

One



The whispers have grown much louder lately. For months I've pretended to ignore them as I stockpiled, bit by bit, the things I would need. When I went to bed last night I still didn't know that today would be the day. Today even ordinary events will take on an entirely new significance. Today everything is about saying good-bye.

I awoke this morning to the dazzling, jewel-like reflection of sunlight dancing on the surface of the ocean. Reflexively, I turned and reached for Catherine, just as I had so many other mornings. Then I remembered again—*Catherine is gone! Catherine is dead!* I felt the undertow drag me back down into

the grief I've felt every day for the past nine and a half months.

I understand that it's quite normal to be depressed like this after a loss, but knowing that hasn't helped me at all. The grief has settled inside me like layers and layers of silt deposited in my body, in my being—so very heavy. With great effort I break the pull of gravity, force myself up, and drag myself to the bathroom. I do have a little extra incentive this morning. I want some time to myself before Gary arrives. Gary comes every day to walk with me whether I feel like it or not, largely I suspect because his wife, Karen, sees me as a desperate, drowning man—a community-service project.

I shrug off my boxers and climb into the shower, trying to bring myself to life. It doesn't help much. While combing my hair, I stop to stare at myself in the mirror. People have often told me I look a little like Robert Redford when he was my age. I've seen some of his older movies, and I did see some resemblance. We both have thick sandy hair, blue eyes, and the same general body type. Thanks to Gary, and to the fact that I have very little appetite, I look as lean and wiry as Redford, too. But standing here, staring at the image in the mirror, the resemblance is largely overshadowed and distorted by the sadness I see.

I slip on a pair of wrinkled khaki shorts and a slightly less wrinkled white T-shirt I find tossed in the corner by the dresser. On my way to the kitchen, I stop to gaze out the living room window at the clear, crisp, beautiful day outside. I know it should stir me, but it doesn't. Over the months I've learned not eating only makes me feel worse, so I fix myself a bowl of cereal and a pot of strong coffee. I can only make my way through about half of the cereal before pushing it aside, but the coffee tastes good and the caffeine energizes me a little. I pour a second cup before slouching down on the couch to reread an e-mail I got from Ricardo three days ago.

Hey Bro,

It's far too dangerous to stay here any longer. The countryside is swarming with rebels. WHO is sending a helicopter to fly us to their office in Brazzaville in the morning. It isn't clear yet where we'll be assigned next. It could be anywhere—maybe even back in the States.

This new bug has already killed hundreds here. Nothing in our medical arsenal seems to touch it. All we could do was to quarantine the village and comfort the dying. Basically, we're just a glorified burial team. It doesn't help that I'm exhausted. I haven't slept much since we got here and when I do sleep, I keep having these crazy dreams about Indians. What the hell's that about? Obviously, I need some rest.

Catherine's death hit me hard. I still can't believe she contracted that virus at work—right in downtown San Francisco. I'm so sorry you didn't get to see each other again, Matthew, but if she hadn't been quarantined with the others...if she'd made it home...you'd both be gone. I'll miss her. I'll miss the happy times we all had together. Will there ever be happy times again? I sure hope so.

Oh, by the way, it's time to get off your ass and start living again!

*Te Amo,
Ricardo*

I type a brief response, telling Ricardo about my plans to leave Cambria in an attempt to join the world of the living. I don't say so explicitly, but this is my first good-bye of the day. I can't imagine that I'll ever see Ricardo again.

It surprised me when Ricardo mentioned his dreams. There have been a couple of mornings recently when I awakened with

fading sounds of drumming and hazy images of Native Americans still playing in my head. I thought those strange dream residues were probably just effects of the sleeping pills I've been taking. Still, it is a curious coincidence.

Ricardo is one of the good guys. After finishing medical school in Argentina, he came to the U.S. to specialize in infectious diseases. He took a job with the CDC, but when outbreaks of epidemic-prone illnesses started popping up all over the globe, he transferred to the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network of the World Health Organization. He and his team respond to disease outbreaks anywhere they occur in the world.

I met Ricardo in a martial arts class during my first year of graduate school. We were only casual friends, but he talked me into going to Japan with him to study with an Aikido master at the end of the school year. Ricardo's like that. He follows his interests wherever they lead—anywhere in the world. He's spontaneous, and he thrives on adventure. Having traveled extensively, he proved to be a very knowledgeable and confident traveling companion. He took me under his wing and made sure I had a great time on that trip. After that, I was hooked on travel—and on my friendship with Ricardo.

Catherine and I got together in the middle of my second year at Michigan. She was there working on a master's degree in creative writing. Catherine was bright, polished, charming, and very pretty. I loved being around her. Fortunately, she and Ricardo got along well from the start. They had a lot in common, having both grown up with fathers who were doctors. The following summer the three of us traveled to Bali. For the next two years, Catherine and I shared a close friendship and a series of incredible adventures with Ricardo. I haven't seen him since he started working for WHO, but we've kept in touch. Ricardo is still my window into the larger world.

After graduate school, Catherine and I got married and moved to San Francisco where she had been offered an editorial position with HarperCollins Publishers. I accepted an entry level job with RH&R, a large international corporate consulting firm. Catherine and I were both quite ambitious, and we worked hard to establish ourselves in our fields. Our hard work quickly began to pay off in a rapid succession of raises and promotions. We were well on our way to meeting our career goals.

However, our goals changed dramatically once we discovered Cambria. We were on a rare weekend getaway drive down the coast to Los Angeles, and we stopped the first night at a little motel on Moonstone Beach. The next morning we took a long walk along that beautiful sandy beach. We loved it so much there that we decided to scrap the trip to L.A. and we spent the rest of the weekend exploring Cambria and the surrounding area. On the drive back to San Francisco, we set a new goal for ourselves. We decided that we would move to Cambria as soon as it was conceivably possible. We started saving money and began exploring ways to support ourselves here.

I glance at the clock, remembering that Gary will be arriving soon. I pour another cup of coffee and step out onto the deck. It's a steep, forty-two step climb from the street up to the house, but once you're up here the street below and all the neighboring houses disappear. Here above the tree tops, all you see is the surrounding nature. When people visit, they always say exactly the same thing: "It's like living in a tree house."

The house is situated at the southern edge of town. Beyond the trees, only a slope of deep green pasture separates the house from the sparkling sea. It is a magnificent view. For the past few weeks I've spent the largest part of each day sitting here, trying to hold on to memories. Catherine and I both loved

it here. There's still a part of me that wants to stay—a big part. How can I possibly leave this place...and Catherine...behind?

To be absolutely honest, there have been times, darker times, when I sat here and thought about how easy it would be to take my own life. Catherine's gone, leaving my life overcast with an almost constant cloud of grief. I have systematically removed myself from my work, my family, and my friends over the past several months. The outside world no longer holds any charm for me. Why bother starting again?

I was surprised to discover that I have my reasons. For one thing, experience has already taught me that one day I will get past this grief. I can remember feeling bad—not this bad, but bad—right after my mom died. That pain softened each year and now comes to visit only occasionally. I know I'll never stop missing Catherine, but no matter how sad I feel right now I know it will pass. I can't imagine how that could ever happen, but I know it will.

There's something else, too—something I've never talked about with anyone. It's about those whispers I hear. I know it may sound crazy, but I believe my world has come unraveled for a reason. I believe I have a part to play in these unsettled, troubled times, although I don't have the slightest idea what that part might be. I would never have voluntarily chosen to change a thing about my life with Catherine, but I wasn't given a choice. It was all just ripped out from under me and created emptiness in me that wasn't there before. Now, as the outside noise grows quieter and less distracting, the call inside grows louder and clearer. That's why I know I have to live...and why I know I have to leave.

I hear Gary bounding up the garden steps. He doesn't notice me as I move to the railing to watch him climb. Gary is a handsome, muscular guy in his mid-sixties. He has a full

shock of black hair with just enough gray mixed in to make him look distinguished, but he carries himself with the physical ease of a much younger man. I allowed Gary to remain in my life because he has never shown any of the discomfort other people do when they hear I've lost my wife.

"Hey, Gary, I'm on the deck. Come on up."

Gary's deep, resonant voice booms back up to me, "It's such a great day. I think I'll just wait out here in the garden. You'll be right out, right?"

"Yeah, I'll be right out," I say, but I take my time. I'm always reluctant to begin these walks even though once I get started I'm usually grateful that Gary has dragged me along.

Descending the steps together, Gary unwittingly raises the very topic I'd hoped to avoid until the end of the walk. "Karen wants you to come over for dinner Friday night."

"Um, I'd love to, Gary, but I'm afraid I won't be able to make it."

"Oh, don't give me that shit again, Matthew! Sure you can. You can't just sit alone in that house all the time."

"It turns out I won't be here Friday, Gary. I'm leaving Cambria...moving on. I just made the decision this morning."

Gary absorbs this news for a few steps. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm dead serious. I'm leaving tonight."

"I'm shocked!" Gary says. He actually does look shocked. "You love it here. You'd never leave Cambria. You're scaring me, Matthew. You aren't planning to...hurt yourself or do something crazy are you? I know you've been down, but...."

"No, Gary. Take it easy!"

We make the right turn at the bottom of the hill and start walking north along a street lined on both sides with houses. It leads to another section of preserve where our walking trail

begins. Gary has been walking unusually slowly, haltingly, but now he stops dead in his tracks directly in front of me, blocking my way and looking way too serious.

I try my best to put on a reassuring smile. "Look, don't worry, okay. I'm not going to hurt myself. I promise! This is a good thing." I look around to see if anyone is witnessing this spectacle. "Can we please keep walking?"

Still wary, Gary looks me over, considering whether he can trust what I've just told him. Deciding he can, he starts walking again.

"When I lost Catherine, I lost Cambria, too. I still love it here, but it just isn't the same. I'll keep the house for now. Given the current state of the housing market there's no way I could sell it anyway. I have been down, but I think I might be holding on to the sadness just to keep Catherine's memory from slipping away." I surprise even myself with this admission.

Gary gives me a sheepish, one-sided smile. "Great! I'm glad to hear that, Matthew. I really thought you'd rebound sooner, but you just kept getting more withdrawn. Karen's been worried, too. She sure as hell will be relieved to hear we've had this little talk."

Gary seems assured. He lets the topic drop and walks on absorbed in his thoughts. We reach the preserve and begin walking on a trail that skirts the jagged coastal cliffs for about a mile and a half. I'm grateful for this break in the conversation. I'm really going to miss this place, and I want to absorb all the sights, smells and sounds one last time.

Gary picks up the conversation as if there had never been an interruption. "So, why the hell are you leaving?"

I haven't attempted to put this into words yet, even in my own mind, but I give it a try. "It has to do with what we were talking about before. I have to make a fresh start."

"That has to be hard, Matthew...but that's exactly why I think you should do it right here...in that old house you love, in this town you love, and surrounded by people who love and support you."

"I can't do it here, Gary—not in that house, not in this town, not now. I just can't. Cambria was part of a dream I shared with Catherine. That dream shattered when she died."

"But, you can rebuild that dream."

"No, I can't. That dream was based on the illusion that Cambria somehow existed apart from the rest of the world. We thought the problems out there could never find us here. Ricardo tried repeatedly to make me see that we could never escape the things that are happening—overpopulation, water and food shortages, weather changes, social and economic system failures, terrorism...disease. I just wouldn't listen. I didn't want to hear it.

"Then Catherine died. Huh! Catherine couldn't die—not that young, and certainly not the way she did—not in my illusion. Now I can't close my eyes and go back to sleep. I can't dream a dream based on a lie. For me, it comes down to a simple choice: Do I try to hold on to a fiction—which would be impossible for me now anyway—or do I start looking for a different future...one that offers me a new, open-eyed part to play?" I don't bother to mention the whispers.

We reach the end of the walking trail where another residential area begins. We stop and stare up the spectacular coastline. No matter how many times I've walked this path, I'm still amazed by this view. "Good-bye," I whisper as we turn around and begin walking back the way we came.

"Well, at least I'm glad to hear you want to put your energy into something positive instead of moping around that house all the time. So, where do you plan to go?"

"I plan to check out a community in Montana I heard about."

Gary looks surprised. "I've known you for almost four years, and I've never heard you express any interest in communities...or in Montana for that matter. Where'd this come from?"

"I learned about the community almost a year ago. Catherine wanted to get more involved in the social community here in Cambria, so she persuaded me to go to a Sunday service at the Unity church. Midway through the meeting a couple I'd never seen before walked in and sat down. There was something vaguely familiar about the man, like I'd met him before somewhere. The thoughtful, unusually honest comments he made during the service made him even more interesting.

"Anyway, I was intrigued by the guy, but would have been hesitant to approach him. Then, at the end of the meeting he got up, walked right over to me, and hugged me like a long-lost brother."

"Didn't that seem a little odd?"

"It was odd, but for some reason I felt the same way. William told me that he and his wife, Liz, were on their way to join a community in Montana. They had driven down the coast to visit his mother in Santa Barbara before they made the move. On the drive back, William felt a strong urge to stop in Cambria. Liz had lived here before she met William and had participated in Unity, so she wanted to stop by to say hello to her old friends. It was just a coincidence that they happened to be there that day.

"That wasn't the end of it, though. I agreed to get together later. When we hadn't heard from William by late that afternoon part of me was relieved, but another part was disappointed."

"Personally, I would have stopped at the hug."

"Sure, I had reservations, but I was fascinated by that feeling of familiarity. William finally did call and, even with that second chance to back out, I still agreed to meet for dinner. Catherine didn't share or understand my curiosity, but she agreed to go along.

"At dinner, William explained that he left a management position with a large construction company to attempt to make a difference in the world. He made a personal commitment to always follow his intuition and do what he felt inspired to do—like stopping in Cambria. I know that sounds a little peculiar, but he seemed very sincere. Of course, nothing William said seemed at all relevant to our lives."

"Catherine must have been squirming," Gary notes with a smile.

"She was." I have to laugh, remembering the expression on her face while William told his story.

"I just can't see you in a community, Matthew."

"For some reason William could. He seemed to take it for granted that we'd be joining them there at some point in the future. Before they left that evening he even wrote down the directions. We never heard from William or Liz again, but for some reason I kept those directions."

"Catherine would never have considered doing anything like that."

"That's for sure," I say, laughing again. "Catherine was quite surprised that I went along as far as I did. She kidded me about it for weeks. After a while, I forgot all about the whole episode. Recently though, I've been thinking a lot about what William said. I think he was talking about me...and about now."

"Matthew, are you sure you want to take a risk like this...based on a short conversation with two people you don't even know?"

"I'm not usually an impulsive guy, but this time I'm going with my gut. I have to do this, Gary."

"How do you see yourself fitting into a place like that? What will you do there?"

"Honestly, I can't imagine what I have to contribute. William grew up on a farm and then worked in construction most of his adult life. Liz worked as an EMT and a midwife for years. It was easy to see what they had to offer. I'm still not sure what I can add, but this is an opportunity to be part of something new and exciting...maybe something better. I think we need some new options now. I know I certainly do."

"It may not seem that great here in Cambria right now, Matthew, but things are still a lot better here than they are most places. This is still a relatively safe place to be. It could be dangerous there. Have you considered that?"

"I realize that, but it feels pretty dangerous to me right here. I'm willing to take my chances. Anyway, what do I have to lose?"

We've made our way back up the hill and are standing at the bottom of the steps to my house. Gary has taken his best shot at convincing me to stay, and he can see that my mind is made up. I can see that's sinking in now. We have come to the good-bye part.

"Don't worry about the house, Matthew. I'll keep an eye on it."

"Thanks, Gary. I'd appreciate that. If I decide to sell, I'll let you know. Gary, I'm really grateful that you've hung in there with me. Our walks and talks have helped a lot. You and Karen have both been great friends, even though I know I've been pretty lousy company. Please give her my love, will you?"

Gary nods. I notice tears in the corners of his eyes. Now I'm surprised. I wouldn't have guessed that my decision would

have such a strong effect on him. In a very uncustomary gesture, Gary awkwardly hugs me. He pats my back in a manly way as he pulls away. Then he turns and briskly strides off down the hill.

“Good-bye, Gary,” I shout after him.

Two



As I climb the steps back up to my little tree house, I hear the metallic scraping of a rake. I search the shaded areas at the back of the garden until I locate the source of the sound. The gardener is gathering together a pile of broken pine branches that must have fallen during the wind storm last week. It's like stumbling upon a nature fairy. Hope is a short, slight, Asian woman. I'm guessing that she must be in her mid-thirties, but it's really hard to tell. Even wearing an oversized blue work shirt with rolled up sleeves, baggy khaki pants, and scuffed work boots, she still manages to look like a fairy. Hope always makes me smile.

By the time Catherine and I bought this property, the beautiful terraced gardens were completely overgrown. We could see the buried potential, but we had neither the time nor the energy to do the extensive work required to resurrect them. One weekend Hope stopped by with her daughter, Lily, and offered to help out. She could see the same possibilities that we saw, but she saw much more. Hope touched and smelled the earth as if it was sacred and talked about the plants, shrubs, and old trees like they were intimate friends. We hired her on the spot.

I don't know much about Hope's background. Apparently, she came here about ten years ago to be with Lily's father, Travis. He lives in Moro Bay and works on the fishing boats there. They never married, and now Travis is living with another woman. From what I hear, he treats Lily well, and I'm glad about that. She's such a sweet kid.

Once I asked Hope where she got her green thumb. She told me she grew up on a small family farm near Santa Rosa. Her grandparents built a successful business selling produce to the surrounding local restaurants and specialty grocers. When they got old, her father took over the farm, and Hope grew up working in the gardens. She inherited her love of the earth from her father.

I liked that Hope never mentioned Catherine's death. She just came by as usual to do her work. Once in a while she would bring me something, fresh-baked muffins or maybe a casserole. I much preferred that approach.

The last thing Hope would do at the end of her workday was to water the plants on the deck. Sometimes I would join her and Lily there while she watered and we would talk. As time went on, I started making it a point to be out on the deck at the end of the day. I enjoyed those little talks, and I enjoyed

spending time with her and Lily. Eventually, it came to be a ritual that I looked forward to all week.

"Hi, Hope. I had no idea that many branches had come down. Do you want some help hauling them to the street?"

"Oh! Hi, Matthew." I can tell that I have startled her out of a deep reverie. "I think I can handle it, but thanks. It doesn't look like they did much damage. By the way, I picked up a couple of ferns to plant in that empty space over by the stairs. I hope that's okay. Are you just getting back from your walk?"

"Yes, it was a perfect day to walk the cliff trail. Listen, I've got some things to do inside, but let me know if you need any help. Hey, where's Lily?"

"Lily stayed at her father's a couple of extra days this week. It's been a nice little break."

"Will you have time for wine later?"

"You bet. I'll meet you on the deck at five."

I won't be looking forward to that time together nearly as much as usual. I'm going to have to tell Hope that I'm leaving...and say good-bye. At least she's alone today. It would be even harder to face Lily. I've grown quite fond of her. Her cheeriness penetrates even into my dreary world.

Once inside, after pouring myself a glass of water, I begin compiling a list of the people I need to inform about my new plans. I haven't done any work for the consulting firm since the funeral, but I should send Bob a formal resignation. It won't come as a shock. Consulting work has been dropping off steadily for the last several years. The companies we worked with have been struggling to survive and consulting was one of first things they cut. I never did like the sales part of my job—the hustle—but I really hated begging for work the last couple of years. RH&R has lost most of its major accounts and become a ghost of its former self.

Luckily, I anticipated the downturn in the economy. I knew companies would be looking for ways to cut external consulting costs, so I devised a strategy they could use to assess and manage problems internally. When I mentioned my idea to Catherine one evening, she convinced me I should write a book about the process. Catherine helped me to conceptualize, outline, draft, and edit the book. Then she found me an agent, helped broker a contract, and designed the publicity campaign. She basically made it happen.

Thank God Catherine helped me get that book published. I lost most of my retirement investments when the market crashed. The advance and royalties from that book and the speaking engagement income it generated have kept me afloat. I wonder whether at some level she could have known what was coming.

Sitting at the computer sipping coffee, I draft the resignation letter and my good-bye to Bob. Bob supported my dream by allowing me to continue working for RH&R out of my home office here in Cambria. I owe him a lot, and I want him to know it.

I consider saving time by sending the same message to my brother Chris and my sister Melissa, but I decide to write two different e-mails. I haven't heard from Chris since Catherine's funeral, but Melissa calls or e-mails almost every week. Melissa was close to Catherine, and I know she was very sad about what happened. I also know that she cares about me. I keep Chris's message brief, sticking to the facts—what facts there are. Melissa gets a longer, personal note.

How can I think about Melissa and Chris without Dad and Mom coming to mind? Dad died of a heart attack four years ago. He was the center of gravity in our family, and the rest of us simply constellated ourselves around him as best we could.

Dad was an economics professor at Northwestern University and he carried the ivory tower with him everywhere he went, like a shell on his back. He was stuffy, self-absorbed, impatient, and judgmental—not easy to get along with.

Mom, Mom, Mom! Mom was the heart of the family, and her constant support and love made up for Dad's aloofness and harsh comments. From all appearances, it didn't seem as though Mom would even notice if Dad were gone, but she did. She was never the same after he died. It was as if her backbone had collapsed. She only lasted a couple of years without him. I loved her and still miss her.

If I really intend to leave tonight, I'd better start thinking about what I need to pack. I start walking from room to room, considering what I should take with me and discover that I have opened Pandora's Box. Each object I see evokes another memory of Catherine. How did I live in this house every day without noticing all of these traces of her?

Catherine and I decorated the house with the Oriental artwork we collected on our trips with Ricardo. Even as poor students we tried to bring back at least one special piece from each trip. The house is full of those objects. Overwhelmed by memories, I crumple into a chair. I'm still not prepared to say good-bye to Catherine, even after all these months. I look around until I spot a small bronze Buddha we haggled for in a riverside antique market in Bangkok. I stick it in my pocket. All these other things will stay behind. I say a tearful good-bye to each of them...and to the memory of Catherine each holds.

In the bedroom, I pack my well-worn travel kit with essential grooming items and then fill a suitcase with underwear, socks, and casual clothes. As an afterthought, I toss in a couple of sweaters, a warm coat, and my hiking boots—it gets cold in Montana. I leave all of my suits and ties behind, hanging next

to Catherine's clothes in the closet. I heave a sigh of relief that I've avoided the eventuality of having to clear Catherine's things out. I'm clearing out instead.

Seeing Catherine's things reminds me to drop an e-mail to her mom and dad. I've never felt close to either of Catherine's parents. I was only their daughter's husband, never someone they came to know as a person. At least now we share a common bond of grief. That's something. I type a brief message to inform them of my departure and to extend my wish that they find peace. I owe them that much; at least I owe it to Catherine.

Catherine's father is a respected orthopedic surgeon in Seattle and her mom is the consummate physician's wife, always hosting gala parties and engaging in countless charity projects. Catherine was their only child, and I don't think either of them really knew what to do with her. I believe that's why she turned to books. She made a life for herself in her books and learned to live in it quite contentedly. I glance up and survey the shelves and shelves of books that she surrounded herself with here—her real friends and family. The picture of Catherine that I'll always hold in my mind's eye is that of her bundled in a cozy afghan, curled up in the corner of the couch with a book.

I move on to the kitchen where I pack coffee, the coffee pot, and a few basic cooking and eating utensils into a cardboard box. After retrieving a small cooler from a back room closet, I fill it with the apples, orange juice, milk, bread, and peanut butter I find in the refrigerator and then dump in the ice from the trays in the freezer. I take a quick look around the kitchen for anything else I've missed. Catherine was a good cook, and she equipped this kitchen with everything a cook could ever need, but there's nothing else here that I actually ever use.

Loaded down with the box and cooler, I smile again at

Hope as I trudge down the garden steps to the garage. There I load the food, gear, water, and eight full cans of gas I have accumulated into the SUV. I'm especially pleased I had the foresight to buy and fill those gas cans. Most roadside service centers have been driven out of business either as a result of drastically reduced travel due to staggering gas prices or the highway bandits who robbed them regularly. Since robbers also ambush travelers, taking their vehicles, gas, and whatever else they can carry away, I plan to do most of my driving late at night, staying as far away from major cities and large towns as I can. I'm a cautious guy.

Checking the time, I realize that Hope must already be waiting for me on the deck. As I climb the steps, I see her and immediately feel my stomach tighten. I am dreading this conversation. I would much prefer to avoid it, but I owe Hope more consideration than that. Passing through the kitchen, I stop to get a chilled bottle of Chardonnay and a couple of glasses. I pour a glassful of the wine and drink it down, hoping to calm myself before joining Hope on the deck.

Hope looks up from her watering and smiles when I walk through the door. She has shed her baggy long-sleeved shirt, and now her thin arms hang from the sleeves of a too-large T-shirt, making her look even more waif-like and vulnerable. I walk to the west end of the deck, to a spot shaded by a tall tree, and set our glasses down on the table between the two Adirondack chairs. After pouring wine into our glasses, I walk to the edge of the deck. I smile when I see the little family of deer contentedly grazing at the base of the hill across the road. I bid a heartfelt good-bye to them and to the incredible nature and beauty I have enjoyed here.

When Hope has finished watering the last lime tree at the far end of the deck, she sets down the watering can and pauses

to brush herself off—not so much to rid herself of dirt as to shed her role as gardener—before she joins me. As I hand her the glass of wine, I offer up a toast, “To another beautiful day in paradise!”

She clinks her glass against mine, laughs softly, and makes a toast of her own. “To another day of grace!”

Damn! I feel awful.

We sit quietly for several minutes, gazing out toward the sea. Hope is still smiling. I know she loves it here as much as I do, maybe even more. We have both enjoyed our time together on this deck. I feel terrible about having to begin a conversation that will spoil that for both of us...forever.

Reluctantly, I break the silence, beginning with easy patter. “I noticed those new ferns by the steps. They’re perfect there.” I’m certain that I sound as awkward and uncomfortable as I feel.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Matthew, but you have the nicest garden in Cambria.”

“I have. I also noticed that you’re the one who made it that way, Hope.” I hold up my glass again. “I salute you.”

“Thanks, Matthew. Many of the other nice gardens around town have been neglected lately. That really makes me sad.”

“And...that translates into less work for you, right?”

“It does. To be honest, the steady pay you give me has meant a lot lately.”

I really hate to have to deliver the bad news. More than ever, Hope depends on the small income she gets from me.

We sit in silence again, watching the sinking sun. “Hope, it’s really hard for me to say what I have to say.” She is still smiling, but I see a flicker of concern in her eyes. I force the words out. “I’ve decided to move away from here.” Her face goes blank.

I search for a way to soften the blow. “I’m keeping the house for now, so I can still pay you to keep up the garden. In

fact...now that I think about it....maybe you and Lily could move in and keep an eye on the place for me. That would save you from having to pay rent...and I could even pay you a little something extra for that, too." I'm trying to ease the awful feeling in my stomach. *Maybe this will all work out after all*, I tell myself. Meanwhile, Hope is staring at me with a totally neutral expression on her face.

Then she breaks another prolonged silence and asks, "Where are you going?"

I sigh, relieved to have gotten past the emotional part of the conversation. "A couple that passed through town last year told me about a community they were moving to in Montana. It didn't seem very relevant then, but now—now that I'm on my own—I think it may be a good place to start over. I've been feeling drawn there."

"When are you leaving?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I'm planning on leaving tonight, late."

"Lily and I are going with you."