



CHAPTER ONE

As I swung out of Copley Square onto the Mass Pike, the band on my radio swung into “Hernando’s Hideaway.” Desultory snowflakes were drifting through the orange sky like petals. Half an inch, the weatherman predicted. I’d picked this station because Oxbridge, Connecticut, is a three-hour drive from Boston and the rest were all playing Christmas songs.

My dad taught me “Hernando’s Hideaway” longer ago than I care to remember. He’d stand me on his shoes and we’d sing it together as we tangoed across the parquet floor of our Manhattan living room. Dad’s a ballroom virtuoso. As my mom says, he’ll always have that to fall back on when he irks the State of New York into revoking his detective license.

What I hadn’t noticed until now is that Robert Frost wrote “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening” to the same tune:

My lit, -tle horse, must think it queer

To stop, without, a farmhouse near . . .

Try getting that out of your head when your alternatives are “The Little Drummer Boy” and “Jingle Bell Rock.”

At Route 128 the projected snowfall rose to an inch. OK, I thought. No problem. Being a media person myself, I’d thrown my heavy boots in the car just in case. I’ve spent enough nights stranded in airports and motels to take weather forecasts with a bag of salt.

Dinner around seven-thirty, Lilah Darnell—or, rather, Lilah Easton—had told

me on the phone. Cocktails whenever you get here. Come early, Cory, OK?—so we can catch up before the horde arrives.

Right. I was still too astonished to grapple with details. Lilah in suburbia? Hostessing a semiformal dinner party? Never mind that this was a fate we'd been groomed for since birth. The core of Lilah's and my friendship was our vow, copied from Jackie Bouvier (later Kennedy, later Onassis): *Never to be a housewife*. And now the notorious Delilah, legend of the Ivy League, was happily married to a textbook publisher? Unthinkable! You might as well imagine Jerry Garcia designing neckties, or Bobby Seale writing a cookbook.

It must be fifteen years since I'd seen her. Not often after we left college, in the wake of the Vietnam war. Lilah was my senior sister when I was a freshman: back then, a vast age gap. Over the years we'd become contemporaries. Sisters again, too, evidently, or why would she ferret through the Old Girl Network to find me?

The other question—why was I driving halfway across New England to see her?—had more than one answer. Curiosity, certainly. I'd picked Lilah Darnell for my role model before that term existed. She was bold, brilliant, and beautiful—just the kind of uncommon woman I planned to become at Mount Holyoke College. My second week on campus she electrified the grapevine by dumping Harvard's class president for a local woodworker. In January she flew to Japan to spend semester break studying calligraphy and the tea ceremony. In March she won a summer apprenticeship at a foundry in Perugia. Her plan after graduation was to become a famous sculptor, start an artists' commune, and launch a series of international affairs.

With this Amazon for my mentor I flourished. When Lilah sold a terra-cotta demon to a New York collector, I caught a bus to Boston and pitched my first story idea to *Phases*. While she skied the Alps, I covered the D.C. demonstration against President Nixon's bombing of Cambodia. She chiseled, I wrote; she exhibited, I published. Shortly after *Phases* hired me as a stringer, I received a handmade invitation to her wedding in the East Village. There we sat up half the night promising each other that our love lives would never overshadow our work. Several years later she turned up on my Back Bay doorstep, divorced; praised my series on

urban gentrification, bought me a dinner worth a month's rent, and left me a baggie of ganja from her Jamaican lover. That was the last I'd heard from Lilah until her surprise reappearance in Connecticut.

By Worcester I was glad I'd brought those boots. The petals had escalated to confetti. Crossing the state line I spotted the yellow lights of a snowplow. Possible four to six inches, announced the radio. I called Lilah to warn her I might be late, and scratched my plan of stopping in Hartford for gas and coffee.

*But I, have pro, -mises to keep,
And miles, to go, before I sleep!*

Past Hartford the traction got tricky. My little horse—an old VW beetle, restored over the years like the Tin Woodman—progressed down Route 84 in a series of glides. As the snow thickened, Friday night's rush-hour traffic had thinned. The forecasters now were issuing stern travelers' advisories.

I peered through the troop of tiny kamikazes hurling themselves at my windshield; picked out a truck with bright lights and lots of tires, and pulled in behind it.

Lilah's directions depended on spotting landmarks: bank, mall, Burger King. Maybe I'd better call her again at Oxbridge . . .

But I didn't make it to Oxbridge.

The balance tipped a few miles before my exit. I'd been too busy keeping my wheels in the truck's tracks to notice how much the weather had worsened. Now I glanced at my gas gauge and saw I should have filled up in Hartford after all. While I was taking that in, the truck pulled left to pass a van—the only other vehicle in sight. I started to follow and felt the VW skitter like a water drop on a griddle.

My stomach crowded my esophagus as I tucked in tight behind the van. You get used to navigating strange roads in rented cars, losing your way and finding it again, and you get cocky. You forget that travel holds greater dangers than arriving after check-in.

At the Oxbridge exit I bid the van a reluctant good-bye and inched onto the snow-lined ramp. The next thirty seconds were predictable: The VW took off downhill like a kid on a playground slide. We skidded past a guard rail, twirled across the

road, and landed nose first in a snowbank.

The radio was playing “Blue Christmas.” Otherwise the world had gone silent. Snow fell past my headlights, beautiful and implacable.

I surveyed the area. No bank, no mall, no Burger King. All I could see beyond my car was a distant glow where the highway must be.

I called Lilah’s home number, twice, and got nothing. I tried her cell phone and got voice mail. My emergency road service regretted that due to unusually heavy call volume, all representatives were currently helping other customers.

I switched off the radio and pulled on my boots.

My husband, Larry, laughed when he found the bag of kitty litter I keep in my trunk. (He could afford to; he drives a Jaguar.) Later I would take a moment to savor his chagrin when he found out how right I was. Not now. For now I didn’t dare think about Larry or vindication or the painful thinness of my driving gloves or why I keep refusing to buy a new car or anything else but getting out of here.

There was already half an inch of snow on my roof. Another round of phone calls produced the same results. Now what? Stay igloored in the VW all night, or risk a potentially futile (or fatal) search through the storm for help?

I found a window scraper under my seat. I dug snow away from my wheels. If my flashlight batteries would only hold out till I finished . . . I’d dimmed the headlights and lit a flare but left the engine running. With the gas gauge on E, I couldn’t take the chance that, once stopped, it wouldn’t start again.

Not that any of these decisions were conscious. My brain had downshifted some time ago. All my energy was in my fingers.

I chopped. I scraped. I scooped. I cursed. I felt like an archeologist trying to extricate a mammoth from a glacier. Fresh snow refilled the holes I dug and blew into my eyes and mouth. Though my feet ached with cold, inside my coat I was sweating. How many eons had I been here? How many seconds till the motor died?

Then lights, and the rumble of an approaching car.

Don’t even think it, Cory. He’d be a fool to pull over. His only hope on this sloped, slippery road is to keep going.

He didn’t pull over but up. “Hey!” A laconic baritone. “You need some help?”

“Yeah,” I croaked.

It took me half a minute to reconnect my brain. Meanwhile my knight-errant had emerged from his car (a vintage white Lincoln Continental) and inspected the damage.

Given that he wore a dark sheepskin coat, fur hat, and fur-lined leather gloves, I couldn't tell much about him but that he was a few inches taller than me—five-ten, maybe—and not apparently short of funds. His manner was friendly, comradely even, without the smarminess one comes to expect from roadside rescuers.

“Got any rope?” he asked, as matter-of-factly as if this were a ranch and we had calves to brand.

I nodded. The key was still in the trunk. I opened it and fished out the heavyweight line I keep coiled beside the kitty litter in case of emergency.

He twirled the end approvingly. “Yippie-i-o-ki-ay! Now, if we tie this to both bumpers—”

“Not enough traction. You'll slide right off the road.”

“Take a closer look.”

I peered at his face—about my age, clean-shaven, distinctly handsome under the hat—before I realized he meant the Lincoln.

“I made them put on chains when I rented this sucker.” He looped the rope through his bumper. “And is that cat litter? Oh, hell, podner, we're all set!”

He was right. Two false starts, a hearty heave, and the VW was back on the road.

We untied the rope. Now that my brain was revving up again, I noticed that my hands were numb and trembling. The right one had blood on it. Where were my gloves? There, on the snowbank next to my flashlight. Oh, lord, how could I possibly find the Eastons' house in this zombie state? Was I even fit to drive?

A moot question. Rule Number Three of the freelance journalist: What is necessary can be managed. If it can't be managed, it's not necessary.

“Where are you going?”

“Oxbridge,” I answered; and added with unreasoning hope, “Bruce and Lilah Easton's. It's off Old Mill Road, wherever that is.”

“You haven’t been there before?”

“No.” Glancing around for something to wipe my hands on, I found a tissue in my coat pocket; and only then registered his change in tone. “Do you know them?”

For a moment he seemed undecided. “I did,” he said at last. “In another lifetime.”

Cocooned as we were between two pairs of headlights, my fists thawing in my pockets, snow sparkling all around us like glitter, this struck me as a reasonable statement. “That’s when I knew Lilah. We went to college together. I haven’t seen her in—oh, eons.”

He nodded as if reassured. “You can follow me. It’s on my way. What’s your name?”

“Cordelia Thorne.” I held out my hand.

“OK, Ms. Thorne.” He rubbed my chilled fingers between his palms. “Now it’s your turn to play good fairy. Don’t mention me at Eastons’. Not to them, their guests, nobody. OK?”

“Sure . . . but who is it I’m not mentioning?”

He grinned back at me—sardonically, I thought, though all I could see was the tip of his nose, a medium-thin mouth, and a square chin. Without a word he climbed into his car.

“Hey, wait! At least let me say thanks!”

As he gunned the Lincoln into a skidding takeoff he powered down his window. “Hi-yo Silver!” he hollered through the snow. “Awaaay!”

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