Vanishing Acts

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Extract

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Delia

You can't exist in this world without leaving a piece of yourself behind. There are concrete paths, like credit card receipts and appointment calendars and promises you've made to others. There are microscopic clues, like fingerprints, that stay invisible unless you know how to look for them. But even in the absence of any of this, there's scent. We live in a cloud that moves with us as we check e-mail and jog and carpool. The whole time, we shed skin cells – forty thousand per minute – that rise on currents up our legs and under our chins.

Today, I'm running behind Greta, who picks up the pace just as we hit the twisted growth at the base of the mountain. I'm soaked to the thighs with muck and slush, although it doesn't seem to be bothering my bloodhound any. The awful conditions that make it so hard to navigate are the same conditions that have preserved this trail.

The officer from the Carroll, New Hampshire, Police Department who is supposed to be accompanying me has fallen behind. He takes one look at the terrain Greta is bulldozing and shakes his head. 'Forget it,' he says. 'There's no way a four-year-old would have made it through this mess.'

The truth is, he's probably right. At this time of the afternoon, as the ground cools down under a setting sun, air currents run downslope, which means that although the girl probably walked through flatter area some distance away, Greta is picking up the scent trail where it's drifted. 'Greta disagrees,' I say.

In my line of work, I can't afford not to trust my partner. Fifty percent of a dog's nose is devoted to the sense of smell, compared to only one square inch of mine. So if Greta says

that Holly Gardiner wandered out of the playground at Sticks & Stones Day Care and climbed to the top of Mount Deception, I'm going to hike right up there to find her.

Greta yanks on the end of the fifteen-foot leash and hustles at a clip for a few hundred feet. A beautiful bloodhound, she has a black widow's peak, a brown velvet coat, and the gawky body of the girl who watches the dancers from the bleachers. She circles a smooth, bald rock twice; then glances up at me, the folds of her long face deepening. Scent will pool, like the ripples when a stone's thrown into a pond. This is where the child stopped to rest.

'Find her,' I order. Greta casts around to pick up the scent again, and then starts to run. I sprint after the dog, wincing as a branch snaps back against my face and opens a cut over my left eye. We tear through a snarl of vines and burst onto a narrow footpath that opens up into a clearing.

The little girl is sitting on the wet ground, shivering, arms lashed tight over her knees. Just like always, for a moment her face is Sophie's, and I have to keep myself from grabbing her and scaring her half to death. Greta bounds over and jumps up, which is how she knows to identify the person whose scent she took from a fleece hat at the day-care center and followed six miles to this spot.

The girl blinks up at us, slowly pecking her way through a shell of fear. 'I bet you're Holly,' I say, crouching beside her. I shrug off my jacket, ripe with body heat, and settle it over her clothespin shoulders. 'My name is Delia.' I whistle, and the dog comes trotting close. 'This is Greta.'

I slip off the harness she wears while she's working. Greta wags her tail so hard that it makes her body a metronome. As the little girl reaches up to pat the dog, I do a quick visual assessment. 'Are you hurt?'

She shakes her head and glances at the cut over my eye. '*You* are.'

Just then the Carroll police officer bursts into the clearing, panting. 'I'll be damned,' he wheezes. 'You actually found her.'

I always do. But it isn't my track record that keeps me in this business. It's not the adrenaline rush; it's not even the potential happy ending. It's because, when you get down to it, I'm the one who's lost.

I watch the reunion between mother and daughter from a distance – how Holly melts into her mother's arms, how relief binds them like a seam. Even if she'd been a different race or dressed like a gypsy, I would have been able to pick this woman out of a crowd: She is the one who seems unraveled, half of a whole.

I can't imagine anything more terrifying than losing Sophie. When you're pregnant, you can think of nothing but having your own body to yourself again; yet after giving birth you realize that the biggest part of you is now somehow external, subject to all sorts of dangers and disappearance, so you spend the rest of your life trying to figure out how to keep her close enough for comfort. That's the strange thing about being a mother: Until you have a baby, you don't even realize how much you were missing one.

It doesn't matter if the subject Greta and I are searching for is old, young, male, or female – to someone, that missing person is what Sophie is to me.

Part of my tight connection to Sophie, I know, is pure over-compensation. My mother died when I was three. When I was Sophie's age, I'd hear my father say things like 'I lost my wife in a car accident,' and it made no sense to me: If he knew where she was, why didn't he just go find her? It took me a lifetime to realize things don't get lost if they don't have value – you don't miss what you don't care about – but I was too young to have stored up a cache of memories of my mother. For a long time, all I had of her was a smell – a mixture of vanilla and apples could bring her back as if she were standing a foot away – and then this disappeared, too. Not even Greta can find someone without that initial clue.

From where she is sitting beside me, Greta nuzzles my fore-

head, reminding me that I'm bleeding. I wonder if I'll need stitches, if this will launch my father into another tirade about why I should have become something relatively safer, like a bounty hunter or the leader of a bomb squad.

Someone hands me a gauze pad, which I press against the cut above my eye. When I glance up I see it's Fitz, my best friend, who happens to be a reporter for the paper with the largest circulation in our state. 'What does the other guy look like?' he asks.

'I got attacked by a tree.'

'No kidding? I always heard their bark is worse than their bite.'

Fitzwilliam MacMurray grew up in one of the houses beside mine; Eric Talcott lived in the other. My father used to call us Siamese triplets. I have a long history with both of them that includes drying slugs on the pavement with Morton's salt, dropping water balloons off the elementary school roof, and kidnapping the gym teacher's cat. As kids, we were a triumverate; as adults, we are still remarkably close. In fact, Fitz will be pulling double duty at my wedding – as Eric's best man, and as my man-of-honor.

From this angle, Fitz is enormous. He's six-four, with a shock of red hair that makes him look like he's on fire. 'I need a quote from you,' he says.

I always knew Fitz would wind up writing; although I figured he'd be a poet or a storyteller. He would play with language the way other children played with stones and twigs, building structures for the rest of us to decorate with our imagination. 'Make something up,' I suggest.

He laughs. 'Hey, I work for the *New Hampshire Gazette*, not the *New York Times.*'

'Excuse me . . . ?'

We both turn at the sound of a woman's voice. Holly Gardiner's mother is staring at me, her expression so full of words that, for a moment, she can't choose the right one. 'Thank you,' she says finally. 'Thank you so much.'

'Thank Greta,' I reply. 'She did all the work.'

The woman is on the verge of tears, the weight of the moment falling as heavy and sudden as rain. She grabs my hand and squeezes, a pulse of understanding between mothers, before she heads back to the rescue workers who are taking care of Holly.

There were times I missed my mother desperately while I was growing up – when all the other kids at school had two parents at the Holiday Concert, when I got my period and had to sit down on the lip of the bathtub with my father to read the directions on the Tampax box, when I first kissed Eric and felt like I might burst out of my skin.

Now.

Fitz slings his arm over my shoulders. 'It's not like you missed out,' he says gently. 'Your dad was better than most parents put together.'

'I know,' I reply, but I watch Holly Gardiner and her mother walk all the way back to their car, hand in hand, like two jewels on a delicate strand that might at any moment be broken.

That night Greta and I are the lead story on the evening news. In rural New Hampshire, we don't get broadcasts of gang wars and murders and serial rapists; instead, we get barns that burn down and ribbon-cuttings at local hospitals and local heroes like me.

My father and I stand in the kitchen, getting dinner ready. 'What's wrong with Sophie?' I ask, frowning as I peer into the living room, where she lays puddled on the carpet.

'She's tired,' my father says.

She takes an occasional nap after I pick her up from kindergarten, but today, when I was on a search, my father had to bring her back to the senior center with him until closing time. Still, there's more to it. When I came home, she wasn't at the door waiting to tell me all the important things: who swung the highest at recess, which book Mrs. Easley read to them, whether snack was carrots and cheese cubes for the third day in a row.

'Did you take her temperature?' I ask.

'Is it missing?' He grins at me when I roll my eyes. 'She'll be her old self by dessert,' he predicts. 'Kids bounce back fast.'

At nearly sixty, my father is good-looking – ageless, almost, with his salt-and-pepper hair and runner's build. Although there were any number of women who would have thrown themselves at a man like Andrew Hopkins, he only dated sporadically, and he never remarried. He used to say that life was all about a boy finding the perfect girl; he was lucky enough to have been handed his in a labor and delivery room.

He moves to the stove, adding half-and-half to the crushed tomatoes – a homemade recipe trick one of the seniors taught him that turned out to be surprisingly good, unlike their tips for helping Sophie avoid croup (tie a black cord around her neck) or curing an earache (put olive oil and pepper on a cotton ball and stuff into the ear). 'When's Eric getting here?' he asks. 'I can't keep this cooking much longer.'

He was supposed to arrive a half hour ago, but there's been no phone call to say he's running late, and he isn't answering his cell. I don't know where he is, but there are plenty of places I am imagining him: Murphy's Bar on Main Street, Callahan's on North Park, off the road in a ditch somewhere.

Sophie comes into the kitchen. 'Hey,' I say, my anxiety about Eric disappearing in the wide sunny wake of our daughter. 'Want to help?' I hold up the green beans; she likes the crisp sound they make when they snap.

She shrugs and sits down with her back against the refrigerator.

'How was school today?' I prompt.

Her small face darkens like the thunderstorms we get in July, sudden and fierce before they pass. Then, just as quickly, she looks up at me. 'Jennica has warts,' Sophie announces.

'That's too bad,' I reply, trying to remember which one Jennica is – the classmate with the platinum braids, or the one whose father owns the gourmet coffee shop in town.

'I want warts.'

'No, you don't.' Headlights flash past the window, but don't turn into our driveway. I focus on Sophie, trying to remember if warts are contagious or if that's an old wives' tale.

'But they're green,' Sophie whines. 'And really soft and on the tag it says the name.'

Warts, apparently, is the hot new Beanie Baby. 'Maybe for your birthday.'

'I bet you'll forget *that,* too,' Sophie accuses, and she runs out of the kitchen and upstairs.

All of a sudden I can see the red circle on my calendar – the parent-child tea in her kindergarten class started at one o'clock, when I was halfway up a mountain searching for Holly Gardiner.

When I was a kid and there was a mother-daughter event in my elementary school, I wouldn't tell my father about it. Instead, I'd fake sick, staying home for the day so that I didn't have to watch everyone else's mother come through the door and know that my own was never going to arrive.

I find Sophie lying on her bed. 'Baby,' I say. 'I'm really sorry.'

She looks up at me. 'When you're with *them,'* she asks, a slice through the heart, 'do you ever think about *me?'*

In response I pick her up and settle her on my lap. 'I think about you even when I'm sleeping,' I say.

It is hard to believe now, with this small body dovetailing against mine, but when I found out I was pregnant I considered not keeping the baby. I wasn't married, and Eric was having enough trouble without tossing in any added responsibility. In the end, though, I couldn't go through with it. I wanted to be the kind of mother who couldn't be separated from a child without putting up a fierce fight. I like to believe my own mother had been that way.

Parenting Sophie – with and without Eric, depending on the year – has been much harder than I ever expected. Whatever I do right I chalk up to my father's example. Whatever I do wrong I blame squarely on fate.

The door to the bedroom opens, and Eric walks in. For that half second, before all the memories crowd in, he takes my breath away. Sophie has my dark hair and freckles, but thankfully, that's about all. She's got Eric's lean build and his high cheekbones, his easy smile and his unsettling eyes – the feverish blue of a glacier. 'Sorry I'm late.' He drops a kiss on the crown of my head and I breathe in, trying to smell the telltale alcohol on his breath. He hoists Sophie into his arms.

I can't make out the sourness of whiskey, or the grainy yeast of beer, but that means nothing. Even in high school, Eric knew a hundred ways to remove the red flags of alcohol consumption. 'Where were you?' I ask.

'Meeting a friend in the Amazon.' He pulls a Beanie Baby frog out of his back pocket.

Sophie squeals and grabs it, hugs Eric so tight I think she might cut off his circulation. 'She double-teamed us,' I say, shaking my head. 'She's a con artist.'

'Just hedging her bets.' He puts Sophie down on the floor, and she immediately runs downstairs to show her grandfather.

I go into his arms, hooking my thumbs into the back pockets of his jeans. Under my ear, his heart keeps time for me. *I'm sorry I doubted you.* 'Do I get a toad, too?' I ask.

'You already had one. You kissed him, and got me instead. Remember?' To illustrate, he trails his lips from the tiny divot at the base of my neck – a sledding scar from when I was two – all the way up to my mouth. I taste coffee and hope and, thank God, nothing else.

We stand in our daughter's room for a few minutes like that, even after the kiss is finished, just leaning against each other in between the quiet places. I have always loved him. Warts and all.

When we were little, Eric and Fitz and I invented a language. I've forgotten most of it, with the exception of a few words: *valyango,* which meant pirate; *palapala,* which meant rain; and *ruskifer,* which had no translation to English but described the

dimpled bottom of a woven basket, all the reeds coming together to form one joint spot, and that we sometimes used to explain our friendship. This was back in the days before playtime had all the contractual scheduling of an arranged marriage, and most mornings, one of us would show up at the house of another and we'd swing by to pick up the third.

In the winter, we would build snow forts with complicated burrows and tunnels, complete with three sculpted thrones where we'd sit and suck on icicles until we could no longer feel our fingers and toes. In the spring, we ate sugar-on-snow that Fitz's dad made us when he boiled down his own maple syrup, the three of us dueling with forks to get the sweetest, longest strands. In the fall, we would climb the fence into the back acreage of McNab's Orchards and eat Macouns and Cortlands and Jonathans whose skin was as warm as our own. In the summer, we wrote secret predictions about our futures by the faint light of trapped fireflies, and hid them in the hollow knot of an old maple tree – a time capsule, for when we grew up.

We had our roles: Fitz was the dreamer; I was the practical tactician; Eric was the front man, the one who could charm adults or other kids with equal ease. Eric always knew exactly what to say when you dropped your hot lunch tray by accident and the whole cafeteria was staring at you, or when the teacher called on you and you'd been writing up your Christmas list. Being part of his entourage was like the sun coming through a plate-glass window: golden, something to lift your face toward.

It was when we came home the summer after freshman year in college that things began to change. We were all chafing under our parents' rules and roofs, but Eric rubbed himself raw, lightening up only when we three would go out at night. Eric would always suggest a bar, and he knew the ones that didn't card minors. Afterward, when Fitz was gone, Eric and I would spread an old quilt on the far shore of the town lake and undress each other, swatting away mosquitoes from the

pieces of each other we'd laid claim to. But every time I kissed him, there was liquor on his breath, and I've always hated the smell of alcohol. It's a weird quirk, but no stranger than those people who can't stand the scent of gas, I suppose, and have to hold their breath while they fill up their cars. At any rate, I'd kiss Eric and inhale that fermenting, bitter smell and roll away from him. He'd call me a prude, and I started to think maybe I was one – that was easier than admitting what was really driving us apart.

Sometimes we find ourselves walking through our lives blindfolded, and we try to deny that we're the ones who securely tied the knot. It was this way for Fitz and me, the decade after high school. If Eric told us that he had a beer only every now and then, we believed him. If his hands shook when he was sober, we turned away. If I mentioned his drinking, it became my problem, not his. And yet, in spite of all this, I still couldn't end our relationship. All of my memories were laced with him; to extract them would mean losing the flavor of my childhood.

The day I found out I was pregnant, Eric drove his car off the road, through a flimsy guard rail, and into a local farmer's cornfield. When he called to tell me what had happened – blaming it on a woodchuck that ran across the road – I hung up the phone and drove to Fitz's apartment. *I think we have a problem,* I said to him, as if it was the three of us, which, in reality, it was.

Fitz had listened to me speak a truth we'd taken great pains never to utter out loud, plus a newer, magnificent, frightening one. *I can't do this alone,* I told him.

He had looked at my belly, still flat. *You aren't.*

There was no denying Eric's magnetism, but that afternoon I realized that, united, Fitz and I were a force to be reckoned with as well. And when I left his apartment armed with the knowledge of what I was going to have to say to Eric, I remembered what I had written down during that backlit summer when I was trying to guess the rest of my life. I'd been embarrassed setting the words to paper, had folded it three times so

Fitz and Eric wouldn't see. Me – a tomboy who spent hours in the company of boys pretending to be a swashbuckling privateer, or an archaeologist searching for relics, a girl who had been the damsel in distress only once, and even then had rescued herself – I had written only a single wild wish. *One day,* I'd written, *I will be a mother.*

As one of Wexton's three attorneys, Eric does real estate transfers and wills and the occasional divorce, but he's done a little trial work, too – representing defendants charged with DUI and petty thefts. He usually wins, which is no surprise to me. After all, more than once I have been a jury of one, and I've always managed to be persuaded.

Case in point: my wedding. I was perfectly happy to sign a marriage certificate at the courthouse. But then Eric suggested that a big party wasn't such a bad idea, and before I knew what had happened, I was buried in a pile of brochures for reception venues, and band tapes, and price lists from florists.

I'm sitting on the living room floor after dinner, swatches of fabric covering my legs like a patchwork quilt. 'Who cares whether the napkins are blue or teal?' I complain. 'Isn't teal really just blue on steroids, anyway?'

I hand him a stack of photo albums; we are supposed to find ten of Eric and ten of me as an introductory montage to the wedding video. He cracks the first one open, and there's a picture of Eric and Fitz and me rolled fat as sausages in our snowsuits, peeking out from the entrance of a homemade igloo. I'm between the two boys; it's like that in most of the photos.

'Look at my hair,' Eric laughs. 'I look like Dorothy Hamill.'

'No, *I* look like Dorothy Hamill. You look like a portobello mushroom.'

In the next two albums I pick up, I am older. There are fewer pictures of us as a trio, and more of Eric and me, with Fitz sprinkled in. Our senior prom picture: Eric and I, and then Fitz in his own snapshot with a girl whose name I can't recall.

One night when we were fifteen we told our parents we were going on a school-sponsored overnight and instead climbed to the top of Dartmouth's Baker Library bell tower to watch a meteor shower. We drank peach schnapps stolen from Eric's parents' liquor cabinet and watched the stars play tag with the moon. Fitz fell asleep holding the bottle and Eric and I waited for the cursive of comets. *Did you see that one?* Eric asked. When I couldn't find the falling star, he took my hand and guided my finger. And then he just kept holding on.

By the time we climbed down at 4:30 A.M., I had had my first kiss, and it wasn't the three of us anymore.

Just then my father comes into the room. 'I'm headed upstairs to watch Leno,' he says. 'Lock up, okay?'

I glance up. 'Where are my baby pictures?'

'In the albums.'

'No . . . these only go back to when I'm four or five.' I sit up. 'It would be nice to have your wedding picture, too, for the video.'

I have the only photo of my mother that is on display in this house. She is on the cusp of smiling, and you cannot look at it without wondering who made her happy just then, and how.

My father looks down at the ground, and shakes his head a little. 'Well, I knew it was going to happen sometime. Come on, then.'

Eric and I follow him to his bedroom and sit down on the double bed, on the side where he doesn't sleep. From the closet, my father takes down a tin with a Pepsi-Cola logo stamped onto the front. He dumps the contents onto the covers between Eric and me – dozens of photographs of my mother, draped in peasant skirts and gauze blouses, her black hair hanging down her back like a river. A wedding portrait: my mother in a belled white dress; my father trussed in his tuxedo, looking like he might bolt at any second. Photos of me, wrapped tight as a croissant, awkwardly balanced in my mother's arms. And one of my mother and father on an ugly green couch

with me between them, a bridge made of dimpled flesh, of blended blood.

It is like visiting another planet when you only have one roll of film to record it, like coming to a banquet after a hunger strike – there is so much here that I have to consciously keep myself from racing through, before it all disappears. My face gets hot, as if I've been slapped. 'Why were you *hiding* these?'

He takes one photograph out of my hand and stares at it long enough for me to believe he has completely forgotten that Eric and I are in the room. 'I tried keeping a few of the pictures out,' my father explains, 'but you kept asking when she was coming home. And I'd pass them, and stop, and lose ten minutes or a half hour or a half day. I didn't hide them because I didn't want to look at them, Delia. I hid them because that was *all* I wanted to do.' He puts the wedding picture back in the tin and scatters the rest on top. 'You can have them,' my father tells me. 'You can have them all.'

He leaves us sitting in the near dark in his bedroom. Eric touches the photograph on the top as if it is as delicate as milkweed. 'That,' he says quietly. 'That's what I want with you.'

It's the ones I don't find that stay with me. The teenage boy who jumped off the Fairlee-Orford train bridge into the Connecticut River one frigid March; the mother from North Conway who vanished with a pot still boiling on the stove and a toddler in the playpen; the baby snatched out of a car in the Strafford post office parking lot while her sitter was inside dropping off a large package. Sometimes they stand behind me while I'm brushing my teeth; sometimes they're the last thing I see before I go to sleep; sometimes, like now, they leave me restless in the middle of the night.

There is a thick fog tonight, but Greta and I have trained enough in this patch of land to know our way by heart. I sit down on a mossy log while Greta sniffs around the periphery. Above me, something dangles from a branch, full and round and yellow.

I am little, and he has just finished planting a lemon tree in our backyard. I am dancing around it. I want to make lemonade, but there isn't any fruit because the tree is just a baby. How long will it take to grow one? *I ask.* A while, *he tells me. I sit myself down in front of it to watch.* I'll wait. *He comes over and takes my hand.* Come on, *grilla, he says.* If we're going to sit here that long, we'd better get something to eat.

There are some dreams that get stuck between your teeth when you sleep, so that when you open your mouth to yawn awake they fly right out of you. But this feels too real. This feels like it has actually happened.

I've lived in New Hampshire my whole life. No citrus tree could bear a climate like ours, where we have not only White Christmases but also White Halloweens. I pull down the yellow ball: a crumbling sphere made of birdseed and suet.

What does *grilla* mean?

I am still thinking about this the next morning after taking Sophie to school, and spend an extra ten minutes walking around, from the painting easel to the blocks to the bubble station, to make up for my shoddy behavior yesterday. I've planned on doing a training run with Greta that morning, but I'm sidetracked by the sight of my father's wallet on the floor of my Expedition. He'd taken it out a few nights ago to fill the tank with gas; the least I can do is swing by the senior center to give it back.

I pull into the parking lot and open the back hatch. 'Stay,' I tell Greta, who whumps her tail twice. She has to share her seat with emergency rescue equipment, a large cooler of water, and several different harnesses and leashes.

Suddenly I feel a prickle on my wrist; something has crawled onto my arm. My heart kicks itself into overdrive and my throat pinches tight, as it always does at the thought of a spider or a tick or any other creepy-crawly thing. I manage to strip away my jacket, sweat cooling on my body as I wonder how close the spider has landed near my boots.

It's a groundless phobia. I have climbed out on mountain ledges in pursuit of missing people; I have faced down criminals with guns; but put me in the room with the tiniest arachnid and I just may pass out.

The whole way into the senior center, I take deep breaths. I find my father standing on the sidelines, watching Yoga Tuesday happen in the function room. 'Hey,' he whispers, so as not to disturb the seniors doing sun salutations. 'What are you doing here?'

I fish his wallet out of my pocket. 'Thought you might be missing this.'

'So that's where it went,' he says. 'There are so many perks to having a daughter who does search and rescue.'

'I found it the old-fashioned way,' I tell him. 'By accident.'

He starts moving down the hall. 'Well, I knew it would turn up eventually,' he says. 'Everything always does. You have time for a cup of coffee?'

'Not really,' I say, but I follow him to the little kitchenette anyway and let him pour me a mug, then trail him into his office. When I was a little girl, he'd bring me here and keep me entertained while he was on the phone by doing sleight-of-hand with binder clips and handkerchiefs. I pick up a paperweight on his desk. It is a rock painted to look like a ladybug, a gift I made for him when I was about Sophie's age. 'You could probably get rid of this, you know.'

'But it's my favorite.' He takes it out of my hand, puts it back in the center of his desk.

'Dad?' I ask. 'Did we ever plant a lemon tree?'

'A *what?'* Before I can repeat my question he squints at me, then frowns and summons me closer. 'Hang on. You've got something sticking out of . . . no, lower . . . let me.' I lean forward, and he cups his hand around the back of my neck. *'The Amazing Cordelia,'* he says, just like when we did our magic act. Then, from behind my ear, he pulls a strand of pearls.

'They were hers,' my father says, and he guides me to the

mirror that hangs on the back of his office door. I have a vague recollection of the wedding photo from last night. He fastens the clasp behind me, so that we are both looking in the mirror, seeing someone who isn't there.

The offices of the *New Hampshire Gazette* are in Manchester, but Fitz does most of his work from the office he's fixed up in the second bedroom of his apartment in Wexton. He lives over a pizza place, and the smell of marinara sauce comes through the forced-hot-air ducts. Greta's toenails click up the linoleum stairs, and she sits down outside his apartment, in front of a life-size cardboard cutout of Chewbacca. Hanging on a hook on the back is his key; I use it to let myself inside.

I navigate through the ocean of clothes he's left discarded on the floor and the stacks of books that seem to reproduce like rabbits. Fitz is sitting in front of his computer. 'Hey,' I say. 'You promised to lay a trail for us.'

The dog bounds into the office and nearly climbs up onto Fitz's lap. He rubs her hard behind the ears, and she snuggles closer to him, knocking several photos off his desk.

I bend down to pick them up. One is of a man with a hole in the middle of his head, in which he has stuck a lit candle. The second picture is of a grinning boy with double pupils dancing in each of his eyes. I hand the snapshots back to Fitz. 'Relatives?'

'The *Gazette*'s paying me to do an article on the Strange But True.' He holds up the picture of the man with the votive in his skull. 'This amazingly resourceful fellow apparently used to give tours around town at night. And I got to read a whole 1911 medical treatise from a doctor who had an eleven-year-old patient with a molar growing out of the bottom of his foot.'

'Oh, come on,' I say. 'Everyone's got something that's strange about them. Like the way Eric can fold his tongue into a clover, and that disgusting thing you do with your eyes.'

'You mean this?' he says, but I turn away before I have to

watch. 'Or how you go ballistic if there's a spider web within a mile of you?'

I turn to him, thinking. 'Have I always been afraid of spiders?'

'For as long as I've known you,' Fitz says. 'Maybe you were Miss Muffet in a former life.'

'What if I were?' I say.

'I was *kidding*, Dee. Just because someone's got a fear of heights doesn't mean she died in a fall a hundred years ago.'

Before I know it, I am telling Fitz about the lemon tree. I explain how it felt as if the heat was laying a crown on my head, how the tree had been planted in soil as red as blood. How I could read the letters *ABC* on the bottoms of my shoes.

Fitz listens carefully, his arms folded across his chest, with the same studious consideration he exhibited when I was ten and confessed that I'd seen the ghost of an Indian sitting cross-legged at the foot of my bed. 'Well,' he says finally. 'It's not like you said you were wearing a hoop skirt, or shooting a musket. Maybe you're just remembering something from *this* life, something you've forgotten. There's all kind of research out there on recovered memory. I can do a little digging for you and see what I come up with.'

'I thought recovered memories were traumatic. What's traumatic about citrus fruit?'

'Lachanophobia,' he says. 'That's the fear of vegetables. It stands to reason that there's one for the rest of the food pyramid, too.'

'How much did your parents shell out for that Ivy League education?'

Fitz grins, reaching for Greta's leash. 'All right, where do you want me to lay your trail?'

He knows the routine. He will take off his sweatshirt and leave it at the bottom of the stairs, so that Greta has a scent article. Then he'll strike off for three miles or five or ten, winding through streets and back roads and woods. I'll give him a fifteen-minute head start, and then Greta and I will get

to work. 'You pick,' I reply, confident that wherever he goes, we will find him.

Once, when Greta and I were searching for a runaway, we found his corpse instead. A dead body stops smelling like a live one immediately, and as we got closer, Greta knew something wasn't right. The boy was hanging from the limb of a massive oak. I dropped to my knees, unable to breathe, wondering how much earlier I might have had to arrive to make a difference. I was so shaken that it took me a while to notice Greta's reaction: She turned in a circle, whining; then lay down with her paws over her nose. It was the first time she'd discovered something she really didn't want to find, and she didn't know what to do once she'd found it.

Fitz leads us on a circuitous trail, from the pizza place through the heart of Wexton's Main Street, behind the gas station, across a narrow stream, and down a steep incline to the edge of a natural water slide. By the time we reach him, we've walked six miles, and I'm soaked up to the knees. Greta finds him crouching behind a copse of trees whose damp leaves glitter like coins. He grabs the stuffed moose Greta likes to play catch with – a reward for making her find – and throws it for her to retrieve. 'Who's smart?' he croons. 'Who's a smart girl?'

I drive him back home, and then head to Sophie's school to pick her up. While I wait for the dismissal bell to ring, I take off the strand of pearls. There are fifty-two beads, one for each of the years my mother would have been on earth if she were still alive. I start to feed them through my fingers like the hem of a rosary, starting with prayers – that Eric and I will be happy, that Sophie will grow up safe, that Fitz will find someone to spend his life with, that my father will stay healthy. When I run out, I begin to attach memories instead, one for each pearl. There is that day she brought me to the petting zoo, a recollection I've built entirely around the photo in the album I saw several nights ago. The faintest picture of her

dancing barefoot in the kitchen. The feel of her hands on my scalp as she massaged in baby shampoo.

There's a flash, too, of her crying on a bed.

I don't want that to be the last thing I see, so I rearrange the memories as if they are a deck of cards, and leave off with her dancing. I imagine each memory as the grain of sand that the pearl grew around: a hard, protective shell to keep it from drifting away.

It is Sophie who decides to teach the dog how to play board games. She's found reruns of *Mr. Ed* on television, and thinks Greta is smarter than any horse. To my surprise, though, Greta takes to the challenge. When we're playing and it's Sophie's turn, the bloodhound steps on the domed plastic of the Trouble game to jiggle the dice.

I laugh out loud, amazed. 'Dad,' I yell upstairs, where my father is folding the wash. 'Come see this.'

The telephone rings and the answering machine picks up, filling the room with Fitz's voice. 'Hey, Delia, are you there? I have to talk to you.'

I jump up and reach for the phone, but Sophie gets there more quickly and punches the disconnect button. 'You *promised,'* she says, but already her attention has moved past me to something over my shoulder.

I follow her gaze toward the red and blue lights outside. Three police cars have cordoned off the driveway; two officers are heading for the front door. Several neighbors stand on their porches, watching.

Everything inside me goes to stone. If I open that door I will hear something that I am not willing to hear – that Eric has been arrested for drunk driving, that he's been in an accident. Or something worse.

When the doorbell rings, I sit very still with my arms crossed over my chest. I do this to keep from flying apart. The bell rings again, and I hear Sophie turning the knob. 'Is your mom home, honey?' one of the policemen asks.

The officer is someone I've worked with; Greta and I helped him find a robbery suspect who ran from the scene of a crime. 'Delia,' he greets.

My voice is as hollow as the belly of a cave. 'Rob. Did something happen?'

He hesitates. 'Actually, we need to see your dad.'

Immediately, relief swims through me. If they want my father, this isn't about Eric. 'I'll get him,' I offer, but when I turn around he's already standing there.

He is holding a pair of my socks, which he folds over very neatly and hands to me. 'Gentlemen,' he says. 'What can I do for you?'

'Andrew Hopkins?' the second officer says. 'We have a warrant for your arrest as a fugitive from justice, in conjunction with the kidnapping of Bethany Matthews.'

Rob has his handcuffs out. 'You have the wrong person,' I say, incredulous. 'My father didn't kidnap anyone.'

'You have the right to remain silent,' Rob recites. 'Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney, and to have an attorney present during any questioning—'

'Call Eric,' my father says. 'He'll know what to do.'

The policemen begin to push him through the doorway. I have a hundred questions: *Why are you doing this to him? How could you be so mistaken?* But the one that comes out, even as my throat is closing tight as a sealed drum, surprises me. 'Who is Bethany Matthews?'

My father does not take his gaze off me. 'You were,' he says.