

Also by Ann Medlock

Arias, Riffs & Whispers; Words Written for Voices

Building with Christopher Alexander; An Illustrated Memoir

Bread Crumbs; A Memoirish Guide to a Meaningful Life

Ann Medlock

SILENCE
of the
SEAMAID
a novel



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This is a work of fiction; any resemblance to persons living
or dead is coincidental.

OK, that's the lawyerly statement.

Here, the author cops to being, as all fiction writers are,
a thief and a liar, stealing bits and pieces of actual people,
places, and events she's seen or been told about,
then twisting and changing them beyond recognition (lying)
to suit the tale she's telling.



*“I seem stark mute but inwardly do prate.
I am and am not, I freeze and yet am burned,
Since from myself another self I turned.”*

—Elizabeth I

*“The prince asked her who she was, and where she came from,
and she looked at him mildly and sorrowfully
with her deep blue eyes; but she could not speak.”*

—from *The Little Mermaid*
by Hans Christian Andersen

“Eppur si muove”—And still it moves.

—Galileo



Rowing in Eden

In the late-arriving darkness of the long solstice day, in the old house filled with sleeping-child silence, Lee flipped the wall switch that turned on the reading lamps, pulled the drop cloths off the floor and the slant-top desk, and turned the radio up just far enough to fill this one small room with the “Ride of the Valkyries,” thundering southward from WQXR.

She smiled encouragement—ride, sisters, ride. She knew she had to hurry too, must get on with it. Go, no go—sign, don’t sign. Tonight. The papers in the morning mail. Or not. *Eppur si muove*—the earth still moved. Seasons began and ended, doors opened and closed, whether she went through them or not.

Crescents of dark earth tipped each paint-speckled finger as she spread the pages out to be read one last time. In this day’s early hours, before the sun had moved above the trees and driven her indoors, she’d planted a dozen flats of impatiens, making edges of salmon and coral giggles along the curving brick walk to the front door.

Looking from the sidewalk to the door of 99 Underwood Road, she’d decided to plant the salmon blooms on the left of the walk, the coral on the right. The salmon would line a mellow brick road for strangers to follow to the door of a house for sale. Just another real estate deal, one small ratcheting up the Gross National Product for 1977. The coral curve was, instead, her declaration of permanent ownership. This way to my house. Mine. She turned up another spade of earth. Her earth.

That afternoon, with lunch finished, Gabe down for a nap and Tobias practicing guitar chords, two fans had blown droning kisses at her damp skin

while she painted this long-locked room just off the foyer, making it her color. Watching the room change beneath her brush from a sky blue to a sea green, she realized that any lingering fingerprints made by the room's previous occupant were being coated over. Exorcism could take many forms.

If she didn't sign the papers and the check, she would keep making this room, this house, truly her own. She would move her files down here from the upstairs bedroom she had long used as her office, take her Selectric off the door she had used for a desktop and put it here, on a typing cart, next to the Dickensian mahogany desk. She would open the cartons she and Toby had hauled down the stairs, cartons full of treasured books. She would make shelf space for them and for the incoming manuscripts she would have to take in from her Princeton neighbors, writers and professors, each one awaiting her editorial eye for logic and sequence, for clarity, for ways to keep a reader turning pages.

This evening she had moved the household accounts here, and paid all the bills. In years to come, she could work here, in her office, in her house, tinkering with other people's ideas and words, helping Gabe with homework when he got old enough to have some, making calls to Toby in the apartment he'd be sharing with fellow students at Hunter College, checking in with Rory to see when she and her sculptor husband would be coming down again.

She would see to it that there would always be a grad student in the attic studio to help with chores, and the guest bedroom and den to rent for extra cash. She'd make sure there would always be tomatoes and string beans from the garden, fresh or put up for the winter, the jars in bright rows on the pantry shelves.

It was damned good duty—unearned, but she was here, a guest in Eden, done with the compass, done with the chart. Lee and her sons. Home. Home free. *Olly olly oxen free* rang in her head, quickly overridden by *Hojotoho* as the Valkyries' voices filled the small room. She tested a newly painted shelf; her finger came away green. It might take days for paint to dry in this weather.

"Home," in her childhood, had looked to her like the big old houses on shady streets in the coastal towns near the Navy bases where her family lived—in tiny Navy quarters. She'd told her father she loved being a nomad, always moving on. She did not tell him that she wished she were one of the people who lived happily ever after in houses that looked like good old 99.

Now, she had been one of the old-house people for seven years, the time it took to renew every cell in a body, making her a different being than the one who had moved into the then derelict house on Underwood Road.

Now, she could hold this ground for her sons, Tobias about to start college, Gabriel approaching kindergarten. She and the house would be the still

point around which their lives danced, bringing their children here for Easter egg hunts and Christmas feasts. Gabe would grow up and she would grow old in this gracious old house, sustained by thick plaster walls and quartered-oak floors, living to the soundtrack of the mourning doves, unseen, who filled the trees surrounding this place.

Nothing untoward would happen here, nothing frightening. Not now. Not ever again. She would not need to be a Valkyrie, armor on, spear in hand, shrieking at the world.

If she signed the papers arrayed across the leather desktop, if she wrote the check, it would be another story. A future cast off from this perfect mooring would be—what? There were no sea charts to show possible bearings, ultimate landfalls, to tell her where the shoals were and the hidden riptides, to mark the places where there be monsters.

“Do *what?* Leave *Princeton* to live in the *city* with your *kids?*” That wasn’t the way the tide flowed. People upgraded to Princeton, after proving themselves in New York. For Lee, that was the rub. She’d landed on Park Place, as baggage, a camp follower. Year after year, the wonderfully honest property tax bill from the state of New Jersey had arrived addressed to “Joseph V.H. Montagna, *et ux.*” Lee Palmer Montagna had been in this house as her husband’s anonymous property, *et uxorem*.

If she signed the lease, she’d need a grubstake. Starting over anywhere took some cash; in New York it would take suitcases full. And she could only get that much money by selling Home. House hunters would come down the walk, taking in the handsomely restored place, solid, simple, but winking its chocolate shingles at them, flapping its peach shutters. They would be new department heads at the University or New York Achievers ready for the great move to this ubersuburb, taking their rightful places among the winners. They would stand in the two-story front hall, absorbing a 1911 solidity they would never find in new, thin-walled construction.

Lee could see them outside the door of this room she was shaping to her needs—or preparing for theirs. Step this way if you will. This was, for the first half of the century, the office of the town’s most beloved family physician. Perfect for any at-home work you might want to do, or for seeing clients, patients. And let me show you the kitchen, completely renovated, so charming, perfect for the serious cook.

How Norman Rockwell, they would think it all, not seeing scenes played on this set that were instead pure Edvard Munch, the text not *Saturday Evening Post* but *Journal of Abnormal Psychiatry*.

She breathed deeply into a small movement of air that reached her through the window screen, bearing the scent of watered topsoil from out there in the

heavy dark. The newly grounded plants must be settling in along the walk, sending small white feelers out to hit not the walls of nursery flats but open soil, inviting, yielding, limitless.

There would be no more digging and planting if she signed the lease. They didn't let you do that in Central Park.

She wiped her damp hands on the seat of her cutoff jeans, careful not to smudge the papers as she read, yet again, the ponderous terms and conditions, and the changes and deletions she'd made in them. She had ferreted out every problem, she was fairly sure, though she'd left in the attorneys' grammar errors, not wanting to seem a smartass. Now it was time to sign, or lose to another apartment-hunter. When—if—the building's owners countersigned despite her changes, she would put her copy on file so they'd never get away with telling her she'd agreed to something she hadn't.

She smoothed creases out of the tea towel that kept her from sticking to the wooden chair she'd carried in from the kitchen, and cursed the New Jersey summer for invading her beautiful town, weighting and boiling the air as if this were Saigon or Leopoldville. It was past midnight and she was still sweating, still fighting to get some oxygen from the wet stuff that enveloped her. The air couldn't hold much more heat and water, would have to burst soon into rain. There were Wagnerian rumblings to the north and flashes of blue light, the Jersey night harmonizing with the sounds of Bayreuth. She aimed her pen at the window. Cue the lights! Her other hand rose palm up. Bring up the thunder! The night obliged, with flashes and with rumbles that drowned out the radio. Sing louder, sisters!

Laughing, she moved the pen to the signature page of the almost-memorized document. "No one reads that stuff," the agent had said. "It's meaningless. Just boilerplate." But Lee was not willing to be sliced and fried by New York; she had taken the lease away unsigned and parsed it word-for-word, pen in hand, making notes. Reviewing her edits, she felt solid, a responsible head-of-household, shaping the two-year life of this contract. Only two years. She thought it was likely to take four. She'd need four years to see if she could play jacks with the big kids, on her own. Four years and she could be a woman with an established career and one remaining nestling.

Or. Or she would be a woman who had taken her shot and failed, one who had confirmed her place way back in the queue, a woman no longer filled with foolish longings, but resolved, accepting, resigned. She might be able to get back into this fine town, as a renter—of a tract house. Or of rooms in this neighborhood of solid old houses.

The checkbook was in the top right drawer, along with the financial records she'd learned to keep. She'd have to send a check for the first and last months' rent and a security deposit. It was more than it should be, but everything was.

She tore out a check and put it next to the nine-by-twelve envelope that would carry the document to the city via certified mail, return receipt requested. If she actually did this.

The city glowed nor'-nor'-east, unseen, invisible but insistent, a huge centripetal force field, though she was alone in feeling it. Toby had already committed to Hunter College, quite rationally; no magic, magnetic pull had been needed. He'd been asking her if she'd made up her mind yet. There were major consequences for him either way, and he had to know soon. Gabe understood only that something big was up, something maybe not good. Lee's mother, on the line from South Carolina, was filled with the economic and safety reasons to stay put, mystified as always by her peculiar daughter, sure she could not affect this wayward offspring's decision, finally saying only, "But sugah, you'd be so lonely."

The fears assumed by neighbors and family did not include the one that most frightened Lee, the fear of being proven, finally and irrevocably, second-rate.

If she signed the papers and sent them northward, into the force field, these pages splayed out in front of her would put her, in a matter of weeks, at windows that looked out not on this silent, sycamore-lined street but on the roaring heart of Manhattan. A person looking out from those high windows would not be able to hide. A person seeing the sun hit those glittering towers every morning would know she was "on." Exposure. She would be exposed, the city looking back at her, daring her to try her hand. The city waited now, indifferent, there where the thunder rumbled and the blue light flashed.

She found herself talking to the radio again. "*Hojotoho* yourself." A warrior woman she was not.

She put the pen down and stared out at the lamplit, blossom-lined walkway, the walk that led to home, and away from it.

Knight's Gambit



Lee put the box of LBJ portraits down and stared into Jack Kennedy's steady, unwounded gaze, looking back at her from the wall above her desk.

"I wanted to work for you, damn it." She took the official Presidential engraving down, hung a photograph of Lyndon Johnson in its place, picked up her carton of photos and moved out into the hall.

She had dreamed high—unreasonably high, she knew—when she sent her resumé to dozens of agencies and offices in Washington, expecting a response from some grim, obscure bureaucrat deep in Commerce or Interior, but dreaming of a call from the Kennedy White House for a spot, however small, in the realm of those who would come to be known as the best and the brightest.

She knew the dream was just that; this was a town full of women with real experience in government and degrees from good colleges, younger women who did not have small kids, expecting, needing their attention. The dream, however, was irresistible.

No White House call had come, but she interviewed at the Democratic National Committee in early November for a press assistant's slot. The job's occupant was leaving in a month to get married and stay home, as nice girls did when they earned the much-sought honorific, "Mrs." The job's salary was pitiful and the duties trivial, but that was going to be true of any job that opened to Lee, and this one was at the Committee, a place that was first cousin to Kennedy's White House.

In January of a new and solemn year, Washington was no longer Camelot but just a government town again, with one new role—capital of the world's mourning. Lee hooked the wire behind Lyndon Johnson's jowly face onto a nail from which Jack Kennedy had looked over the Committee's conference room

for a little more than a thousand days. She tugged at the wood frame until it hung straight, then moved on with her box of faces.

Looking repeatedly into JFK's engraved eyes pulled Lee's thoughts to Arlington, to the gravesite, where Toby had held this same image in one small hand, a bouquet in the other. Mother and son had watched the honor guards from all the armed services as they took wreaths and baskets of flowers from people at the picket fence that surrounded the muddy site. The young warriors carried each offering in slow, straight lines and perfect square corners, and laid them on and around the grave.

When Lee and Toby had come to the gate in the fence, her son handed his five daisies and three yellow roses to a Marine in full dress blues and a closed, determined face that came undone when he reached down to the child. Tears inching down his cheeks, the Marine had given Toby's flowers the full military drill, placing them at the top of the grave right, Lee realized, at John Kennedy's head. Not the fine head that was filling the carton at her feet, but one that was obscenely shattered.

Seven frames to go.

On most days of this terrible winter, Lee had been at her desk in the press officer's anteroom, answering phones and catching typos as the cast changes were completed. Incoming Texans tried to be tactful as the Yankees gradually found other places for their wounded souls. The Boston reporter she was supposed to assist in getting out releases to the press and stock speeches to party candidates had been replaced by the owner of some Texas newspapers, a man who had never written anything himself. He had need of her English-major skills.

Southwest twangs were replacing New England honks, boots replacing Hush Puppies, but deep into gray January, one highly visible thing had not changed: Jack Kennedy's portrait still looked out from every wall, and Lee's sense of the rightness of things couldn't be silenced.

"C.T.? Have you got a minute?" Lee handed her boss his coffee and waited as he reached for the mug and kept on reading the *Washington Post*.

"Hunh? Oh. Well. Sure. What's on your mind, precious?"

Well, first thing on my mind is I wish to hell you'd stop the precious and the darlin' and all the talking to me like I'm some kind of pet.

"What's on my mind is all these portraits of Kennedy. They may be sending the wrong message, you know? It's as if the Committee isn't really behind the President and here he is running against Goldwater, with people so upset about the assassination and wishing Kennedy were alive to run again. Shouldn't the pictures be changed? So we look like Johnson's team?"

"Well, sure we should, darlin'. We got the danged photos of Lyndon, but there's no Texan gonna take that on. These Yankees already think we don't have

any class or ‘sensitivity.’” He made the word sound as if it came with a cup of *ma hwang* tea and a watercress sandwich.

“You’re not from Texas.” He squinted up at her. “*You* do it.”

She had a full carton of Jacks under her desk and a pocket stuffed with damp tissues as she went back to answering the phone, typing up memos from C.T.’s hand-scrawled notes, fixing his grammar mistakes. It had not been a good morning, beginning with Toby’s insistence that he didn’t want to get on the school bus to his kindergarten, then her old car taking forever to start, almost making her late, and now this mournful task. She wondered if she could find the vanished Yankees and give them the engravings. She pulled out her notes on the day’s tasks, the appointments C.T. wanted her to set up for him and those to cancel, the filing that needed to be done of his correspondence....

“Hey, Mizzz Pitt!”

Lee looked up, putting one finger at the place she had reached in her list. Joe Montagna was leaning, backwards, into the office door, off center, his lower body ready to rush on. His position was gravity-defying, his words mystifying.

“Pick you up at two on Saturday—that’s tomorrow. You got that?” She laughed uneasily. “You’re assuming you and I have plans.”

“*I* do. Now *you* do. So yeah, *we* do.”

She wondered what he was doing here, so far from the Department of Labor. And if there shouldn’t be a question somewhere in what he was saying.

He grinned a white slash in his dark Italian face, his unlikely pale blue eyes narrowing to pleased crescents of sky before his solid, sport-coated body hurtled out of the doorway.

“Hey! Uh—wait?” She thought she might not have spoken loudly enough, but he was back, grinning, arms folded nonchalantly as he leaned against the doorframe.

“Yeeess?”

“You don’t understand. I am one of those working single mothers people talk about—we have to find sitters before we can go out the door and that involves considerable advance notice.”

“I know about the kid. Boy, right? Five years old?” He reached into his jacket pocket and fanned out three tickets. “He’s going to love this. So you’ll cancel anything else you thought you were doing.”

Lee looked down, shaking her head in disbelief, looking back up with a string of questions for Montagna. The doorway was empty.

She stared at the vacated space, amazed by this odd man’s enormous confidence. What did she know about him? A college classmate had introduced them at a cocktail party just the evening before. Being well married herself and appalled by Lee’s divorce, Louise had made it her cause to get Lee safely back into the marriage fold, recruiting Harlan, her own kind husband, to help scout

for likely candidates, all of whom Lee had found most *unlikely*, as were the men she had met at work.

There was the pudgy freshman Congressman with the non-stop monologue on the magnificence of his legislative ideas, the intense wire service reporter who assumed she would find stories at the Committee and leak them to him, the statistics professor from American U who smelled of onions and thought the analysis of data made for fascinating conversation.

It had been almost two years since Timothy Pitt had left Washington for another tour at the Saigon embassy and Lee had stayed behind, filing for divorce, asking for personal support only until she could find a job. The job had happened sooner than she had feared, but it was taking longer to factor men back into her life. She had been on half a dozen once-only dates in recent months, choosing to read her way through many a long, quiet evening rather than repeat the experiences.

It wasn't just that she hadn't found the men attractive. She sensed in each of them a disturbingly familiar attitude that one woman was as good as any other as long as she was pretty and willing to offer assistance. Lee was willing to be a backup player, trained for the position by her upbringing and the times, but she wanted to do the part as Lee, as her particular self. To Tim Pitt, struggling Foreign Service staffer, she had been *My Wife* and *The Mother of My Son*. Lee was sure anyone could have filled the part as written, as long as that someone was willing to constantly shore up a man who was daunted by the world.

There had been so many moments when the next move was clear—to her, but not to Tim—so many times when she had whisper-coached him, only to realize that she could not do that at every necessary juncture. Her husband, Toby's father, the man they counted on, had no idea how to be their protector, the role that was assigned to men, husbands, fathers.

She had married him because he was handsome, as husbands were supposed to be, because he was sweet, because at 21 all her friends were married, because she couldn't imagine he would not be up to the role.

In their early years, it was acceptable to Lee to be a template bride, young helpmeet, then a new mom, the one with a handsome husband who had an exotic job. They looked wonderful together in photographs, riding in a carriage during a layover in Rome, attending a reception in Leopoldville, climbing a stupa on vacation in Bangkok, backpacking Toby through the hills around Dalat. But she became more and more discomfited by the Tim behind the appearance—that picture was not wonderful. Behind the image was a man who was constantly at a loss, a sweet-natured, passive man who was content with his lot, whatever it was, and with his pretty, helpful wife, whoever she was.

It was better, she told herself, to be clearly alone than to seem to have a husband when she actually had two dependents. A dependent child was welcome,

deserving, adorable; a dependent husband was not acceptable in the world as she knew it.

She could not save this drowning man, but she had a chance to save her son from being confused and overwhelmed by the world, as his father was. She had a chance, a slim one, to save their lives, hers and Toby's, and she had taken it, becoming Lee Palmer Pitt, working single mom in Washington DC, rather than Mrs. Timothy Pitt, *My Wife and The Mother of My Son*, in Saigon.

It was a temporary holding action. She knew she was not equipped to provide for Toby longterm, to be both mother and father to him, but she could, she hoped, hold things together until she found the right husband, the right model of a man's life for her son. She was of her time, programmed for assisting, for backing up the right man despite a recurring, nagging thought that there might be something off-kilter about all this. But clearly, from all the evidence around her, it was she who was askew. The way things were was natural, inevitable, right.

Through these post-Tim, pre-Someone days, she walked a narrow line between hope and fear, with never enough money or time, with her confidence waxing and waning. From the other side of the world, Tim sent a monthly child support check that didn't cover their son's clothes and food. Her own salary had to cover more than it possibly could. She became a consummate penny-pincher, avoiding all unnecessary expenditures, doing her own house repairs, changing the oil and anti-freeze in her old Volkswagen, making and mending clothing.

She fretted about unforeseen calamities that might shoot the wings off the fragile two-seater plane she was learning to pilot, some calamity that would plunge her and her son into the abyss of poverty. Her days were rounded by nightmares of being homeless, her trusting son in rags, looking up at her with uncomprehending eyes, nightmares that she ran from, waking herself to walk the dark house until it might be safe to return to sleep.

On better nights there was a dream she had never understood, the one in which her lifelong fear of water disappeared and she was under the sea, confident, happy, moving freely, and singing in a voice that seemed not hers. The joy and freedom of the dream made Lee reluctant for the night to end and the day's fears and restrictions to return.

But the days did come and she faced them, repetitious days filled with her son, her menial job, a few friends, household chores, and the occasional once-only dinner or drinks with another man who would prove to be a poor substitute for an evening with an Austen or Didion book and Hovhaness on the stereo.

Harlan had described his new find, this Joe Montagna, with something approaching awe. The guy, Harlan explained, was an ace negotiator who had been brought into Labor to settle a dock strike, but only after he'd negotiated a deal for himself that was so exceptional, it took a special act of Congress to set it up.

This cocky man, this blue-eyed Italian, came to town and within weeks settled a dock strike that had tied the whole country in knots for close to a year. And, in Harlan's admiring words, "He didn't even break a sweat."

He was a bit much in the bravado department, but good-looking, funny, clearly competent, and he'd included Toby in his cheeky plan, whatever it was—he seemed eminently worth checking out. The tickets in his pocket had to be for something more interesting than the Saturday she was thinking of, making macaroni and cheese for Toby and a kindergarten buddy.

Her hands burrowed under layers of paper and found the phone. "Louise, that guy Montagna, at your party after work yesterday? He works with Harlan at Labor, right?"

"He runs the whole section, Lee. Hold on. Is this an actual expression of interest? Well, well. Charming, handsome, smart, polite—could it be this one's actually got your attention?"

"I do thank you both yet again for your tireless efforts at fixing up the picky divorcée. You are saints of patience. Now I just need this one's extension at the Department so I can give him my address, and I don't have a Labor directory here."

Her friend laughed. "He got your address from me last night, after grilling me about you for twenty minutes. And how come you don't have every number in Washington there? The DNC is supposed to Know All See All in this town."

"It well may. But I'm a peon here, remember? I don't know anything." What she did know was that Joe Montagna had shifted the day 180 degrees. She checked "Change POTUS pictures" off her list and added, "Tell Toby we have a date."

Joe Montagna was grinning at her over her son's head as they sat in the stands at the Armory. "I told you he'd love it."

Toby's huge green eyes were fixed raptly on the antics of the Harlem Globetrotters, when they weren't taking curious looks at this new and strange person who had come to his house in a much nicer car than his mother's rusty Beetle and had let him hold his own ticket all the way to their box seats.

Their date was wearing a sweater the same light blue as his eyes, and black slacks. Lee was annoyed with herself for noticing that both had the sheen of synthetics. Taste in clothes had to be secondary to his startling presence; even sitting still, there was a bright urgency about him, a sense that he was being charged by an invisible power source that could at any moment illuminate him and everything around him.

One of the Globetrotters hid the ball under his shirt and strolled with extravagant nonchalance toward the basket.

"Excuse me, sir, but is he allowed to do that?"

“Good question, Tobe. In a real game, you’re right, the players can’t fool around like that, but this is only for fun so it’s OK.”

“I wonder why anyone agrees to play them.” Lee smiled at her son. “The other team looks so foolish.”

“It’s OK, Mom. It’s just for fun.” Toby turned to Montagna. “Right, sir?”

“It’s fine with me if you call me Joe. That is, if your mom says that’s alright.” Montagna and Toby both looked to Lee for her approval. She smiled assent and Montagna extended a hand to the boy. “Me Joe. You Tobe. Deal?” Toby’s small hand disappeared into Montagna’s broad grip.

“It’s a deal, sir.” He looked puzzled when the two adults burst into laughter, then he joined in, realizing the joke.

At the end of an early dinner at Sholl’s downtown cafeteria, Lee watched Toby go into the dessert line with a dollar from their date.

“A silly ballgame, a point-to-your-own-dinner restaurant—you’re pretty good at knowing what kids like. How many do you have?”

There were three, living in Atlanta with their mother.

“Rory, she’s 13. Maddy’s 11 and Van, my boy, he’s Tobe’s age.”

“Miss them?”

“Sure. Especially Van. He’s...” He looked away, and found his voice. “He’s not strong like your Tobe.”

He frowned and seemed to welcome the interruption when Toby arrived with a slice of chocolate cake and two quarters in change that he clinked into a stack next to Montagna’s coffee cup.

“Good choice there, guy. Lee, may I get you a slice? Another cup of coffee?”

“How about I make a pot, at our house?”

Their empty cups sat on the coffee table in front of the sofa where Toby was gently snoring. Lee was curled in a club chair at one end of the table; Montagna stretched almost prone in the matching chair opposite her, his hands clasped behind his head, framing lobeless ears, small, with black curls around them. *Treasure Island* lay open face down on the floor beside him where he’d put it when he saw that Toby had fallen asleep. He had read the boy almost a full chapter, after a talk about basketball strategies and the promise of a lesson.

“I’m sorry Toby was so demanding. You may not even like reading out loud and if you don’t really want to teach him to play basketball, I can make some excuse....”

“No, no. That was one of my favorite books and I’m actually a hell of a basketball player. *And* he’s a great kid. I’d enjoy showing him how we did it on the Lower East Side.”

Lee wasn’t surprised that he was a New Yorker. And a poor boy, on the rise. Who else had his kind of nerve? Rough edges and all, he’d gotten far, fast. The

attitude was traceable, but not the voice. She wondered what had happened to his accent. She could hear her father saying, “Of course I don’t still sound like South Carolina. People think you’re stupid if you talk like that.” Her father had moved up and out of his cotton-mill world. And this man-on-the-move who was making himself so at home in her living room wasn’t going to let anyone dismiss him as some dumb New York slum kid.

“This is nice, you know?” He was staring up at the ceiling. “Just being here. Quiet.” He pulled himself up in the chair and faced her, his forearms on his widespread knees, his broad fingers interlaced.

“OK, what do I know about you? Lee Pitt 101. Let’s see. You grew up on Navy bases and you went to seventeen schools, so you know how to handle yourself in new situations. You worked your way through U Maryland because it’s cheap and your old man wouldn’t put up any money to educate a girl. Lots of hours on lots of part time jobs and you made honors anyway. So you’re smart as hell. The books here... you realize they’re everywhere? The shelves are full, there’s a stack by your chair—and those piles on the stairs. So I think you know a lot. About a lot of things. You did some acting and modeling, so you know how to walk and talk. Your dad was a Commander but he came up through the ranks so you’re not a snob, but you’ve got that officer thing down. And the diplomat stuff too.”

Lee told herself to have a word with Louise about her responses to the curious questions of strangers. “I’m sorry but, ‘officer thing?’ ‘Diplomat stuff?’”

“You’ve got class, lady. Look at this place. Look at you.”

Lee considered the modest old house she rented, far into the Maryland hinterlands, its backyard conjoining quiet woods where there was a fine little creek and a child could safely play. There was some decent art on the walls, modern prints and a couple of nice block prints from Saigon. Simple furnishings, but comfortable. Nothing expensive, but nothing ugly. Her clothes were, she thought, unremarkable: gabardine slacks, a white cashmere turtleneck, a silk scarf, your basic Audrey Hepburn-on-the-weekend, all bought at good sales.

“I’m not sure what you mean, *sir*, but thanks.”

The Navy had indeed affected her, the constant moving from base to base, learning to adjust quickly, to say what needed to be said, do what needed to be done, in each new place. Again and again, she had been taken to yet another new school and left there to find her way, carrying with her a parental expectation of perfection—perfect appearance, perfect grades and perfect conduct. Each time, she had moved into her observer position, surveying the lay of the land, learning all she could, always knowing she would be moving on soon, to the gift of another beginning.

The settings varied, some delighting, some repelling, but her family was constant. Wherever they hung their curtains and pictures, wherever they found

the nearest church and school, there was always the little brother who must be taken care of and protected, his future planned and saved for; the mother pointing out her daughter's every shortcoming, determined to stop any move the girl might be making toward being "just too full of yourself." And there was the father appearing from time to time, frowning, ominously quiet, eternally disappointed in his first-born.

Lee had always found refuge in books. She had absented herself from the world of criticism and frowns, from a marriage that wasn't working, from the loneliness and fears that now beset her. Since her first library card at six, she had read her way through one treasury of books after another. The evenings she spent reading volumes from the shelves and piles in this quiet house were not evenings lost, though she did worry that there were too many such evenings.

"What else do I know? You've got that independent-woman thing." Montagna held up a hand, as if to stop an expected denial. "But you're not obnoxious about it." He smiled appeasingly. "Resourceful. You've even found something you can do with an English major—that press job at the Committee. You want to mix it up in the world or you'd settle for teaching *Moby Dick* to bored high school kids. And how about brave? Setting out on your own, with a kid, no less. Not scared of anything. How'm I doing so far?"

"Sounds like a combination of Mary McCarthy and Joan of Arc. Good for me."

So I look like I know what the hell I'm doing, do I? But I feel like I'm living the Perils of Pauline and I may not make it to the last reel. If the car breaks down, if Toby gets sick, if I lose my job—so many ifs and they all mean Poor. This man is roaring up from poor, and he's not afraid of falling back in. He'd never understand obsessing about falling backwards.

"You're very kind but I'm definitely scared of some things. Like water. I won't go anywhere near water. And New York. I'm definitely scared of your hometown. It's amazing to me that kids grow up there and survive. All that concrete. The traffic. The crowds." She was shaking her head, rejecting it all.

He grinned and picked up the beat of her voice, nodding his head up and down to counter her sideways rejection. "The excitement. The juice. The energy." His face turned serious. "You're right it isn't easy—but it was great. Especially for me. My dad was a union organizer, so he was a really strong guy, surrounded by strong guys. They taught me to be tough, which I had to be, just to get to school and back. Public school all the way through. We never had money for anything else—dad was an *honest* union guy, never on the take. But he made me study and if you do that, New York schools are great, right up through CCNY, which has to be the best college in the world. And free—every bit of it, as long as you kept your grades up, which I did. In psychology. History. Sociology. The only bad thing was writing papers. I was terrible at that.

“Oh, before CCNY I did a stint in the Air Force which was how I got to Georgia, which was how I met Cindy Lou Carpenter. And her father’s shotgun. When I started at City I was a dad. Rory. God she was cute. But it meant working nights at a plant in Queens that my old man had organized. And never having enough money and listening to Cindy Lou tell me how much she hated New York every chance she got.”

“Hated New York? Maybe she was just scared of it, like I am.”

“No way. Why would a person like you be scared of the city? You just haven’t given it a chance.”

“No way back at you—I’ve been in and out of New York all my life. Starting when my dad was at the Brooklyn Navy Yard when I was a kid. Lots of trips there since then. And you’re right, it’s fabulous.”

“So what’s to be scared of?”

“Well, let’s start with the third rail.” It was Lee’s turn to laugh. “My buddy Izzy in Bay Ridge told me all about getting sliced and fried in the subway. Once my mom got lost in the subway and I was sure she must be in little cooked pieces down there in the dark.”

“But she wasn’t, right?”

“She made it home. Eventually.”

He spread his hands palms up with a “See?” expression.

“Right. That was irrational thinking by a little kid. But *I* get lost in New York too. It’s all so fast and confusing, and it’s overwhelming to imagine getting a toehold in a place that big, that intimidating. The music, the art, the theatre, publishers, networks, corporations. It’s all so high-powered, you must have to be absolutely perfect or you don’t survive.”

She was thinking about an enchanting, intimidating week of modeling for a college fashion issue of *LIFE* magazine, the only time in her life she had felt that her bony body was a plus. The *LIFE* staffers raved about her auburn hair, the structure of her face, the way the dresses looked on her, even though she was not tall enough to be a professional.

She’d been doing leads in college plays, delighted to discover that she could lose herself completely in being other people. In New York for the modeling job, she was drawn to the theatre district between shoots. She walked the blocks of fabled marquees, wondering how you became one of the people whose names were up there, instead of a ridiculous, gawking onlooker. Taxis rescued her when her wanderings left her on loud corners, completely confused about where she might be, surrounded by intense, purposefully moving swarms of New Yorkers.

Just a year ago she had taken her parents’ invitation to let Toby stay with them for a visit and had gone north to see Ariel Pierson, a friend from college theatre days, a friend who tried to convince Lee to move to New York and start her new life there, “in the center ring.” Lee was alone in Ariel’s third-floor apart-

ment when her friend called from her day job and shouted at Lee to close and lock everything. Two doors away from where Lee was trying to understand her friend's urgency, three young women had been butchered and a blood-drenched man had been seen moving across the roofs. Lee fled, back to her quiet house at the edge of the woods, on a creek in Maryland, where everyone was safe. No, New York was far too dangerous, and too tough an arena for imperfect people.

"What I see, Ms. Pitt, is 'absolutely perfect.'" He was not smiling but looking at her seriously. When she moved a nay-saying hand in front of her face, uncomfortable with his intensity, he reached for Toby's ankle, rubbing it gently, and broke the moment.

"OK. You asked why I'm in DC. Well, I figured I could end the dock strike from here and that's not a bad thing to have on your record. Also wanted to case the place, see who runs what, who's got the keys to the kingdom. But I don't know how long I'll stick around. New York is just better, you know? You should think about going there too."

"Not a chance. I don't want Toby fighting his way to school and back. I don't want us to live in the old tenement I could afford—if I found a job there at all. Not a *chance*."

Montagna seemed undaunted, looking at her with wry certainty. "If you were that easy to scare, you'd be a schoolteacher. And you'd still be married."

She was silent, remembering the confusion she'd caused in her family by wanting to go to college. Girls only went to college so they could be teachers or nurses, otherwise they were just taking time away from the job at hand: finding a husband and starting a family. And walking away from marriage had been even more puzzling to them. It wasn't enough to want a better life for her and Toby; Tim had never hurt them, and that was the only acceptable reason for such a drastic step. She had gone so far as to remind her family that she and Toby had both gotten terribly ill in Saigon, that the war was getting more dangerous by the day, and that staying with Tim meant going back there. But she'd never told them that she left because she refused to accept that at 29 her life was over, and because Toby's life, which had barely begun, must not repeat his father's.

"I think... I think the divorce was about running from what scares me *most*. I was more afraid of joining the living dead than of being out here without a safety net. I stopped *breathing* when I was with Tim. At least I know I'm alive, out here on the tightrope. I felt mean and selfish—I still do—for not staying with him, because Tim is a nice guy, but there *had* to be more than that. I spent those years with him trying to stand shorter than he was—and I just couldn't do it any more. It's not that *I'm* all that great—I am *so* far from perfect—but I'd have to erase myself completely to fit behind him."

Oh my God don't cry. And you don't say stuff like that to a man you don't even know. But would like to know. You're blowing it. He'll run for his life from a woman that bitchy.

"I should get Toby up to bed." She brushed away the tears before they could fall and stood, smoothing her slacks.

"Why? He's so peaceful right where he is. Look at that hair. Just like yours. It's called chestnut red, right? Lots of Celtic genes?" Again, Montagna was moving the conversation onto safer ground. She eased back into the chair, no longer curled in it, but perched on the edge, ready to flee if she misspoke again.

"Some people call the color roan, I think the Irish. On the Pitt side, Toby's all Scots and Englishers. The Palmers are completely English, but my mother's half German."

"Not quite as mixed up as my people."

"Yes, I did wonder about a blue-eyed Montagna."

He smiled. "I like the way you say that, the Italian way. Moantanya. We've always said the 'g'—to sound more American, I guess. My dad's first-generation here. His folks came over from Italy. But my mother's Dutch, van Heuvel, old upstate New York family. Farmlands and a graphite mine. You know, for pencils."

"But there was no money for your schooling?"

"Funny you should ask." He grinned wryly, perhaps remembering many a family argument. "My dad wondered about that too. But she got nothing. Punishment for marrying a poor dago."

"And you're the only child of an Italian Catholic father." She eased back into the soft cushions.

"It broke my old man's heart that he didn't have a pack of kids, but there was no way that Presbyterian woman was going to spend her life pregnant. And how did *you* get to be Catholic?"

"Me? I'm not. Well, not now. My mother's Germans were Bavarian Catholics so she raised me in the church, but I bailed years ago." His eyebrows asked for a reason.

"I read a paper on brainwashing and all those Sister Mary Benedicts and Mary Christophers flashed before my eyes with the stuff they'd programmed into my head. Then it was easy to walk away. But what made you think I was Catholic?"

He nodded black curls toward a print of Our Lady of Guadalupe hanging at the bottom of the stairs.

"Oh, her. A confirmation gift. So she's been on the wall since I was 12—if she's on the wall, this must be home. And the picture next to her—the mermaid surrounded by polliwogs? That one too. She goes with me everywhere. It's from my dad's ship, in the Pacific war."

“That’s good.” He answered her questioning expression. “That you’re not Catholic. I’m not either. Anymore. This is good.”

This man, Lee realized, was actually listening to her. His focus was intense and complete; there was no one else in his world at this moment but Lee Palmer Pitt—as herself, in the particular, even though she’d revealed things she shouldn’t have. He was gentle, quick-witted, he had that electric charge, and he was living up to all that Louise and Harlan had said about him. Joseph Montagna might well be worth more than one Saturday of her time.

In her room, settling into the lemon-scented flannel sheets, hoping Toby would sleep late in the morning, Lee wondered how people got past the fears of sliding back into the lives that lurked behind them. Montagna didn’t seem to have the slightest doubt that he could rocket upwards and never fall back onto the Lower East Side. He knew he was making it. He just knew. Sometimes Lee was confident that she could keep her family’s upward trajectory on track, but confident or not, it must be done. She must not undo the progress her parents had begun by giving her a life better than their own. She owed Toby no less. She took a deep breath of the sweet sheets, wondering why there were no detergents that smelled of roses.

Her northern grandmother used rosewater in the laundry she took in from wealthy customers. The southern one worked the looms in a cotton mill, where chemicals made the air stink. Both their lives were about outhouses and fried-bacon-in-Wonder-Bread sandwiches and the fumes of kerosene heaters, and about hating the people who might knock loose their shaky grip on the bottom rungs of the ladder. It was eight kids in the two-bedroom row house where her mother grew up, the granddaughter of farmers who had lost their land, the eldest daughter of a floor-finisher who could barely feed his brood. Emily Wellock was assistant to her harried mother until she escaped by marrying, at 16, the handsome sailor she’d met in a night-school accounting class. She had Lee at 18, on a Navy base far from home, as she and her sailor built a new life that would lift them above their harsh beginnings.

Lee twisted in the bed, pressing her pillow into a more comfortable shape, pulling the comforting flannel sheets closer.

Her father’s people, the Palmers, had been in the Carolinas since the 1600s, and there were family rumors of great old plantations, but when time came down to the Palmers Lee knew, they were cotton-mill workers, linheads, the bottom-feeders of the white Southern world. They lived in company houses, got their groceries and dry goods at the company store, and died of company white-lung. Every time Lee had visited the tiny town that circled the massive mill, she’d silently thanked her father for running away to sea, getting himself, and ultimately his children, as far as he could from the great white bales, the reeking dye pots, and the roaring looms. His

survival instincts had made it possible for Lee to grow up on the coasts and not drawl. And to take the spoon out of her coffee cup before she drank from it, which none of her grandparents had done.

Now, one of her southern cousins was a Bull-Connor clone, sheriff of a county fighting desegregation, belly hanging over his belt, spoon firmly in his cup, probably wearing a white sheet at night. Lee shuddered at the thought of sliding backwards into her grandparents' world of hopelessness and fear, the world her parents had escaped.

She made herself stop. She was not in a rowhouse, in a slum, or in a mill-town company house, but in the Maryland woods, in a dear old house where her son had a room of his own and a creek to play by. She had a job in an interesting place and the possibility of moving into more responsibilities. She'd just spent a Saturday with a man she had begun to doubt existed, a man who was moving brilliantly in the world, who could see her and hear her and seemed to like everything about her. That had happened once, long before, but she had stopped expecting it could happen again.

This had been one day of surface observations. If this Joe Montagna really knew her, knew everything about Lee Palmer Pitt, would he still think she was a combination of Mary McCarthy and Joan of Arc? Hardly. Lee knew better. Her family knew better. Especially her mother.

Emily Palmer had aligned with all the nuns who imbued Lee with a longing to be holy, doing what God wanted her to do, despite the fact that this would not be easy, given who she was. Mrs. Palmer had made it clear that Lee was too bright for her own good, unacceptably artsy, impractical, unreliable, entirely too drawn to the unconventional. Even Lee's handwriting was too dramatic: not the neat, easy-to-read script it should be. A girl that smart needed to be kept in line so she wouldn't get a swelled head and so she wouldn't have foolish expectations that life would knock out of her, causing her great disappointment and pain.

All that reading and drawing pictures and coming up with outlandish things to do. Like getting the base kids to sign a petition to the commanding officer, asking for a playground. It was embarrassing, and dangerous. Standing out was just inviting trouble. People didn't like girls who stood out. Like the time Lee ran for student body president of her high school in San Diego. Student body presidents were always senior boys, boys who had always lived there, not girls, and not Navy kids who'd been in the school a year. Lee was not only a girl, she was a junior, for heaven's sake. Mrs. Palmer reminded her daughter that the week she'd started tenth grade at this massive school, she'd come home every day weeping, saying she couldn't go to a school that big after the tiny one she'd gone to near their last base, back East. She had to adjust. That's what Navy kids did, just as Navy wives did. The girl should keep her head down and just focus on studying something useful.

But did she listen? She actually said she thought she could do a better job than the other candidates and she went right on, making campaign posters and buttons every night, using her babysitting money to put ads in the school paper. It was ridiculous, but it really didn't matter if she wasted her time on a useless campaign, because her classes were a waste too. Mrs. Palmer didn't expect her daughter to take bookkeeping; she hadn't inherited her mother's ease with numbers, but not a single course in typing or shorthand? Instead of these things she would surely need, the girl was taking Latin and Spanish and every literature course the school had, even all the drawing, painting, "playschool" classes that silly Californians offered their children. Nothing that would help Lee get an office job until she married, and then manage her household properly. Mrs. Palmer warned her, got her father to give her a talking-to, but their daughter went right on being willful and foolish.

It was a constant struggle to keep the girl's feet on the ground, but Mrs. Palmer was up to the job, pointing out her many faults and failures. Like getting so lost in some book that she forgot she was supposed to be helping her little brother, Ernie, with his homework. And not rinsing and stacking the dishes in proper order before she washed them, still in the proper order. The girl wanted to cook and she hadn't even mastered doing the dishes. She wanted to drive but she hadn't read the book her father had given her on the internal combustion engine. Mrs. Palmer herself didn't know how to drive but they were to entrust the family Oldsmobile to this unreliable girl? It was ridiculous.

On the day of the election at school, Lee had rushed home with her announcement: "I got more votes than all the guys combined—there won't be a run-off!"

Mrs. Palmer had done the right thing. She went right on with her sewing, while giving her daughter a grounding perspective.

"If they knew you as well as we do, they wouldn't have voted for you."

Lee shuddered. If Joe Montagna got to know her that well, he would not come back. Your family *had* to keep you around. Men didn't. Bosses didn't. Lee, if fully known, would spend her life alone. And unemployed. She had learned long ago to mask her fears in bravado, to keep her real thoughts closely guarded. She'd slipped tonight, saying far too much. Montagna said he'd be back. But he wouldn't.

She made herself stop. This day wasn't about the past. It wasn't about the future. It was simply a very good day. Right here, right now, she was happy. She stretched, turned on her side, and dropped into sleep smiling.



C.T. was at his desk, not looking up at her, not calling her “precious.” “Lee, I’m looking at a speech you did here and this War on Poverty piece....”

All through the spring, Lee had filed, proofread, and answered phones for him, finally asking for and getting some trial writing assignments when the reporters the Committee had brought in as staff writers couldn’t keep up with campaign-year demands. Thousands of Democrats all over the country were running for office, and the Committee was providing them with position papers and stock speeches on civil rights, the Great Society, the war. There were model letters to the editor and columns for local papers that were supposedly written by well-known Democrats. When C.T. raged that the ghostwriting wasn’t getting done fast enough, Lee had asked for a try at it. She’d worked hard on each piece, hoping they would be her way out of the girl-assistant ghetto, up to the kind of assignments—and salaries—the staff writers were getting.

The day had begun for Lee with the end-of-the-world gloom that always preceded her period, a gloom she never recognized as hormone-induced until the flood began and the world returned to a nonmalevolent neutral, allowing possibilities both fair and foul. Listening to C.T., her mind ruled by premenstrual angst, Lee felt total darkness closing in.

“They aren’t very good, Lee. I’m going to have to ask you to move on to some place that would suit you better.”

Lee stared at his mouth, opening and closing above his yellow tie and his short-sleeved shirt. He wasn’t moving her up. He was firing her.

She nodded and hurried out of his office. At her own desk, she steadied herself with both hands, fighting to stay composed.

“Lee, what’s happening? You look sick.” Hannah Rivers, the widow of a renowned political columnist, was staring at Lee, her arms full of her reports on the voting records of Republican Representatives and Senators.

“I just got fired.” Her voice was barely audible. She nodded toward C.T.’s door. “He said my work was no good.”

The older woman’s eyes narrowed. “Hold everything.” She disappeared into her office across the hall, returning with her coat and bag. “Grab your stuff, dear. We’re getting out of here.”

Lee was propelled into the Cosmos Club, where Hannah’s membership had continued after her famous husband’s death. In its handsome old bar, Hannah slid a double martini in front of Lee. “Now you listen to me. That man is a fool and a scoundrel. He had no need to say what he said. I know good copy and those pieces you showed me were good. He just didn’t have the guts to tell you the truth.”

“The truth?”

“Yes, and it’s simple. You’re out because you have no patron and somebody who has one wants a job. It’s not about your competence. Lee, do you hear me?”

Lee did hear, but she didn't believe.

"Listen to me, Lee. In the years I've been there since my Jerry died, they've tried to dump me five times! But I just call Bobby Kennedy and within the hour I've got my job back, and God knows I need the job. You don't have a Bobby, so some chippy from Texas is going to get your desk. Wait. Did that jerk ever make a pass at you?"

Lee shrugged a Doesn't-matter.

"But there it is, Lee. The jerk wants a harem and you wouldn't play. Now I *know* it's about bringing in a chippy. Or a big contributor's daughter. Maybe she'll be both. I tell you what. You don't even have to go back there. Just tell me what you need from your desk and I'll pack it up for you."

"I need to *work*." Lee took a gulp of the martini. "Toby's outgrowing everything and my car needs new brakes and I don't know what the hell I'm going to do."

She could see no glimmer in the darkness. Just when she had begun to hope she could do real work in the world, she'd been declared mistaken. Proven unworthy. Found out. Her only recourse was to admit defeat and tell Joe Montagna that a half year of dating was enough, that he must marry her immediately, to take care of her and Toby, before she completely messed up her son's life and they were wandering the streets, a bag lady and her starving child.

"Let me make a couple of calls. I've got some ideas." Hannah was patting Lee's hand reassuringly.

In the following days, the flooding brought Lee the light-headedness of a plummeting hematocrit, and a slow mental corking-up to the brightness of a world in which there were, once more, options. It was good to have an ally like Hannah. It was good to have Joe Montagna telling her over lobster *vol au vent* at the Rive Gauche that she was way too smart for that dumb job anyway. It was good to get a call from the White House, where Hannah had managed to get Lee's resumé into a newly created office there.

An Ivy League intellectual had been brought in to create some Kennedy-style class for Lyndon Johnson. The professor would choose composers, writers, playwrights, and painters who would be salted into White House events. He would bring in prestigious speakers and performers. He needed an assistant.

In the suffocating June heat, Lee went through the great iron gates, showing her ID to the guards, watching them find her name on their list of the favored few with business inside.

She was there. Wrong time. Wrong occupant. But it was the White House. The professor noted Lee's experience as a Foreign Service wife/hostess, her knowledge of American literature and music, her carefully thought out appearance. She was startled to see that the professor had copies of the ghost writing she had done at the Committee—Hannah had done more than send Lee's resumé.

“This article you wrote for the Speaker of the House—the cadences, the allusions—you made him sound like Winston Churchill.”

“Too literary, you think?”

The professor grinned. “Maybe for those bozos at the Committee, but here, literary is good. Hannah Rivers says you’re the perfect companion at an art exhibit—you’re savvy and discerning. And you’ve read every American writer we’ve got *and* you know David Diamond and Lucas Foss.”

“Well, I don’t know *them*. Just their works. Serious new music interests me. Especially Samuel Barber. And Alan Hovhaness.”

The professor was looking at her with a bemused smile. He leaned forward and said in a conspiratorial whisper that the interview period had not closed, but that he would very much like her to accept the job, if she was interested.

Over dinner at the Old Ebbitt Grill, Joe opined that Lee was the best thing that could ever happen to that Ivy League guy and his chances of doing a good job.

“It’s going to happen again, I know it. There’s going to be a Buffy or a Mimsy from Smith or Vassar whose daddy gives the Party trainloads of money and she’ll have artsy connections out the kazoo and I’ll be out again. I don’t even have the *clothes* for this job.”

Lee’s fork moved rice kernels back and forth on her plate.

Joe reached across the table and stopped her hand. “Lee, listen to me. The job’s officially in play until next week, right? OK, I can get away for a few days so let’s take Tobe to your folks and then head out to Hilton Head to think it all over. What do you say?”

It was a good plan. There would be a sea breeze on the island and she could think all this through. Joe always seemed to have a good plan.

He was the man who called her several times a day, the man who had pulled her away from her eat-at-the-desk home-packed brown-bags to eat real lunches in restaurants with tablecloths. He was the man who had taken her to dinner every Friday evening since they’d met, each time sending over a sitter he had screened and paid, arriving with a book the sitter could read to Toby. With her son so well taken care of, Lee was free to enjoy the dinners and theatre performances she couldn’t afford on her own.

He was the playful, charming, entrancingly physical man who had nailed a hoop over her garage door and spent Saturday afternoons teaching her son to dribble down the driveway, then lifting him high enough to sink the ball. Lee watched her son’s emerging skill and his delight at each achievement. And she tried not to stare at the raised veins on Joe’s knotted, bare arms as they emerged from a gray T-shirt with the words “CCNY Athletic Department” across his broad chest. She got the joke—there was no athletic department at the brainy City College of New York.

He was the courtly family man who would run a finger along her neck, lightly, slowly, watching the gooseflesh appear, but welcomed Toby if he came into the room, with an open, available smile. “Hey, Tobe. How’s the jumpshot coming? You get in any practice time after school?” After their Friday evenings on the town, when he and Lee went to his DC apartment, there was never a thought of letting the sitter stay the night with Toby. Always, Joe would drive Lee home and head back to town. “Tell Tobe I’ll be over around eleven, OK? He said he wanted to show me a chipmunk nest back by the creek. You think chipmunks really make nests?”

The first time they had gone to his glass-walled apartment, Lee was caught in counter-currents of fear and longing. She had to enfold this electrifying being and if she did, she was sure she would lose him. Everywhere they had gone on their evenings together, she’d seen women follow him with lustful eyes, women who saw what Lee saw, the taut, muscular body that moved with such assurance, the startling contrast of crowblack hair and skyblue eyes in olive skin. The women offered, in return, the lush figures that men clearly preferred to spare specimens such as herself.

Lee knew she was a fraud, a faux woman. She had managed to warn Joe that even the small curves she manifested were a deception, attributable to the padded bras she’d worn since realizing that Mother Nature was never going to come forth with secondary sex characteristics for this one forgotten daughter. In all her years of adulthood, she had been pregnant only once, despite years of unprotected married sex and an affair when she was a student. Lee appeared normal but was sure that she was not.

“Don’t worry about it, Leedle. I’m a leg man myself and I’m looking at those beautiful gams of yours. And what about that face? You’re gorgeous.”

Still, she did not believe him until that first time in his apartment when he had laughed and moved two broad hands under her blouse, under the false front that allowed her to pass as womanly.

“Hmmm. I hear Spencer Tracy saying, ‘Not much meat on ‘er but what’s there is choice.’ Let me take this armor off so I can see you. Please?”

Lee nodded a frightened Yes, shivering in the warm apartment as the huge windows filled with the swirling flakes of a rare snowfall. He held each of her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. “God, Leedle, look at you. Look how responsive you are.” He laughed in delight, watching the reaction he was causing.

She thought she would implode if she didn’t draw in every part of this beguiling man. She wrapped herself around him on his leather sofa, forgetting snow, forgetting fear, lost to any thoughts at all. He shouted as if he’d been shot, was still a moment and then was saying words to her that she could barely decipher. “Good God. I’m so sorry. But you are... that was... OK, don’t come back, stay there, I’ll get you down.” She wanted his tongue in her mouth but

he pulled back to watch her as his hands kept her nipples erect and found their way into her depths. Every muscle in her body tightened and exploded, tightened and exploded, until there was nothing left to give and she was sobbing, returning slowly to an apartment looking out over Washington DC on a late Friday night in February of 1964, holding Joseph van Heuvel Montagna in her arms and legs and heart.

On that night and on all the others that followed, Lee longed to stay with him in the severely modern apartment, to follow their lovemaking with a long night of dreaming on his shoulder, of waking in the night to enfold him again. But she knew that a sitter could not stand in for her in Toby's world, come morning. Good parents didn't do that, no matter how much they might want to dream the night away with their lovers.

She imagined full nights with Joe, with no child needing her to come home. Now, she could feel sea breezes and imagine the long talks they would have on the beach at Hilton Head—it would be the perfect break from work, from worry, from parenting.

She knew *his* children now—Rory, Maddy and Van—since the early spring day when he had said out-of-the-blue, “My kids have come up to visit and I’m wondering, could they stay with you and Tobe? Your house is so much bigger than my apartment and it’s, you know, homier. The girls can watch Tobe so you won’t need a sitter.” He was nodding the Yes he wanted from her, and grinning the up-on-the-right-down-on-the-left smile that Lee loved to see.

It was a logical and practical idea, and one of many signs that Joe Montagna was planning ahead, though the word “marriage” had not come up at all in their many long talks. Lee filled that vacuum with assumptions. For the divorced, she had mused, meeting the children might be equivalent to a younger couple’s introductions to parents—a sign of seriousness.

It would be a chance for Lee and Toby to get to know these kids Joe must miss terribly. Lee would get the house set up—Van could bunk in Toby’s trundle, Rory and Maddy could sleep in the guest room where there were twin beds fitted out in Bamberg-lace-trimmed linens. Lee would have to make a run to the Giant supermarket. And she was short one pillow; Toby had never had a sleepover guest so there was no pillow for the trundle. She’d probably need more towels as well. There was a linen store not far from the Giant. Then she would pick up a tourist brochure and see what concerts and exhibits might be on that she and Joe could take all four of them to see.

“Of course they can stay at the house.”

Joe stopped alongside a line of parked cars in front of his apartment building. “That’s great. I’ll circle the block while you go up and get them.”

“Right now? Wait. Do they know about this? Won’t they have to pack up all their stuff? And they haven’t met me yet. Won’t they be startled that you’re moving them to my place? How do I explain this?”

“Donworry aboutit.” His grin turned his eyes into little arcs of sky. “Just introduce yourself and tell them I said to hustle because I’m driving around and around down here.”

Introduce myself? They don’t know about me? Oh my God. I’m the Unknown Girlfriend. The reason their dad hasn’t come home. This is not good. This is not good at all.

“Wait, Joe, wait. I don’t know about this. How about I drive around and around and you go up and get them?”

“C’mon, Leedle. They’re just kids. Good kids. You can do this. For me.”

And so she had. Rising to his requirements, she went to the ninth floor and rang his bell. The door was opened by Rory, his fourteen-year-old, a tiny blonde with a stern expression and an angular body that was clothed in jeans and a tight purple sweater.

The girl responded to Lee’s explanation of her mission with a resigned sigh and a directive to equally blonde Maddy and little brother Van to get their stuff together “right now!”

Joe’s normally stark apartment was a disaster scene. The steel and leather furnishings that had come with the place were draped with jeans and shirts, skirts and underwear. Damp towels and crumpled snack wrappers lay where they’d been dropped and an open, horizontal Coke bottle had spilled half its contents onto the pale beige carpeting.

Maddy was slowly stuffing clothing into a plastic suitcase. Lee found it hard to believe she was only 12; the girl was already an assemblage of S curves, from her baby-lamb curls to her burgeoning breasts and hips. She moved languorously, reluctantly. And she was wearing makeup, lots of it.

Van came into the living room, flailing at the air with bent arms, creaking and clanking across the room in a metal body brace that encased him from armpits to heels, trying to reach for things on tables but missing them, knocking them over. “Rory, don’t forget my radio. I have to have my radio!” He spoke clearly, though with some hesitations between his words.

Lee knew she had to find a way to talk to Toby before she and Joe arrived with what she feared was a trio of Visigoths. She didn’t think Toby knew that Joe’s boy had cerebral palsy, and she was sure Toby had never encountered a child with an external metal skeleton and uncontrolled head-bobs and arm-waves. Her son would need some preparation for this.

She asked Joe to pull his loaded-to-the-gunnels car into the supermarket parking lot so she could run in for extra groceries, going first to the pay phone just inside the door.

When she and the Montagnas trooped into the house with suitcases and grocery bags, Toby had already gotten the sitter to help him pull out the trundle and make it up; his own pillow was at the head of the bed.

By the morning that Joe drove his children to National for their flight back to Georgia, Lee was deeply grateful that their mother had custody. It had begun when Maddy looked into Lee's kitchen, which was a cornucopia of fresh fruits and bakery breads and jugs of juice and varied cheeses and tins of cashews and almonds, and had moaned loudly, "Theah's nothin ta eat in this haowse."

Lee found Joe in the dining room, teaching the boys to play Go Fish, and asked him, after smiling nervously at Van, what in the world his children ate.

"Cokes. Chips. Oreos." Seeing Lee's disapproving frown, he'd added with his up-down grin, "Think Southern, Leedle. Dr. Peppers would be good. Guess we can't get Moonpies here, but they like Twinkies." He winked at Van. "Waddya say, guy? Twinkies, right?"

Toby looked expectantly at his mother, sure that this was her cue to explain how damaging processed flour and sugar were to children's health. She said nothing.

Maddy watched soaps and sitcoms that she played so loudly they made conversation impossible in the living room. She used the extra-long cord on the downstairs phone to make calls from the front porch, looking up defensively if anyone came within earshot, which Lee did often on her runs out for more supplies. The phone bill later confirmed Lee's assumption that the girl had been reporting to her mother, in hours-long detail.

Van's radio was an audio counterforce to Maddy's television-watching, the boy blasting country and western songs over the organ music and laugh tracks of "Maddy's programs." He seemed puzzled by Toby's simple board games and found the terrain behind the house too hazardous to join in on sorties into the woods. Van returned always to the pleasure of the twanging voices and strong beats from his radio, beats his head and arms tried ineptly to follow.

Rory, seemingly the only sibling who read, was not interested in any of the books in the house. When she asked Lee where she kept her magazines, Lee told her that the current *Atlantic Monthly* was under the *Washington Post* on the living room coffee table. Frowning, Rory flipped through the pages and tossed it back unread. "I mean *magazines*, like *LOOK* or the *Saturday Evening Post* or *LIFE*." Lee had picked up copies on her way home the next day.

The girl sighed a great deal and issued endless orders to Maddy to do various services for Van. Professing boredom with every outing Lee suggested, Rory at least seemed to like Toby, ruffling his hair and calling him a cute little Yankee. Lee noted with relief that Rory was the responsible one, keeping an eye on what the others did, ordering them to stop anything that might be injurious to them, although property damage didn't seem to be on her list of things to prevent. Lee decided she could deal with the chaos as long as it was temporary and as long as no one was hurt; she would not have to insult Joe by calling in a sitter for the boys.

Toby trailed after both girls, trying with little success to engage them in the games and walks that Van could not do. After days of being ignored herself, Lee came home from work with an imported recording for Maddy and Rory, and books for Van and Toby.

“We can read yours tonight, if you like, Van. Toby always loves to hear a good story, so what if you read this out loud...”

Van closed stiffly curled fingers around the thin book and creaked away from her. She watched him lurch his way to the kitchen and winced at how difficult every move was for him. If her son had such overwhelming physical problems, she doubted that manners would be at the top of her agenda for him.

She put the 45 on the turntable. “This just came in at a record shop near my office. A group in England. I thought you girls might like them.”

As “Love Me Do” bounced out of the hi fi, both girls rolled their eyes and announced that they were walking to the community pool for an evening swim and a dinner of hot dogs.

Lee could imagine no reason Cindy Lou Montagna hadn’t civilized these two perfectly healthy children. Switching the stereo to WGMS classical, Lee put two of the thick chops she’d brought home into the freezer. Her toe encountered the book she’d just given Van, Tolkien’s *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*. Wiping sticky pink Dr. Pepper from the pages, she noted that she would have to do better at figuring out who these children were and what they might like.

Every time Lee looked a question at Joe, he responded with the grin and the upturned hands that said Kids will be kids. But she was to make changes, nevertheless. At a band concert in Rock Creek Park, their improvised family of six sat behind a well-dressed couple and their daughter, a ten-year-old in a pinafore, her Alice-in-Wonderland hair tied back with a bow. As Joe’s kids ignored the program and stared off into space, and Toby studied the horn players and the conductor, the little Alice sat in amazement at all she saw and heard.

Joe leaned close to Lee and whispered, “I want my girls to be like her. You could do it.” But these days of observing Aurora Belle and Madelena Lucinda Montagna had convinced Lee that they had an excess of attitude to match the excess of vowels in their names. She would never teach them anything, nor she thought, would anyone else. Smart, suspicious Rory had a self-generated surround of ice separating her from any influences at all, much less those of some woman her father was dating. In Lee’s company, the girl said little to nothing, always watching the scene, a chronic frown on her small face. And not-bright Maddy, the budding Wife of Bath—Lee thought she’d have as much luck changing her as holding back a dam that had already cracked. Lee wondered about even getting her to understand the simplest things—Maddy grabbed food from across the table and talked with her mouth full.

Joe beamed at Lee. “They see how you are. You can teach them to be ladies, like you.” She’d laughed, thinking he couldn’t be serious.

And there was Van. The boy named “Of.” Lee had looked up *heuvel* and found it meant hill; Joe’s Dutch ancestors were “of the hill.” And his son was Van Heuvel Montagna, Of-the-Hill Mountain. Names meant something. They not only should sound good, they should have good meanings. Like Tobias Andrew Pitt. Three syllables, two, then one. His given names meaning “Goodness of God” and “Manly.” Even Toby’s initials pleased her. At least Joe’s mother had known to give her son a real first name. Lee hated being so critical of Cindy Lou, a woman she’d never met, but surely it must have been hard for someone as bright as Joe to be married to the woman he described as a dumb-as-a-brick cracker.

Lee wondered what Van’s level of comprehension might be, whether he understood anything she or anyone else said to him. There was a look in his eye that conveyed not intelligence so much as cunning, a *modus operandi* a child so handicapped might develop to survive. Lee saw no way past his limitations and his calculations.

But the three of them had left. Their mother had custody. Georgia was far away. Joe’s kids would only come to Washington from time to time. In all the other times, she would have just Joe and Toby and the sweet, strong life they were making together, a life that foretold a happy marriage.

For now, after they took Toby to her parents, it would be, for a little while, just the two of them, Joe and Lee, caring about each other, figuring out how she would make a go of the White House job, planning a future in which she, Lee Palmer Pitt—or Lee Palmer Montagna—would be going through the great iron gates every morning of the week, not a tourist but a staffer, an insider, at the hub of power, even if she were the one insider who was hoping not to be propelled back out the gates, an imposter among the powerful.

Mrs. Palmer, her plain face carefully made up, was dressed in a frilly blouse and bright suit as if she were on her way to St. Mary’s for Sunday mass.

“So you’re the young man Lee’s told us so much about.”

For heaven’s sake, Mom. I just told you about him day before yesterday. Don’t make it sound like I’ve been gushing, or like you and I chitchat every morning before breakfast. And ‘young man’? What are we here, 17? Still, she’s trying. She’s being friendly. Which is more than I can say for Dad.

“Yes he is. Mom, Dad, this is Joe.”

Joe reached a hand toward Commander Palmer, who shook it seriously and briskly, just once, as if he were returning a junior officer’s salute. He was taller than Joe, and even with his hair white and his skin lined by years, he was still the handsomest man Lee had ever seen. “Welcome to South Carolina, Joseph.”

“Thank you. I’m glad to be here. It’s a pretty town, from what I saw of it as we drove in.”

“Mom, can we put Toby’s bag in the back room?”

“Yes, of course. And yours? I made up both the beds in there. You are staying the night aren’t you? After the flight and the drive from Augusta? You must be tired. And we have this new sofa bed in the den, Joe. It’s really very comfortable.” Mrs. Palmer was smiling an entreaty at Joe, trying uneasily to head off any thought that he and Lee might share a room in the tidy little brick house to which the Palmers had retired. Lee was sure there had been a serious conversation earlier that included the shouted words from her father, “I don’t care how old she is, in my house there’s no shacking up!”

“That’s sweet, Mom, but, like I told you on the phone, we’re booked on the island starting tonight, so we’d better get going.” She knew she couldn’t bear further delay in having Joe’s arms around her. There was no more comforting thought than imagining her head in the hollow of his shoulder through a night of sea sounds outside their windows. She would absorb his strength, take in his courage, making her strong enough to march right into the White House job and know that she would do it well.

Her mother looked relieved; there would be no confrontation. The Commander eyed Joe warily, making curt responses to this stranger’s overtures, which Lee knew were overly casual; Joe was making himself too at ease in a house where he was an unknown quantity and to her father, it seemed, a highly suspect one at that.

Still, Joe was clearly charming her mother, who was going to the kitchen for the coffee she insisted he’d need for the rest of the drive.

How about me? It’s OK if I doze off and drive into a tree? Oh, that’s right. Women don’t drive if there’s a man in the car.

“Not me, Mom. I had a cup on the plane, so I could drive here.” She ordered herself to stop, to not get caught up in the old discordant dance.

Mrs. Palmer handed Joe a mug of the coffee Lee knew was chicory-laced and strong, the way Ernest Palmer liked it. Mrs. Palmer turned away, blocking Lee’s view of the tray that Lee had already seen did not hold another mug.

Toby took his grandfather’s spotted hand. “Granpa, can we go to the lake? Quick? Before it gets dark?”

The Commander winked at his grandson and beckoned him out the kitchen door and into the garage. They returned quickly, Toby carrying a small fishing rod, his grandfather looking down on him with total delight.

“Mom! Joe! It’s just like Granpa’s but small so it fits me. And he’s got a new boat. So we’re going right now.”

Lee stopped herself from telling her son to change into old clothes, and watched through the sheer living room curtains as he clambered into his grandfather’s red truck.

“Well! That wasn’t very polite of my husband. I do apologize, Joe.”

“It’s fine, Emily. And it’s nice that Tobe’s so excited to be here.”

Lee wondered if her father could have left any faster, though she knew departure was better than the inquiry he might have begun had he stayed. What are your intentions, Joseph? And your prospects? It was also just as well that Joe did not have the chance to address her father as “Ernie,” which she was afraid he might do.

What were Joe’s prospects? Well, he was going to be the Secretary of Labor someday, that’s all, and he’d do a fine job of it. Lee knew that such aspirations were not understandable in this household. Here, success was keeping your head down and the mortgage paid, being nice to the neighbors, never missing Sunday services. A Cabinet post, or even a minor job at the White House, was just a way to be conspicuous, to act as if you were better than other people.

A sharp pinch on her arm made Lee pull away from her mother, but Mrs. Palmer stayed close and whispered, “Don’t scowl like that. It’s not pretty at all. That’s probably why you lost your job—no one likes a girl who’s always grouchy.”

Well, I’m not always. Not everywhere. Just here, where everything I do is the wrong thing.

“Sorry, Mom. Thanks for taking care of Toby. We better get going.”

Joe was giving Mrs. Palmer the up-down grin and the skyblue crescents as he pulled himself out of the chair, and she was beaming at him.

“Are you sure you can’t stay a little while, when you come back for Toby? Lee never comes home. Ever.”

“Mom, I keep telling you, I never lived in this house. Or this town. The house in San Diego was home.”

“But *were* here. And your dad’s family is all over this valley. So you should come. Your brother came for Easter. Joe, you’ll bring her back to stay a while, won’t you?”

Lee smiled to herself at the mention of her little brother. She’d wondered how long it would take her mother to put him forth once more as the exemplar of the good offspring. Her brother, the one whose college education her parents were saving for in the years Lee was working her way through Maryland, the one who dropped out after one disastrous semester, the one who had joined the Army rather than the Navy, but who went to mass every Sunday and came home for Easter. The one who was doing just fine.

Lee would have to call him now. They’d never had much to say to each other, being too far apart in age for conversations beyond “Get out of my room!” and “I’m going to tell Mom you’re drinking coffee!”

Now that he was a my-country-right-or-wrong soldier who did not like Lee’s opinion of the growing war, they had even less to say to each other, but joking worked. Lee smiled at the thought of calling him to say, “Mom always liked you best,” in a Smothers Brothers voice.

Joe laughed on his way to the door. "I'm at her command, Emily. At her command."

As Lee followed him toward their rented Buick, her mother pinched her arm again. "You be nice to him, you hear? That's a very sweet man."

One that I of course don't deserve, being so unsweet myself.

"I'll try not to scare him off, Mom."

She opened the French doors, letting in a rush of sweet night air and the sound of waves, small whispering ones, unlike the massive California breakers she remembered, rushing and retreating, but still the sea, the pulsating sea. The long sheer robe she'd packed billowed with the curtains until Joe came out of the shower and pulled her back into the vast bedroom of the suite he'd booked.

"It's late, it's been a long day, it's time to sleep, Leedle my girl."

The lovely suite, her dear Joe, his solid, warm shoulder, the sounds of the waves, the gentle touch of the soft breeze—it was so perfect she tried to stay awake, taking it all in, breathing quietly, not thinking about the serious matters that they would be wrestling with tomorrow. For now, tonight, there was only the sea, and Joe.

"What is it? Leedle? What's wrong?"

She was sitting up, her breath coming in rapid gasps, her hair damp with perspiration. "They're drowning! I can't reach them!" She shook her head rapidly and stared in horror out the open doors to the moon-glittered water.

"It was a nightmare, just a nightmare. Everything's fine, nobody's drowning."

Burrowing into his warm chest she told him what she had seen, what she saw on so many terrifying nights. She was in dark water, unable to breathe and all around her there were drowning men, spiraling downward, their arms and legs moving with loose, hideous grace. She struggled to reach the surface, to find air to breathe as the men circled all around her, moving inexorably down, pressed by the weight of the water. Their eyes bored into her, demanding to know why she was not lifting them with her, up to the light and the air they needed to live. A voice, a woman's voice, encircled her, but she could not understand what it was saying.

"Don't cry, Leedle. Don't cry. It's not your fault. Shhh. Shhh. Sleep. Everything's fine. I've got you. Nobody's drowning. You're safe. You're safe." He wrapped her in his beautiful, veined arms, gently cradling her into a peaceful sleep, without dreams or nightmares.

Joe was diving into the breakfast that had been laid out on the balcony of their suite, pouring himself coffee, adding more bacon to his plate, not looking at her.

"Do you remember what you told me last night, your nightmare?"

She smiled at him. “Thank you for bringing me out of it. Sometimes it’s hard to believe it’s not real, hard to get back to sleep. But I slept so well... thank you.”

“You were really upset. Hell, you were frantic. I felt terrible for you.”

“And you were wonderful. I’ve had that nightmare since I was a little kid. And you made it go away.”

He put down his coffee and leaned on the table, watching her intently. “You can’t save those men, Leedle. But you can save me.”

“You? And what would *you* need saving from?” She watched a butter pat melt into her warm biscuit and reached for the honey pot.

“From being a lonely old bachelor. In New York.”

She looked up, a spoonful of honey poised in mid air.

“I’ve got a job offer, too. In New York. There’s this guy I met and he wants to start a consulting business with me. He’s got the capital and I know all the people we need to get government contracts.” Joe was talking rapidly, pouring coffee, dispatching his omelet. “We’ll be doing Great Society work, important stuff that’ll help working people get some breaks. We’re calling the company Montagna & Altridge Associates, MAA. Good, isn’t it? And there’s this apartment, the bottom half of an old brownstone on the West Side. Big. Lots of room for Tobe, and for my kids when they visit. Thick walls so it’s quiet. It’s even got a garden. You’ll love New York, I promise. My divorce will be final in two weeks. Marry me, Leedle.”

Lee struggled with the deluge of information. Joe was not divorced. He was going to New York. All this time, he had never said he was not divorced but surely he had realized that she assumed.... He’d just said Marry me. He had made all these moves, started a business, found an apartment, all without saying a word to her.

It was a done deal and it was not the dream. The dream was being Lee Montagna, yes, but in Washington, making a go of the White House job, living in the dear old house she had chosen, the one by the creek, with her Joe and her Toby, making the life she had begun complete, perfect. The dream was not upending everything and starting over in OhMyGodNewYork.

A sound that was not quite a voice was reaching to her from the sea. It felt of rage and sorrow, but she couldn’t make out the words, nor understand the warning. Joe pulled her up from her chair, wiped the tears from her cheeks and held her. His voice was close, reassuring, drowning out the whispered message from the sea.