherman that the Frigate was not for sale. Yup, that sure was a realtor's sign in the window; but if he looked closer, he'd see BOOKS written in above FOR SALE. A marketing gimmick, that's all. No sirree, Mr. Boose and his bookstore were not in any kind of trouble. Those boxes in the parking lot would be unpacked and shelved real soon. The stacks in the aisles, too. What with folks tromping in and out all day, who had time? Oh, no no, he wasn't an owner, only an employee. One more local boy who'd crossed the bridge in search of adventure and come back years later like a bad penny. Found one of those Airstreams, like a little old silver blimp— Well, OK, sure. If Mr. Sherman insisted, he'd go ask when Mr. Boose might be free to speak to him.

For one instant Wally feared he'd overdone it. But no; the man wasn't suspicious, just backing out for some elbow room. Reaching for his cell phone. What did he care about a long-haired, weatherbeaten bookstore clerk who'd returned to the scene of his childhood?

Thirty-two minutes.

According to Dinah, Roosevelt Sherman had turned around the Patriots almost single-handed. Wally didn't know about that. Yes, the man probably could squash her like a bug. But it might not be a bad thing if he threw his weight into Quansett.

The bell jingled: customers.

“Caroline! Carlo! Good to see you.”

Air kisses and handshakes were exchanged, although they had just said good-bye at Leo's two hours ago.

And here came Gromit, tags jingling as he wagged up to greet his friends. Ken Boose hadn't wanted a dog in the shop, until he saw what a magnet Gromit was. Being a black lab, he offered an adoring welcome to everyone. Maybe two customers a month asked why he didn't look like his cartoon namesake. At least two customers a day confided that they used to have a dog exactly like that.

“What can I do for you folks this fine afternoon?” Wally led them inside, with Gromit close behind. “Sorry about all this mess. Ken keeps swearing he's gonna hire us some help, soon as he finds the time.”

Carlo was nodding sympathetically. “Only he never finds the time.”

“Mudge would be glad to help out, I'm sure,” said Caroline Penn. “He could probably use the money.”

“Get that truck of his fixed,” Wally agreed. “Take out girls, whatever.”

“Oh.” Caroline's eyebrow arched into a Nike swoosh. “Speaking of girls! What about Leo's new sous-chef?”

“Wasn't that a surprise! What planet do you suppose she dropped from? Boston?”

“Unusual hair.” Carlo scratched Gromit's ears. “Dinah seems pleased.”

“More rings in one ear than I've got in my whole jewelry box.” Caroline's lobes glittered with hand-blown glass. “Wherever

she's from, her broccoli soup is scrumptious."

"Is what's-her-name gone for good, then?"

"Sue. She generally comes back," said Carlo.

"Like a yo-yo," said Caroline. "It's a crime how she's taken advantage—"

From the office came the short whooping laugh they all recognized as Ken Boose's: *hiu! hiu! hiu!*

Caroline arched an inquiring eyebrow at Wally.

"Oh, gosh," he said. "Sorry, folks. Here I am shooting the breeze, when you must have come in here for a reason. A book? What can I get for you?"

"Ah, yes," said Carlo. Caroline continued to gaze with lizardlike intensity at the office door. "I'm having a birthday next weekend, and Caroline hoped— Well, you tell Wally what you want."

"Who's in there with him?" Caroline asked.

"Well now best wishes, Carlo!"

"Is that the football player Dinah was going on about?"

Wally sighed and conceded. For a moment they eavesdropped in unison; but there was nothing to hear.

"I won't push, Wally. If you'd rather not say."

"It appears he's a reader," Carlo said cheerfully.

"Not much to say." Wally leaned on his crystal-headed cane, which he carried mostly to reach books on high shelves. "Aside from yes, his name is Roosevelt Sherman and he used to play for the Pats. Came in here asked me a bunch of questions; wanted to see Ken. There you have it."

"Dinah said he's eaten lunch at Leo's twice this week. Reading the Cape Cod Times. The real estate section."

"Seeking an investment opportunity, perhaps," Carlo suggested. "Somewhere to put his winnings."

"Earnings," said Wally.

"Of course. No winnings in football."

“Unless he cheated.” Caroline glanced hopefully at the door.

“Whereas we,” said Carlo, “are seeking a more modest investment opportunity for our earnings, or winnings, namely a book. Caroline?”

What they sought was an early volume of Edgar Rowdey’s that Caroline could have him sign for Carlo. Wally pointed out, to be fair, that if she asked Edgar he’d probably give her the book, and be happy to honor his friend’s birthday. Caroline insisted that would be taking advantage; and after all, the Frigate *was* their beloved local bookstore.

Wally found the book—a first printing of *The Mute Soprano*—and rang it up. Carlo and Caroline took their leave. 3:15 PM. Ken Boose and Rosey Sherman still hadn’t come out of the office. If I’m right, Wally thought, this is gonna rattle Quansett like an earthquake. They sure as heck better know what they’re doing.