

Chapter 1: What Happens in Vegas

Thirteen startled Las Vegas shoppers halted when Ashley and Danny Dillon came waltzing across the marble floor of Soignee: a Boutique.

Danny, muscular and golden-haired at 46, still moved with the agility of a tennis coach. Ashley, tanned and blonded by a month in a thong bikini, mirrored her father's steps as if they'd rehearsed.

The Dress—a Justina Malo confection in blue-green silk—clung when they clung, and billowed when they twirled.

Gamblers paused on their way to the casino. Tourists clapped and held up cell phones. They Tweeted, e-mailed, posted on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.

Of the 3,437 people who would eventually watch this ad hoc floor show, not one linked it to the near-disaster two nights ago at the Bellagio pool.

Who'd recognize the dazzling girl in swirling chiffon as the limp body that had been dragged out of the water, strapped to a stretcher, and rushed away in an ambulance?

Who'd recognize her partner as the frantic father who'd sneaked her back into the hotel yesterday in scarves and sunglasses?

She's alive. That was the spar Danny clung to. *We made it.* What if that waiter hadn't spotted her? What if the ER doctor simply turned it over to the cops instead of phoning her dad in Florida?

What if her bottle of Elevane had been full instead of half empty?

Danny had broken the news to his ex-wife from Palm Beach Airport. Easier on everybody: he could deflect Pam's panicky questions, and she could insist on paying his expenses instead of drop-ping everything to fly out from Cape Cod. Neither Ashley nor her mom wanted that.

Back at the Bellagio, they called Pam together. *No worries.*

Just a scare. You stay focused on your Zappa launch. We'll talk more soon.

Blame could wait. What the hell kind of mother (OK, parents) would leave a fragile kid like Ashley alone, unprotected, twenty-eight hundred miles from home? Later. Top priority now was to be here for her. Get her back on her feet, out of that damn room. Squire her around the Strip, the casinos, the buffets, the shops, the Dancing Fountains. Buy her the dress of her dreams. And, having maxed out his MasterCard, pray that Pam would cover the whole trip.

But screw the cost! Danny Dillon's number-one priority was his daughter's happiness.

Number two was to nail the evil twisted sick-minded fuck who'd tried to kill her.



In Ashley Dillon's mind, that ring of smiling faces and clapping hands was a 20th Century Fox production team begging her to star in their upcoming remake of *The King and I*.

How could she help but be a winner in this dress?

She'd recognized it instantly. The exact same Justina Malo that Angelina Jolie wore on her goodwill tour of those dusty countries full of tents and starving children. Looking like an angel, with the floating shoulder panel draped respectfully over her head. What did that TV newsman call her? "Madonna of the Maghreb."

Ashley rarely watched the news. But when you were stuck in a hotel all by yourself, after your unfuckingbelievably selfish roommate ran off with some cowboy she met at New York New York, what choice did you have?

It made her cry, comparing Angelina and Brad's beautiful marriage to hers, which she was in Las Vegas to terminate. Still, Danny had a point: Didn't Angelina burn through two other husbands before she found Brad Pitt?

Ashley Dillon was way younger than Angelina Jolie, and shorter, with shoulder-length corn-silk hair and eyes that shifted between green and blue. *That dress matches my new contact lenses*, she'd thought. *OMG, if I could turn 21 in that dress, I'd never be*

scared of anything ever again!

And an hour ago, there it was! Glowing in Soignee's window like a consolation prize from Fate.

Now was when Ashley's life passed before her eyes: dancing from pillar to pillar, aswirl in aquamarine chiffon, lit by popping camera-flashes. Not two days ago, so hysterical that a fistful of Elevane couldn't stop her shaking. Not yesterday, puking her guts out in the hospital, harassed by people pecking and pecking at her with stupid questions. Now, with her dad's strong safe arms around her.

He spun her with one hand and caught her with the other. The 20th Century Fox reps applauded and aimed their cell phones. Sun filtering through the arched skylight and wrought-iron fretwork cast lacy shadows across her wafting skirts.

"Ta da!" Danny bowed.

"Thank you!" Ashley made a grand curtsy.

"So let's go have a drink by the pool, babe, and take a look at those death threats."



Twenty-eight hundred miles away, Phyllis Nash held the cleated main sheet with her right hand, her luffing head-scarf with her left, and raised her voice over the wind.

"Trust your stepdaughter to stage a crisis on Desolation Day!"

Harry Nash answered with what might have been a grimace or a grin. "I doubt she timed it for us."

Mother and son sat knee to knee in the cockpit of their Herreshoff daysailer, squinting out at the rising and falling surface of Nantucket Sound.

Thin leather driving gloves covered Harry's burn-scarred hands. Aviator glasses and a broad-brimmed canvas hat protected his shiny seamed head and dented face from the sun. The hat fastened under his chin with a bead, like his favorite boyhood Stetson. Four years of plastic surgery had left him looking remarkably like the Harry Nash in Phyllis's family albums, including his permanent

half-smile.

“She’s all right now, isn’t she? Out of danger?”

“Hard to say.” Harry shrugged. “Danny’s bound to downplay it till he finds out what the hell’s going on.”

“I do feel for the poor girl.” Phyllis, being a diplomat’s widow, conceded that at her age she was fortunate to have not only regained a lost son but added a daughter-in-law and a granddaughter. “The one time she acts sensibly. Dumping that horrid husband. You know, it won’t surprise me if he’s behind this.”

“We’ll see what Danny finds out.” Harry, being a war veteran, conceded that Ashley Dillon was a loose cannon. “Hell of a thing for Pam, anyhow. Like she hasn’t got enough cops, colonels, and whatnot breathing down her neck.”

“How such a gifted woman could produce such a feckless child!”

“I told her, Take some time off. Go talk to Edgar Rowdey. He’s an expert on mystery stalkers.”

Phyllis nodded approval. “Sufficient unto the day are the evils thereof.”

On the first Sunday in August eight years ago, the convoy carrying Harry and Scott Nash into an Afghan village had hit a booby trap. The remains the Army later extracted from the rubble were so fragmented that the brothers’ whole unit was presumed dead.

Phyllis claimed that losing both his sons literally broke her husband’s heart. Exactly one year later, Vernon Nash took a nap after lunch and never woke up again.

In Harry’s opinion, it would make more sense to celebrate his own resurrection than the deaths of Vern and Scotty. Harder to pin down, admittedly. His recollections of the ambush were patchy. Smoke and dust too thick to breathe. Scorching heat. And noise! A roar like the end of the world. Gunfire, men screaming, a dog howling, flames crackling . . . and blackout.

He’d awakened in agony, jolting down a rutted dirt road on an oxcart.

As for the milestones in his struggle toward recovery, those he was glad to forget.

That was Harry Nash's Afghanistan: a bottomless pool from which his nightmares rose and circled like sharks.

Phyllis knew this. She'd nodded her head when he explained it—sculpted platinum-and-pewter hair, sable lashes, penciled brows—but he could see it didn't sink in.

Her Afghanistan was a monster that had devoured her family.

She shouted again over the wind. "Will Ashley stay in Las Vegas till the divorce is done?"

"That's the plan. You know, it's not just Pam's Zappa bash she'll miss. Her twenty-first birthday is next week."

"You know what I say to that," Phyllis adjusted her Audrey Hepburn sunglasses. "Let her eat cake."

Two summers ago, Ashley had (in Phyllis's view) tried to ruin Pam and Harry's Cape Cod wedding by turning a toast to the bride and groom into an announcement of her own engagement. This after her fiancé showed up at the ceremony in ragged denim shorts and an ill-cut plaid jacket.

"But enough of Ashley," said Phyllis. "This is our day! Let's observe it in peace."

Every Desolation Day they sailed into the past. With Vern's diplomatic duties shuttling him around the globe, the Nashes had rarely taken traditional vacations. Several times an uprising sent the boys off to boarding school, or home to Bethesda. Wherever they were, at least once a year the four of them gathered at the Nash Cottage on Compass Point for a voyage aboard the family sloop.

"Ready about!" barked Harry.

The farthest they'd go in this little daysailer was the crocodile crags and flashlight-battery lighthouse of Bishop and Clark's. But in their memories they cruised around Monomoy Island, up the Cape's long sandy arm past Provincetown, past Scituate and Nantasket . . .

"Hard alee!"

Over went the tiller. Down went their heads, to avoid the swinging boom. Out flew the mainsail. The ropes, damp with sea-

spray and hot from the sun, rasped through Phyllis's hands.

She nudged her son's twisted shoulder. "Living well is the best revenge!"

"And who could live better than this?"

That was the real point of Desolation Day. The two surviving Nashes couldn't get back what they'd lost: loved ones, physical agility, years of grief. But they had this consolation prize: a sunny August afternoon gliding across the water, a salty breeze ruffling their jackets, filling their sails, and stirring their memories.

Phyllis never talked about Vern's death. Nor did she ever ask Harry about the ambush that killed Scott. He'd told her the whole grim story when he first came home. Ever since, if anyone raised the subject, she changed it.

The Harry Nash who'd enlisted to serve his country in Afghanistan would have been touched. Such a delicate soul, his mother, that even the passing of an old man in his sleep was too painful to recall. The Harry Nash who'd come back, who'd seen dozens of young men blown to shreds, stifled an urge to ask her: *Why so squeamish? What are you hiding?*

Squeamish? Phyllis wouldn't leave the house unless her clothes, hair, and makeup were perfect; yet here she sat without a qualm, her thigh against his, looking into his distorted face with open affection.

For his survival Harry credited genes, training, the villagers who'd dug him out, and the doctors who'd pieced him back together. For his marriage to Pam, he congratulated himself on his superhuman charm. For Phyllis's devotion, he could only thank God.

She smiled as if she'd overheard his thoughts. "We've been lucky."

"Yes."

"I do hope Danny and the police can put an end to this thing without Ashley sucking Pam into it."

"If she does," Harry wiped sea-spray off his sunglasses, "I'll kill her myself."

Chapter 2: By the Pool

The Bellagio's vast, gorgeous swimming pool was the coolest thing about Vegas. (Well, up till two nights ago.) It didn't kick you from behind, like the ocean, knock you over or sting your nose or fill your suit with sand. You could splash around without getting your hair wet, lounge on a sun-warmed chaise, flirt with Chico the waiter, and sip the tall pastel drinks he brought in frosty glasses, so that you had to dry your fingers on a fluffy hotel towel between texts.

Danny insisted Ashley's usual poolside table was where they should look at the threats on her phone. Like riding a horse: You fall off, you jump right back in the saddle.

He'd been putting her back in the saddle as long as she could remember. When the kids at school bullied her, called her a mouse and a shrimp and wouldn't pick her for sports teams, he made her try out for Barnstable High's *Wizard of Oz*. Pam helped with her munchkin costume, but it was Danny who coached her. Year after year, chorus after chorus, from "Ding Dong the Witch is Dead" to "I Feel Pretty" to "Wilkommen."

They hit *The King and I* while Pam was finishing the Squelcher, her remote control for other people's cell phones. Why did Pam keep inventing silence? Like her whole career was about shutting people out. If Pam wasn't so OCD about her frickin' inventions, if she'd fought for her marriage instead of banishing Danny to a boat dealership in Boca Raton, Ashley's self-esteem wouldn't have tanked. She could have crowned her senior year with the starring role of Anna instead of a Siamese slave. She'd never have met a post-punk guitar rat like Steve Makropoulos, much less married him. She'd be in L.A. right now, building her acting career, instead of in Las Vegas getting divorced.

And doing the Dead Man's Float.

When she'd first checked in here it felt like prison. The minimum-security kind, obviously, with two king-size beds, two giant flat-screen TVs, a posh living room and kitchenette, and 24-hour room service. She and Pam had agreed that sharing a suite with a fellow would-be divorcee was the best way to establish Nevada residency. Not! Two suicidally depressed women stuck with each other for two months? Give me a break.

She'd felt sandbagged when her roommate took off, and also a tiny bit relieved. Still suicidally depressed; but if you had to do time, you could do hella worse than the Bellagio.



Swimming pool? To Danny it looked more like Hollywood's version of a Roman bath, all columns and statues and fountains surrounded by turquoise water.

Which part of this monster had tried to devour his daughter?

She wouldn't talk about it. Said she didn't remember anything from when she got the texts and flipped out until she woke up in an ambulance.

He'd learned from the bartender there'd been three or four wedding parties drifting between the bar, the casino, and the pool. Too many margaritas, rum punches, bottles of champagne for him to notice Ashley, aside from that once when she'd stumbled up with some guy's arm around her. No, he didn't know the guy. They all get to look alike after a while. When his crew went out to clear up, there she was. Like a floating shadow, said the waiter who dragged her out. Like a dark spot on a turquoise ring.

Danny kept on his sunglasses so Ashley wouldn't see him watching her, or asking himself stupid questions.

"Lime rickey?" he said instead.

"You read my mind." Ashley dropped her towel on her chaise. "I'll get them. I should say hi to Chico anyway."

"You sure he's OK, this Chico?"

"Oh yeah. He's the one who saved me, Dad!"

Danny nodded. "Go for it."

Part of getting back on the horse, right? Show the hotel staff that whatever gossip they'd heard, she was fine.

And what pretty girl wouldn't enjoy spreading ripples of admiration through the ring of gamblers and conventioners basking around the pool?

Like her mom twenty years ago.

If he told Ashley that, she'd laugh. But it was true. You wouldn't guess it now, but when Pam Linnell used to bounce onto the tennis court in her tiny white dress, she'd knocked him over without lifting a racquet.

It was Pam who'd first shown him Las Vegas, from the air, on their honeymoon flight to Hawaii. *The one place you can recognize even in the dark at thirty-five thousand feet.* He'd leaned across her lap to see the neon-rainbow snake winding through blackness. Savoring her warmth, her scent, earthy and spicy and female. Sneaking a hand inside her sweater . . .

Just thinking about it, Danny had to throw a towel over his swim trunks.

Ashley had taken her iPhone with her. Why? Who could she need to contact, or hear from?

Was she afraid he'd snoop if she left it here? As impatient as he was to see those texts, she should know him better than that.

U R not alone. That was the first one, right after her roommate moved out. Then *IM watching U.* Creepy, but being watched was nothing new for Ashley. She deleted them both.

When she got the third text, *Go home U dont B long,* she forwarded it to Danny.

They had to be from Mack, she insisted. Mack was the new name of Steve, her soon-to-be-ex-husband. New identity, new try at stopping the divorce? What other reason could anyone have to scare her out of Vegas?

"Did you call him?"

"Sure. He swore it wasn't him. He wanted to come out here and protect me. As if!"

That was how Danny presented the problem to Pam. Worth

asking the hotel management to keep an eye out, but not worth calling the cops. Yet.

A few days later the texts ratcheted up.

I C every thing U do bitch.

I will C U die.

“It’s gotta be a sick joke.” Ashley sounded shaky on the phone. “I’ll call Mack again.”

“No. Let me handle it.”

Danny had to agree that Mack/Steve’s denial sounded truthful. He warned him off anyway. Then he bought a plane ticket.

They drove to the police station and showed the texts to Officer Mischke. He told them the sender’s phone was a burner: a cheap pay-as-you-go, untraceable. The messages were disturbing, but he didn’t see what could be done beyond alerting the hotel detective. Danny could keep watch over the weekend; and before you know it, Ashley would be home free.

On Wednesday Ashley got two more texts:

Go now or U B dead.

Run ho I M coming 4 U

The hotel detective gave her a sympathetic pat and offered to buy her a drink after his shift. Officer Mischke had left for vacation.

What were the final messages on Friday that sent her running for antidepressants and the pool? He didn’t know yet.

Overhead, the distant buzz of a speck-sized airplane whose daylight passengers couldn’t see Las Vegas. Danny scanned around for his daughter.



At the poolside bar, Ashley told Chico she’d wait and carry the drinks herself.

She sat on the bench by the jacuzzi and Tweeted a quick selfie: *OMG its so good to feel good again!*

Danny was right: Don’t rain on your own parade.

If anybody texted death threats to Angelina Jolie, she wouldn’t pop half a bottle of Elevane and wake up soaked and choking on a

gurney. Well, she probably wouldn't even know. Didn't she have secretaries and bodyguards to protect her from shit like that? A woman who could go from *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* to winning an Oscar, directing her own films, marrying Brad Pitt, and becoming the mom of six kids wouldn't lose it over a bunch of hate spam.

What would Angelina do?

Buy a fabulous new dress!

Show off her fabulous self to an adoring crowd!

Ashley Dillon took her courage in both thumbs and texted her mom.

Changed mind about birthday party. Your right only 21 once. Sat 12th perfect. XOX A

“Two lime rickys?”

She clicked Send and swiveled. Chico was holding out the tray: two frosty glasses, two miniature umbrellas stabbed into fat slices of lime, two butterfly napkins.

Ashley reached for it, and watched her iPhone leap out of her hand into the jacuzzi.

Chapter 3: The Back End

Screech-crunch of tires on gravel. Park the BMW in the overflow area, where nobody will drift over to chat. Under the tree, where sun won't scorch the leather seats. No need to check wind-tousled hair or touch up lipstick. Or raise the convertible top: this won't take long.

Up the grassy slope on flagstone steps. Past the weathered stockade fence hiding Leo's garbage cans from his customers and the local kids, dogs, and raccoons. Past the Elephant Tree, past the frog pond, to the Back End's familiar white clapboard façade.

Pam Nash stepped through the screen door and backward in time.

There was Dinah, Leo's enormous cook, waddling from stove to fridge. Same old kitchen: weathered chopping blocks, greasy black grill, cast-iron pots, plastic-wrapped bowls. How long since she'd inhaled this noseful of frying bacon and burgers, simmering chowder and chili, chopped onions and human sweat? Same ancient conveyor-belt toaster . . . double porcelain sink . . . formica lunch counter lined on this side with chrome-and-vinyl stools. Even the row of T-shirts and tank tops hunched over their lunches hadn't visibly changed since her mother used to bring her here thirty years ago.

Neither had the menu, a patchwork of colored poster-board squares thumbtacked to the wall.

That flirtatious fortyish guy at the register looked like he might be one of Leo's sons. The kid ladling sauce onto spaghetti clearly wasn't: dark-skinned, tall and wiry, with heart-melting brown eyes and a smile that made Pam glad her daughter couldn't see him.

As if Ashley would set foot in a place like this. If she were on Cape, which thank God she wasn't (yet), she'd insist on The Whistling Pig up the street, or some new Osterville cafe—

“Stop right there. Don’t take another step.”

That voice! Pam swiveled, and the snapshot in her head expanded into a 3-D craggy, skinny, white-haired curmudgeon.

“Pam Linnell! Where the heck you been hiding, young lady?”

He approached her with his ice-blue eyes crackling. “You city folk are all the same! Go off and get famous and that’s the last we see of you.”

He kept talking, but Pam didn’t listen. “Leo!” Her arm went around his shoulder. “My god, you haven’t changed a hair.”

“You hear that?” Leo demanded of a customer watching in amusement from the counter. “I haven’t changed a hair! And she ought to know. You know who this is? This is Pam Linnell, the famous inventor!”

Pam squeezed him and kissed his bristly cheek. “Don’t fuss at me, you old buzzard, or I’ll rip every whisker off your face.”

Leo spoke to the whole front room. “You read the Cape Cod Times? This is the lady who gave us Here Glasses and the Stick-Up Clock. From right over on Compass Point.”

He pushed her toward the kitchen. “Hey! Tony! Dinah! Look what the cat brought in!”



In the back room Lydia Vivaldi wondered why Edgar Rowdey looked as if he’d bitten into a lemon.

She’d just delivered his lunch: nothing unusual, a Tooner Sallid, topped with a parsley sprig and bottomed with iceberg lettuce. Talking to Edgar was a high point in Lydia’s day—at least, on days when he felt like talking. Off Cape, Edgar Rowdey was renowned as the author and artist of spine-chilling little black-and-white storybooks in which hapless characters met a variety of dreadful ends. Most of his fans assumed he was British and dead, a mistake he encouraged. To Quansett, Edgar Rowdey was a tall thin white-bearded old friend of Leo’s who ate here every day with his nose in a book.

Today he’d struck up a conversation as soon as he came in.

Had Lydia noticed that the Cape Cinema was showing Jacques Tati's *Jour de Fête*? She'd never seen it? Heavens! Not a moment to lose.

Yesss! Given how few concessions Edgar made to the alleged need for human company, Lydia was hugely flattered that he seemed to enjoy hers.

And if they went to this movie, maybe she could find out how long she had a home.

Back in June, when she walked into Leo's Back End with a flat tire and came out with a job, Lydia didn't plan to stay in this postcard New England village. She'd fled here on impulse from Cambridge, from the flaming ruins of her work, romance, and aspirations. The first piece of news to meet her on the Cape was that Leo's sous-chef had just quit. The second was that her one friend here, DeAnne Ropes, was dead.

How could a skilled carpenter fall off a ladder to her death? Lydia couldn't believe it. As her ex-partner in The Fix-It Chix, she'd never known DeAnne to be so careless.

Lydia grabbed the sous-chef job for the income, the accommodations, and the chance to poke around. Soup-chef, was Dinah's title: keep the chowder and chili pots full and create a new Soup of the Day when the old one ran out. Sue-chef, was the regulars' title, who didn't miss Sue's rubbery clams and watery broth. Sioux Chef, was Mudge's title. A local chief's son, Kevin Mudjekeewis Miles had started as an after-school dishwasher and risen to all-purpose helper and pastry chef. His own preferred title was Wampanoag Chef.

Lydia knew Edgar Rowdey had only been persuaded to lend his guest cottage because she couldn't afford a rental, and he too would suffer if the Back End were short-staffed, and his niece Mirella was away for the summer hunting rhododendrons in Bhutan. Edgar's house testified to his fondness for solitude: a vine-choked, silver-shingled, sagging-roofed antique which passers-by assumed must be abandoned or haunted or both.

Do not disturb, Leo warned her. But Edgar Rowdey was the only person besides Lydia who didn't believe DeAnne Ropes's death

was an accident. Without exactly meaning to, they began sleuthing. She soon reached three conclusions: No, DeAnne did not just fall off a ladder. Yes, Edgar Rowdey was a genius. And although her mother might be right that feeding your neighbors and investigating suspicious fatalities didn't amount to a career, she wasn't ready yet to give it up.

Not until she had to.

Not until Mirella came home from Bhutan and took her cottage back.

Which would be when? Every time Lydia asked him, Edgar dodged. Because he didn't know, or because he hated direct questions?

She'd asked Leo. He retorted that he was an old man who had his hands full managing a restaurant, never mind housing, especially after he'd given her an income, which some folks thought was mighty charitable, what with her dropping in out of the blue, no references, spiky hair all green-streaked at the time, and more earrings than Joe Foley's hat had fishhooks.

She'd asked Dinah, who advised her to quit worrying. Come September, tourists would leave the Cape like rats from a sinking ship. Only later did Lydia wonder: Meaning there'll be plenty of places to live, or I might not have a job, either?

She'd asked Mudge, who said that since his dad's girlfriend fell off the wagon, he'd been spending nights under the Elephant Tree—the giant beech beyond Leo's frog pond. If push came to shove, he'd find Lydia a sleeping bag.

Lunch traffic was picking up. Lydia realized she'd better find out what time *Jour de Fête* started. Then that strange look puckered Edgar's face.

"Is everything OK?"

"Oh, absolutely. Delicious as always." His forehead smoothed. "By the way. What's become of the Flying Wedge? Are you and Mudge still . . .?"

"Oh, yeah. We haven't done any catering since the Frigate's Fourth of July party, but we want to. It's just been so busy."

“Mm.” He picked up his book: end of conversation.

Drat! Under Edgar’s sardonic drawl and courtly manners lay a will of concrete. No use asking him anything now.

She lingered, checking the soups, just in case. Chowder, good. Chili con carne, OK, but the veg was almost out. Amazing! Last month’s customers scoffed at chili without meat.

July is blue-collar, August is white, said Dinah. Less pot pie and burgers, more salads and wraps.

July you got your vacation rentals, August you got your summer homes, said Leo. Up front at the counter won’t change, but the back room’s like a high-school reunion.

You don’t come to Leo’s for the food, she’d been told the first time she walked in. Year-rounders came to schmooze with their buddies. Summer people came because that was what you did on Cape Cod. Same as your parents and grandparents: you went to the beach, the outlet malls, Cap’n Chilly’s, and Leo’s Back End.

Like that woman squeezing past the soda machine. Summer people picked up the locals’ retro style, but they couldn’t resist adding a touch of panache. Through the mesh of this lady’s cotton sweater gleamed flashes of fuschia silk. She got the drugstore flip-flops, but her rumpled khaki shorts and her tousled sandy-silver hair were more Back Bay than Ocean State Job Lot.

Then there was her angular face: too pale for a year-rounder, and too intense. As if she’d just arrived and hadn’t yet found the Cape groove.

Unlike other August customers, she didn’t pause to admire the paintings of sailboats and flower gardens on the pine-paneled walls, or study the menu, or take a slip to write her order.

She beelined toward Edgar Rowdey.

Watching out for Rowdey fans was a job shared by the Back End’s staff. One could argue from his sparse white hair and full white beard that Edgar was old enough to look after himself. That was his trouble: he’d grown up in the age of chivalry. When a stranger came gushing up to him, he would set down his fork and listen. Usually the fan rhapsodized for a few minutes—what a

pleasure, changed my life—and Edgar murmured polite replies, and eventually the fan walked away happy. Intervention wasn't called for unless someone thrust a tall stack of books at him to sign, or a weapon.

Today's intruder was armed only with a leather shoulder bag, which she dropped on his table. Planting one hand on each side of it, she glared at him over his paperback. Only Lydia was close enough to hear her speak, low and intense:

“Edgar. I need your help. Sorry about your lunch, but this is life and death.”



Mudge Miles was so distracted that when Dinah asked him to dish out spaghetti, he handed her the garlic bread.

Leave it alone, he'd been telling himself all morning. *Nothing you can do but wait*. Anyways, how does that go? *Worry is interest you pay on a debt you may not owe*.

Coping with shocks was part of Mudge's everyday life. Rarely did a personal problem interfere with his focus. But Darla's news this morning had dropped on him like a flock of monster chickens come home to roost.

What the fuck, dumbass?

He blamed Darla, of course, but mostly he blamed himself. He'd been happy to stay at her place instead of sleep under the Elephant Tree. And when she'd told him she was on the Pill, he'd been happy to believe her.

Dumbass!

He hadn't guessed anything was wrong until this morning. She'd been depressed ever since she lost her housekeeping job, but that was more than a week ago. He'd assumed that was why she welcomed his company. Until she handed him his coffee and dropped her bomb.

Phyllis Nash firing her ass had totally stressed her out. She kept losing track of stuff. Like her pills, a couple times. Now her period was late. That could be stress, right? Anyhow, the thing was,

she might need to borrow some money. Not today, but end of the week.

“Like, Friday?” He grasped at the one firm fact in this barrage. “Sure. No worries.” His mind reeling. “Any chance— You talk to Phyllis at all?”

“I tried.” Darla shook her curly blonde head. “I mean, how is she still alive? I did everything for her! Housecleaning. laundry, grocery shopping—”

“She said you were like a granddaughter.”

“Yeah, well. Turns out she hates her granddaughter.”

With his own job to get to, Mudge couldn’t offer any more but a hug.

She hugged him back with a panicky desperation that made him want to shake her off. She’d told him last night that he was the one friend she could trust not to stab her in the back. That since he’d been here, her crappy apartment felt like a real home.

“I gotta go.”

“Sure.” She stepped back. “I just, you know.”

“Sure.” Where were his keys? “No worries. We’ll deal with it.”

Right. Darla forced a smile. They’d deal with it. Everything would be OK. She’d pay him back soon as she got her job back. That’s all she needed from him, was time. Mudge of all people should know, she might be a screw-up, but she wasn’t stupid. No way would she even think about raising a kid here. Even if she hadn’t promised herself and her parents and their priest not to ever become an unwed mother.

If Mudge let himself be drawn into the discussion Darla was asking for, he’d be late for work. So he kissed her, and ran out to his truck, which for once (thank God) started right up.

She just needed to vent. With him gone, she’d pull herself together. Call Phyllis Nash and straighten things out. Or find another job. Cape Cod in August? Plenty of work.

Everything would be OK.

What if it wasn’t?

Dumbass!

How could he tell her now that he'd planned to move out in a day or two? That the fun they had together didn't change what he'd said at the start, that he just needed someplace to sleep until the ground dried under the tree, or his dad's girlfriend sobered up? That her two small rooms above a package store would never, ever feel like home to him? That he liked her a lot, more than any girl he knew, but what he mostly wanted was a shower between Leo's and the Frigate, and to hang up his work clothes instead of stuff them in his duffel bag?

Darla was beautiful, funny, a good friend. Someday she'd marry a local guy—a carpenter or plumber, like her brothers—at St. Pius X and have cute blonde kids. But she had to know, as he did, that if she ever got serious about a half-black Wampanoag, the cops would find them both floating in Hyannis harbor.

Two wishes vied for space in Mudge's mind: First, that Darla would get her period. Second, that Phyllis Nash missed her comforts as much as Darla missed her paycheck.