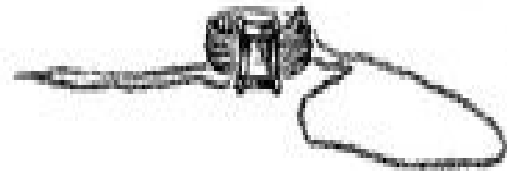


THE GIRL AT THE END OF THE LINE

CHARLES MATHES



..... The Girl at the End of the Line



Charles Mathes



..... St. Martin's Press  New York

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Charles Mathes](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

For T.P.C.

who was my very first girl

and for Arlene

who is my one and only

One

“Comb your hair, it looks like a bird’s nest,” whispered Molly O’Hara, grabbing her sister by the sleeve of her T-shirt and locking Nell’s green eyes with her own. “And stay away from oyster plate you hear me? We’ve got twenty-six and that’s enough.”

Nell replied with a wink and a grin in the early morning light but didn’t say a word. This was hardly surprising. She hadn’t spoken since she was eight.

A slow rustle swept through the restless crowd, the kind of sound the summer wind blowing makes through a stand of loblolly pines. Grim-faced men ground out cigarettes on the slate walk. Women with skin the North Carolina sun had cured to old-wallet perfection licked lipstick off their lips and checked their watches. A young man in a chartreuse shirt tittered and waved his long fingers in the air, indicating either that he found the tension unbearable or that he needed to dry his nail polish in a hurry.

Suddenly the door of the big old house opened, and the crowd surged through as one. Molly grabbed her sister’s hand, not so much to protect her as to haul her inside ahead of the others.

Three competent-looking ladies, all blondes, were sitting at a card table in the entrance hall. Their tired eyes filled with a mixture of awe and terror as the mob of early birds swarmed past them and into the house.

It had taken the women weeks to price and advertise the property that the late Miss Edna Gerritz had acquired over a long lifetime. It would take only two days for the dealers, the decorators, and the public to strip the house clean, the way maggots strip the carcass of a dead fox. Already the madness that was a tag sale had begun.

“It’s mine,” declared a deep voice.

“I saw it first,” replied a shrill one.

Crash.

One of the tag sale ladies jumped up from her chair and scurried toward the noise, but Molly knew that the combatants would already have fled the scene of the crime in search of undamaged booty. She was an old hand at this, starting from the days when she had bought Depression glass with baby-sitting money to sell from a begged table at the Clark County Flea Market. Now, at twenty-eight, Molly O’Hara owned Enchanted Cottage Antiques on Porcupine Road at U.S. 29 and by her calculation had been an antique dealer half her life.

Across the room Molly caught a glimpse of her sister juggling three Noritaki teacups and shot her a furious look.

Nell casually plucked the cups out of the air and deposited them back on a table. Molly’s sister loved showing off and never dropped anything, but Molly hated the attention she drew to herself with her antics. Since Nell didn’t talk, the apologies and excuses were always Molly’s to make, and they took time. Time was money at a tag sale. They were here to work.

With a practiced eye Molly took in the cluttered panorama as she walked briskly from room to room: umbrellas and flowerpots; birdcages and end tables; once-precious pictures whose only value now lay in their frames.

The late Edna Gerritz’s dining room was piled high with tableware. Unfortunately the “silver” was commercially produced plated stuff. The candlesticks were cheap glass reproductions. Even the two sets of Sunday dishes—one modern Lenox, the other hideous Limoges—weren’t anything a savvy

dealer would ever consider.

This was the sort of stuff you found at tag sales, Molly knew. At least it was what you found here. Pelletreau, North Carolina, though there were still treasures to be had. Even the best tag sale ladies missed things occasionally, which was why Molly had roused Nell before dawn today to get her out before the doors opened. By ten o'clock a sale was so picked over that any real bargains were gone.

Molly turned her attention to the glassware, which was laid out on a sideboard across from the china. The estate suddenly began to look a little better. Molly recognized a dozen pieces of pattern glass, which had surely come down in the Gerritze family; it was already clear from the contents of the house that the deceased had simply accumulated her worldly goods, not collected them in an art-conscious manner.

Molly nonchalantly ran her fingers through her short brown hair, then flicked the rim of a Seneca Loop pattern goblet. It produced the dull noise: soda-lime glass. The price of the goblet in her hand was reasonable, but Molly already had too much pattern glass. It might be years before she could sell an ordinary piece like this one. She put it back on the table.

Another flick with her fingernail on a Waffle-and-Thumbprint pattern celery vase sent an unexpected thrill down Molly's spine, a thrill she never tired of. The glass rang like a tiny bell. It was "flint," as pre-Civil War lead glass was called. This piece was priced as cheaply as the others but could easily bring a hundred dollars from a collector.

Leaving the rejects on the table for other dealers to pick through, Molly brought her prize back to the front hall. Her sister was just coming down the stairs with an old radio, an RCA Victor in a red plastic case.

Nell was four inches taller than Molly's five feet one and three years younger. The family resemblance between the girls was still obvious, however. Though Nell's figure was more curvaceous, both of them had green eyes, upturned mouths, and too-small noses. They shared the same brown hair cut short with bangs, and the same porcelain complexions that had to be kept out of the summer sun. Even their eyebrows, which were too thick to be pretty but which Molly refused to pluck, were similar.

But there the resemblance between the girls ended.

While Molly was intense and driven, a gregarious chatterbox so impetuous that she kept a packed suitcase in her van so that she could take off at a moment's notice, Nell was unhurried in her actions, uncertain of what she wanted and entirely mute. Her moods swung crazily. One moment she was impish and full of mischief, the next she could fall into an inexplicable sullenness that lasted for hours. Though Nell had the body of a woman, she seemed to have the mind of a child. She could do complicated tasks like ringing up sales on a cash register or baking a pie, but the simplest interactions with anyone other than Molly was all but impossible for her.

It was as if Nell had slammed some inner door against everybody in the world but her sister. There was no mystery as to why she had done so, why she had withdrawn from everything and stopped speaking. Seventeen years ago, when she was eight, Nell had seen something that no one should have to see, certainly not a little girl. There was no way she was going to grow up to be normal.

Molly checked the price tag as Nell laid the radio on the card table in front of the blond salesladies. "Good girl!" she exclaimed, patting her sister on the shoulder and placing her precious celery vase down next to Nell's find.

There was big nostalgia for old radios, and they might be able to quintuple their money on the one Nell had just found if the right tourist wandered into the shop. As much as Molly loved her sister, she wouldn't have brought Nell along if her eye for bargains wasn't almost as good as Molly's own.

Nell was already bounding back up the stairs. Molly left her business card on top of the radio so the ladies could keep track of her purchases. Then she hurried back into the house, which had gotten

crowded in the last fifteen minutes as more people had arrived. The feeding frenzy had begun earnest.

Molly elbowed her way into the late Edna Gerritze's living room, hoping to find something everyone else had overlooked. As usual she was the shortest person in the room, but that fact never stopped her. What she lacked in height and reach, she made up for in speed and determination. Antiquing was a kind of warfare, and Molly would take on Arnold Schwarzenegger for the right piece of printed fabric.

A couple of women were fighting it out in front of the curio cabinet, though Molly didn't see anything particularly exciting—just the usual china birds and silk fans. The young man in the chartreuse shirt was wrestling with a *Gone with the Wind* style lamp.

There was a nice mahogany breakfront that nobody seemed to be looking at, probably because it was so big. Molly checked the price tag—quite reasonable for a piece like this, but it would be hard to sell and a bitch to get home. Molly passed.

In the kitchen a young couple was inspecting the refrigerator, probably because they couldn't afford a new one. A gaggle of old ladies—civilians, not dealers, judging by the sweet, kindly look of them—poked through assorted tea strainers and juicers. In the back hall a greedy-eyed bald man scooped up mason jars like they were filled with jewels. A collector? Or was he just someone into cannibal preserves?

By the time Molly made it back to the front hall, Nell had returned from upstairs and was putting a large cardboard box down next to their other purchases.

"What did you find?" said Molly eagerly, coming over and fingering through the contents. Her excitement quickly evaporated, however. The box was full of old theater programs. The Chattanooga Civic Light Opera presents *Show Boat*. Tennessee Williams's *Summer and Smoke* at Playmakers Chapel Hill.

"What are we supposed to do with these?" she exclaimed. "You know nobody wants this kind of stuff. What's the matter with you?"

Nell's pretty smile collapsed and she looked away. Molly immediately felt guilty. It wasn't her sister's fault if she sometimes got confused or carried away.

"Come on," Molly said in a conciliatory voice. "Let's take them back upstairs. I was just going up."

When Nell didn't move, Molly picked up the heavy box by its cutout handles and struggled up the stairs with it. Nell finally followed, looking confused and a little hurt. Molly deposited the box on the landing at the top of the stairs—there was no point in worrying exactly where it had come from—and started into the upstairs hall.

"See if you can find some baskets," she said over her shoulder. "We could sell a million of those nice old peach baskets, like the kind you found up in Leightonville. You know the ones I mean?"

Nell stared back with an unreadable expression. Molly didn't wait for an answer—she knew the answer wouldn't be one. She walked into one of the bedrooms, a typical old lady's room with a mahogany bedstead, crocheted comforter, and heavy curtains that smelled of lavender.

By the time Molly had satisfied herself that there were no valuable perfume bottles among the late Edna Gerritze's dressing table bric-a-brac, the hallway had begun to fill up with browsers from downstairs. Nell was still where Molly had left her, however, squatting next to the box they had brought back upstairs, leafing through a theater program.

"Will you please put that down?" said Molly in exasperation, marching over and taking the program out of her sister's hands. "We don't have time to waste today. We have to see Grandma before we can open the shop. Now, please, sweetheart, go down and see if you can find something I missed. Go on."

Molly dropped the program on top of the others and waited as Nell reluctantly made her way down the stairs. What was the girl thinking? Molly shook her head and checked her watch. It had stopped,

course.

Molly ~~cursed under her breath and knocked the cheap timepiece against the bannister railing~~ Grandma had given both her and Nell watches when they were teenagers. Grandma was too poor to afford good ones, and Nell had thrown hers away years ago. Molly couldn't bear to hurt the poor old woman's feelings, however, and buy a replacement. Grandma looked for the watch every time Molly visited—at least she had until recently.

Molly spent another ten minutes checking out the remaining second-floor rooms, then came back downstairs to settle up. There were presently only two tag sale ladies on duty ringing up purchases at the card table in the front hallway. Molly went to the more benign-looking one: a small-boned woman with bronze-colored hair and lips no thicker than chives. Her name tag proclaimed to the world that she was LILLIAN of THREE BLOND LIQUIDATORS.

“Let's see,” said Lillian the Liquidator, tapping a calculator. “You've got the glass vase, the radio, and the oyster plate.”

Nell smirked and gave Molly a little pat on the back. Molly felt her face go red. So what if she had happened to find another oyster plate in an upstairs bedroom? This one was different than all the other ones. Besides, the price was too good to pass up.

“I'll need your resale number,” said Lillian the Liquidator. “And we take only cash, no credit cards or checks.”

Molly took her wallet from the back pocket of her jeans and counted out the bills. The third tag sale lady had now come back into the hall from the house and was taking her place at the card table. She was the oldest of the trio, a wrinkled blonde not a day under seventy. Something stopped her before she sat.

“You okay, honey?” she asked in a quivery voice, looking over Molly's shoulder to where Nell was standing. “You need a drink of water or something?”

Molly turned around in time to see her sister cover her face with her hands. Nell's amused expression had suddenly changed to one of sheer terror. Her eyes brimmed over with tears. Her mouth opened as if she were screaming, but no sound came out. She took several steps back until she was against the wall and began to shake violently.

It was happening again. Nell was having another one of her attacks. She had had them on and off since that terrible day so long ago. Months had passed since her last attack, however. Molly had almost begun to believe that they were a thing of the past.

“She's all right,” said Molly, rushing over. “Just leave her alone. She'll be fine in a minute.”

Molly put an arm around her sister's shoulders and gently stroked the back of her neck. That sometimes worked when Nell got like this. What had brought it on? The crowded house? Oyster plates? Too many blondes?

“Did I say something wrong?” said the elderly tag sale lady, looking concerned. “I just thought she looked a bit peaked and asked if she wanted some water.”

“Do you want us to call a doctor?” piped in Lillian.

“Thanks, but that won't be necessary,” said Molly. “My sister just gets like this sometimes. It's a nervous condition. It's nothing to worry about. She's perfectly okay. I need a receipt for those things.”

The ladies returned to the paperwork, occasionally glancing nervously at Nell. Molly led her sister over to the door, stroking her neck and speaking to her in a gentle voice. After a few moments, Nell dropped her hands from her face and stopped shaking.

Molly dug into her pocket for a tissue and wiped the tears from her sister's cheeks. Then she held Nell out at arm's length and scrutinized her.

“You okay now?”

Nell nodded her head.

“What was it?” Molly asked. “What frightened you?”

Nell didn't answer. She smiled weakly and slipped out of Molly's hands. Then she opened the front door of the house and ran out across the lawn in the direction of their van.

Molly didn't try to stop her. She returned to the card table and finished up the details of the purchases. An overwhelming sense of guilt descended on her, as it always did after one of these episodes.

Why did Nell still have these attacks? Why wouldn't she speak after all these years, even to Molly? The doctors all said that there was nothing physically wrong with her voice. Molly had always feared that Nell was just angry. Angry at her. She could hardly blame her sister for that. After all, what had happened to Nell that day had been Molly's fault.

“That wasn't much of a sale, huh?” Molly said later, when she had loaded the morning's treasures into their ancient minivan and they were on the road back home. “But can you believe how they had that radio priced? Those poor women didn't have a clue what they had. We're going to sell it to some fool Yankee for a fortune, you just wait and see.”

Nell nodded, then stared silently out of the window at the strip malls and red clay that passed for scenery in their part of the world. Molly rattled on, as was her nature. The van made more than its usual quota of creaks, knocks, and groans. It had taken to stalling out if you drove it for more than a few hours a day. Molly knew that she'd have to replace it soon—maybe at the end of the summer, she could put together enough money.

It was another twenty minutes before they had driven back across the spread-out old city of Pelletreau and pulled into the unpaved drive of Enchanted Cottage Antiques. There was parking for up to six cars in front next to a stand of oak trees, but Molly drove the minivan around back and parked under the carport by the rear door. The day was already getting hot, but that was hardly unusual for North Carolina in July.

Molly got out carrying the celery vase and the oyster plate. Nell followed Molly inside with the radio. They deposited their haul on the round maple table in the little kitchen at the back of the shop. It was ten after nine according to the cuckoo clock out front—early, but there was still a lot to do.

“I've got to take care of business before we see Grandma,” said Molly, resetting her watch and giving it a good wind. “You go on upstairs and get ready. I won't be but a minute. I thought you were going to comb your hair.”

Nell had sat down at the table on one of the cathedral chairs that Molly liked too much to sell. She didn't move.

“Come on, honey, we've got to get going,” Molly said gently. “And please put on some lipstick. You look like an iceberg lettuce. You don't want to scare Grandma, do you?”

An image of their beloved grandmother the way she used to be flashed into Molly's mind—a beautiful woman sitting in an easy chair, sewing dresses for rich ladies. She would sit there like that ten hours a time, seven days a week sometimes.

One of Molly's clearest memories from her childhood was of a six-year-old Nell, a Nell who was still a normal, happy little girl climbing into the old lady's expansive lap and stopping Grandma's needlework with her tiny hand.

“One day I'm going to buy you a great big house, Grandma,” Nell had promised, her eyes wide and earnest. “And you'll never have to work again.”

Grandma had smiled her sad smile, clearly not believing that it would ever happen, not believing that she would ever have anything but a two-room apartment in downtown Pelletreau.

Even then, even before the tragedy that had befallen them all, hers had been a hard life, but until three months ago Grandma had still smiled her resigned smile and sung funny old songs in her big, raucous voice. Then she had had the stroke that had put her in the Pelletreau Charitable Nursing

Home. Now it was Molly who tried to smile and do the singing.

“~~Nellie, what are you doing?~~” asked Molly, coming out of her reverie only to find Nell lost in one of her own. “Where are you?”

Nell still didn't move or make eye contact with her sister. She looked deep in thought, like she was trying to remember something, something very important, but very lost.

“Go on,” said Molly, coming up behind her sister and squeezing her shoulders. “Git.”

Her expression unchanged, Nell rose and wandered through the kitchen archway into the back hallway. Molly listened until she heard footsteps going up the stairs to the bedroom they shared over the store. Then she brought out the ledger in which she kept track of purchases.

In her tiny neat handwriting, Molly entered the information for the celery vase, the radio, and the oyster plate.

The cuckoo clock out in the shop chirped its quarter hour reminder that cuckoo clocks didn't sell. If someone didn't buy it soon, Molly was going to bury the damn thing in the backyard. The shop fell silent again.

Molly closed the ledger and replaced it behind the sugar jar. She sat for a moment, enjoying the silence and the unfamiliar sensation of being alone.

Another image from childhood drifted into Molly's mind. She and Nell were at their grandmother's tiny apartment again. Their mother had often left the girls with her when she had to do something in the city. Nell was coloring with a crayon in a coloring book. Grandma was sewing, as she always was.

Suddenly the old woman's face grew dark with unmistakable rage. She took the garment in her hands and tore it in half, threw it on the floor. Molly was terrified. She had never seen her grandmother so angry, even when she argued with their stepfather after Sunday dinners.

But Nell wasn't frightened by Grandma's unprecedented outburst at all. She looked up from her coloring book with a stern look and shook her finger at the old seamstress.

“Temper, temper,” she chided in a mild little voice.

Grandma's face had melted into a smile. She cut another piece of cloth and returned to her thankless work.

Nell had been such a brave, smart little girl, Molly remembered. But this morning at the tag sale she had been a mass of terror. Why? It couldn't have been just what happened seventeen years ago, that was ancient history. What had set her off this morning? What had she seen?

The kitchen was getting too crowded, Molly thought glancing around the room, trying to shrug off the guilt that began to overwhelm her again.

There were books everywhere—under the table, lined up against the walls, blocking the hall. Molly might not have had a lot of formal education, but knowledge was survival to an antiques dealer and she was probably better read than many PhDs. There were even books in the oven, a 1940s-vintage gas behemoth.

That probably explained why Nell hadn't baked any pies lately, Molly realized. Nell's apple pie was something directly from heaven. But this wasn't the time to worry about her lack of library space. Or about Nell. Or about pies. Molly stretched and headed for the stairs.

Upstairs, Nell was sitting on her bed, staring at a small white booklet in her hands. She had made a move to comb her hair.

“Oh, for pete sake's,” Molly exclaimed. “Next time I cut your hair I might as well do it with the lawn mower if you can't keep it combed. You want Grandma to think you're some kind of semihuman creature from the swamp? What am I going to do with you?”

When Nell didn't look up, Molly went over and took what she was reading out of her hands. It was a “Playbill” from the Booth Theatre in New York City. The late Edna Gerritze had apparently been on Broadway.

“Oh, this is marvelous!” Molly exclaimed. “My baby sister’s a thief now, too. You stole this from that box at the sale this morning, didn’t you? What did you do? Stick it under your shirt when I was looking? Are you going to start knocking over Seven-Elevens next?”

Nell reached for the program, but Molly pulled it away.

“I should make you take it back to those people. If it weren’t so far away I would, I swear. You know how we feel about shoplifters. You should be ashamed of yourself. What’s so darn interesting about this thing anyway?”

But what was so interesting was right on the cover—a beautiful young woman in an elegant white gown. Molly’s mouth dropped open as she read the caption beneath the picture of the strange familiar-looking actress.

Margaret Jellinek in *Without Reservations*

It was Margaret Jellinek, their grandmother. Margaret Jellinek, the seamstress.

Two

“... and to think Grandma never said a word about it, never let on that she ever did anything but dressmaking!” marveled Molly, trying to keep her eyes on the road and at the same time catch a glimpse of Margaret Jellinek’s picture on the cover of the “Playbill” in Nell’s lap. “I didn’t think she even liked the theater. Remember when I did that play in high school and told her I wanted to be an actress? Remember what she said? No, don’t say it—I don’t want you using that kind of language!”

Nell scratched her cheek and nodded. Molly crossed Highway 5 and turned down Moffat Road, talking all the while.

“I mean, Grandma must have been a star. Did you see all her credits in the program, all those other plays she’d been in? They don’t put your picture on the cover if you’re just some walk-on from the chorus, you know. Why didn’t she say something? That’s what I don’t understand. Unless she was ashamed, maybe. Ashamed that she lost her big Broadway career and had to work her fingers to the bone making dresses for people in Pelletreau, godforsaken North Carolina, just to stay alive.”

Molly reached over and playfully punched her sister on the shoulder.

“And if you hadn’t found that program we never would have known a whit about it, you clever thing. You steal anything else, and I’m going to break your arm.”

Nell grinned. Molly turned into the drive of the Pelletreau Charitable Nursing Home and parked in the drab little lot. Then she got out of the van and came around to Nell’s side. Nell had made no move to open her door.

“Of course, we can’t put Grandma on the spot about it,” Molly chattered on, “not with her the way she is right now. We’ll have to bring it up casual-like, when the moment is right. ‘Oh, and speaking of the weather, look what Nell happened to find the other day. We didn’t know you were a famous Broadway actress. My, what a pleasant surprise.’”

But Nell wasn’t listening. Her face was suddenly full of panic. She glanced around like a frightened animal, then stared at the floor. Molly opened the door.

“Are you okay?” asked Molly in a quiet, serious voice. “Is it happening again?”

Nell shook her head, but didn’t look up.

“Is it this place?”

Nell nodded, still looking at the floor.

“It’s okay,” said Molly with a sigh. “I understand. You don’t have to come in with me, if you don’t want to. I’m not going to make you.”

Nell raised her eyes, hopefully.

“It’s just that she’s got nobody but us,” said Molly, “and it’s been practically two weeks since our last visit. I think she’s pretty lonely and miserable. I know I would be.”

Nell took a deep breath, then nodded. Looking grim, she got out of the van.

“Thanks,” said Molly, reaching back inside for the theater program, then locking the doors. “We won’t stay long, I promise.”

They crossed the parking lot to the nursing home entrance.

Molly didn’t want to admit it, but she wasn’t looking forward to seeing Grandma any more than Nell was. Not like this, not the way she was. Besides, Molly was puzzled and hurt that Margaret Jellinek hadn’t said anything about her stage career. It had never occurred to Molly that Grandma would have kept secrets from her. They had always had a special relationship. With their mother dead,

the girls were all the family the old lady had in the world, as she was always reminding them.

Grandma must have had her reasons, Molly knew, but the cat was out of the bag now. Molly was determined to find out all the details of Margaret Jellinek's life in the theater. Of course she probably wouldn't learn much today, she knew. The therapist had said it might be months before Molly's grandmother would be able to hold an intelligible conversation. But she would pry out the whole story sooner or later. Once Molly got her mind set on something, she never gave up.

At the busy reception desk a stern, pasty-faced woman in rhinestone-studded glasses was talking into the phone. The other receptionist—the sweet, black girl who knew everybody's relatives by name and always seemed happy to see them—must be off today. Pasty-faced Mrs. Springer didn't know anyone and obviously didn't care to.

Molly fought down an urge to dodge the ritual check-in entirely and just go up to the room. The Pelletreau Charitable Nursing Home's *security* was little more than an annoying formality.

"Molly and Nell O'Hara to see Mrs. Jellinek," she said obediently, however, when the woman finally put down the phone.

"That other man still with her?" asked Mrs. Springer, who had a voice like a frog.

"What other man?"

"Redheaded gentleman," croaked Mrs. Springer. "Asked for her room number earlier."

"Who was he?"

"Don't recall the name. He was wearing sunglasses and had a bushy mustache. Said he was a friend of hers. The limit's two visitors per room. He still up there?"

"Oh, *him*," said Molly, wondering who it could be. "No. He left."

"Okay, y'all can go up then."

"Thanks." Some security.

Molly led Nell to the elevator. The hallway was a sickly peagreen and badly in need of a paint job. She made it a point to keep her eyes straight ahead and hoped that Nell would follow suit.

Modesty was no longer a high priority for many of the resident old folks. The last time they had been here Molly had come back from the drinking fountain to find a little old man outside his room regaling Nell with tales of the shoe business. He was buck naked beneath his robe, and his robe was hanging wide open. Nell had found the whole thing hugely amusing—though perhaps hugely wasn't the right word to describe what she had seen.

Molly pressed the button for the elevator and waited for it to arrive, wondering who her grandmother's visitor could be.

She had thought she knew all Margaret Jellinek's friends. None of the men had much hair left at all, let alone red hair and bushy mustaches. A son, perhaps, paying respects for someone too old and sick to come herself? Or did Grandma have other secrets besides her long-lost career? Was this some old beau? Some guy who liked loud, older women like Grandma? Molly smiled at the thought of it, trying to ignore the odors of medicine and decay in the hall.

When they got to the little room on the second floor the door was closed. Molly opened it, half expecting to find an unfamiliar man sitting by her grandmother's bedside, holding a bouquet of flowers, and making the kind of awkward small talk that visitors made with sick people.

There was no visitor, however. The lights were off. Margaret Jellinek lay in bed flat on her back under the covers, her pillow on her chest.

Molly turned to Nell.

"Sssh," she whispered, putting a finger to her lips. "She's asleep."

Nell shrugged uncomfortably and stared at the pillow on her grandmother's chest. With a smile Molly gently picked up the pillow and went to place it under Margaret Jellinek's head.

Instantly she knew that something was terribly wrong.

“Grandma?” she said in a voice so small it frightened her.

~~There was no answer. Molly grabbed the call button next to the bed and pressed it repeatedly.~~

“Go get someone,” she said after a moment when no one came.

Nell looked from side to side, but didn’t move.

“Get the nurse! Now!”

Nell darted out of the room. She returned a few moments later, pushing an annoyed-looking aide in front of her, but it was too late, of course. Molly had known from the instant that she touched her grandmother’s head that Margaret Jellinek was dead.

The funeral was three days later.

More than two dozen old people and Nell and Molly in dresses their grandmother had made for them stood at graveside under a tent against the morning drizzle. All around them the green grass was crowded with white gravestones, some older than the Civil War. A rented clergyman spoke of the Resurrection and Eternal Life.

Margaret Jellinek had never had much use for religion. Neither did Molly, but she thought wouldn’t have been fair to her grandmother’s friends not to have a service and let them say good-bye. There hadn’t been a service for Molly’s mother seventeen years ago, and it still seemed like her death was unfinished business.

“I’m so sorry,” said Mrs. Hoyt, another seamstress, afterward.

“It was a blessing,” said Mrs. Siegrist, the pharmacist’s wife. Mr. Siegrist nodded sad agreement.

“If there’s anything I can do,” declared Mrs. Onckelbag, for whom Margaret Jellinek had made dresses for thirty years, “please let me know.”

As the crowd began to disperse, Tessie Haimes, Margaret Jellinek’s neighbor and best friend, made her way to their side.

“How are you girls holdin’ up?” she asked in her sugary North Carolina drawl, squeezing Molly’s arm.

Tessie was a round little woman with curly bluish hair and deep dimples in both cheeks that made her look like an ancient Shirley Temple. She had worked most of her life in a fishmarket, but always smelled of face powder and English soap.

“We’re fine, Tessie. Thanks for coming.”

“Maggie would have liked this. All her friends. The two of you.”

“She would have hated it, and you know it,” said Molly. “She would be yelling at me for wasting the money. She once made me promise to bury her in a tin can in Wheatman State Park.”

“Oh, she was just carryin’ on,” tittered Tessie, waving her lacy handkerchief in the air and shaking her head. “You did the right thing. It was a real nice service.”

“Thanks.”

“Hi, Nellie,” Tessie said, turning her attentions to Molly’s sister. “You’re lookin’ real pretty. How are you, sweetheart? You remember me? Tessie?”

Nell shrugged out of Tessie’s attempted embrace. She had always been agitated around Grandma’s friends, especially when they tried to touch her—as practically all of them had tried to do today.

“That’s okay, honey,” said Tessie, not taking it as a personal rejection, the way some people did. “I know you’re upset ‘bout losin’ your grandma. I understand.”

“How about you, Tessie?” asked Molly in an amiable voice. “How are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m all right,” sighed the old lady. “I should have expected something like this, I guess. Was it another stroke?”

“The doctor at the home thought it probably was. That or her heart. He said that in her condition she

could have gone at any time.”

“And here I was convinced she was gettin’ better. Last time I saw Maggie, she was beginnin’ to growl again, just like her old self. She even told me to shut the hell up when I started talkin’ about the damned Republicans—I swear I understood every word she said.”

“She was something else,” said Molly, smiling. “Did you know she was an actress once?”

“Really? She never said nothin’ ’bout that to me. Here in Pelletreau?”

“On Broadway, almost fifty years ago.”

“No!” squealed Tessie. “You’re funnin’ me.”

“It’s true. Nell found a program from a big New York City theater with her picture on the cover.”

“Well, if that don’t beat all. It’s possible, I s’pose. Maggie never would talk about her life before she came South, and she certainly was a dramatic individual. Always making grand pronouncements in that big ol’ voice of hers. And y’all didn’t know?”

“Not a thing.”

“Your mama never said nothin’? Evangeline was just a baby when they came to Pelletreau, but surely Maggie would have said something to her over the years. She never passed it along?”

“If she did, I don’t remember,” said Molly.

“No, of course not. Whatever happened to my brains? You was just a little girl when Angie got . . . when your mama passed away.”

Molly suddenly noticed a white Mercury Sable parked across the drive. The driver wore sunglasses and had rust-colored hair and a thick mustache, but as Molly looked over, he lowered his face and pulled into the line of departing cars.

“What is it?” asked Tessie, trying to follow her gaze.

“Do you know who the man in that white car is?” said Molly, wondering why he hadn’t gotten out and come over for the service. He seemed to match the description of Margaret Jellinek’s visitor the last day.

“What man?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Molly with a shrug. “He’s gone now. Well, anyway. Thanks again for coming, Tessie.”

“Listen, Molly, honey,” said the little woman, lowering her voice and leading Molly away from the gravesite to the back of the tent. “Maggie gave me somethin’ for you, somethin’ she wanted you to have when she was gone.”

Tess dug deep into her enormous handbag.

“She gave it to me that day she got sick, before the ambulance came. Maggie had it on a chain around her neck. She just pulled it right off. Broke the chain. Her head was hurtin’ her something awful, but she knew what was happenin’. Kept talkin’ ’bout how people was always gettin’ robbed at hospitals and such places.”

Tessie pulled her pudgy hand out of the handbag. She opened her fingers triumphantly beneath the shelter of her ample bosom to reveal a ring that took Molly’s breath away: a large, deep green stone entwined in a thick golden band.

“It’s beautiful,” said Molly, stunned.

“I didn’t want to take it, but Maggie made me,” said Tessie, pressing the ring into Molly’s hand. “You know how stubborn she could be. Said I could give it back if she got better, but if not, she wanted you to have it. Then the ambulance came and took her away.”

Nell came over for a closer look, her curiosity apparently overcoming her reluctance to be in the clutching range of Tessie.

Molly studied the ring. The thick band was crafted to look like the stem of a flower. It was deep yellow in color and surprisingly heavy for its size. The clear green stone was square-cut and perfect

faceted.

Molly's field was antiques, not jewelry. The ring looked expensive, but she was well aware that jewelry was a trap for the unwary. Things often were not what they appeared at first glance to be. Still, a bold, well-crafted piece like this had to be worth a few hundred dollars to somebody, Molly knew even if it was just costume jewelry. If it was real ... well, she couldn't even guess at a price. Her appraisal expertise was strictly limited to antiques.

Who could have given Margaret Jellinek such a thing? wondered Molly—she surely wouldn't have bought a ring like this for herself. Grandma just wasn't the sort of woman who was interested in flashy jewelry, even if she could have afforded it, which she couldn't. She had barely been able to buy herself a new toaster oven when the old one broke and had even shared a telephone with Tessie to save money. Other than a small savings account and the drab furniture from her apartment, there had been no assets for the nursing home to take before admitting her.

Molly turned the ring over and looked on the inside for lettering that said 14K or GOLD-FILLED or some other clue that could tell her something about it. What she found was a faint mark that seemed to read SC & P.

"I guess it's pretty valuable, huh?" said Tessie's faraway voice.

Molly snapped back to the present. She had forgotten for a moment where she was. Nell was staring at her with a quizzical look. Two cemetery workmen were standing by the open grave, waiting to go on with their business. The sky was gray. The rain had finally stopped.

"Did Grandma say where she got this ring?" asked Molly.

"No," said Tessie. "Just that she'd had it since before she got to Pelletreau. I figured maybe it was from a beau, but then of course, I'm just a hopeless romantic. Y'all don't have any idea?"

Molly shook her head.

"Maybe it was an heirloom. Something from her family. Did she ever talk about them?"

"Not really," said Molly, flustered. "Grandma didn't like to talk about the past. She said all her family were dead."

"Well, I'm just glad you have it now, honey," said Tessie, reaching over and patting Molly's hand. "That's the important thing, that's what Maggie wanted. I'm surely gonna miss her. Look, I better scurry before I get all weepy again. You girls take care of yourselves, you hear?"

Tessie wrapped her arms around Molly and kissed her fervently on the cheek, as if she were kissing a precious child farewell. Nell endured a hand squeeze. Then they watched their grandmother's best friend scurry back to her big old Pontiac and drive slowly off.

"What do you think?" Molly said to Nell, holding up the ring, when Tessie was out of sight. "I know I shouldn't be thinking about money at a time like this, but I can't help myself. I've been a dealer for so long, and this looks real to me. Then again, what do I know about jewelry?"

Nell didn't answer. She looked at the ring, then stared at the grave, her eyebrows scrunched together in thought.

"It's turning out that there was a lot about Grandma we didn't know," said Molly in a sober voice. "First she's this big Broadway actress. Now she has a ring on a chain around her neck that nobody's ever seen, but that she leaves to us as some kind of legacy. Do you leave your grandchildren a fancy cut piece of glass?"

Nell didn't look up.

"I don't much feel like going home right away. Maybe we should show it to Oscar, what do you think?"

Nell didn't say what she thought. But she started walking toward their van.

When Oscar Winnick moved down from Detroit in 1961, he had been the only black jeweler in Pelletreau.

Molly knew that he had had some trouble at first. Older dealers had told her that Oscar's first store downtown was firebombed and that he had marched to Selma with Martin Luther King. Oscar himself would never talk about those days, however, and things had changed a lot since then, even in North Carolina.

Oscar now lived in a cheerful Victorian house in what used to be an all-white suburb and helped out three mornings a week at the jewelry store in Pelletreau's most fashionable mall that his son had taken over from him. As far as Oscar was concerned, he was just another senior citizen, though there weren't many eighty-year-olds who taught themselves Greek all winter then spent the summer working eight hours a day in their vegetable gardens. Since his wife's death a few years ago, Oscar's garden had grown to the size of a small farm.

Molly had known Oscar since she was sixteen years old. She had bought a box lot of odds and ends at a country auction and had found a strand of pearls hidden inside a leather change purse. Molly couldn't wait to cash in on her good fortune, and Oscar had been the only jeweler open on a Sunday.

Her *pearls* had turned out to be plastic. Oscar had been nice about it, however, and had shown her how she could tell phonies herself by running them across her teeth. They had been friends ever since. Oscar still kept his hand in the jewelry game even in semiretirement. He still gave Molly a fair price for what she brought him and good advice whether she wanted it or not.

Molly found him digging up radishes in his backyard half an hour after she had laid Margaret Jellinek to rest. He knelt on a tarp against the still-wet ground; a little dampness never stopped Oscar.

"My condolences about your grandmother," he said in his precise baritone as she and Nell approached.

"How did you hear about that?" asked Molly, surprised.

"The obituaries. These days, they're about the only part of the paper where I can read about people I know."

"Thanks, Oscar. She was a nice lady. You would have liked her. I'm sorry you two never met."

"I'm sorry, too," said Oscar, brushing black soil from a clump of radishes and tossing them into a waiting bushel basket. "You and your sister look real pretty. Don't think I've ever seen you in dress clothes before."

Molly winced. She had always hated grown-up clothes.

"And you're not going to again anytime soon," she declared. "We just came from the cemetery. I have something I want you to look at."

"Wash your hands first. Nell, too. Come on. I'll take you inside."

Oscar took off his gloves and threw them in the basket with the radishes, then stood and headed for the back door.

"This is important, Oscar," protested Molly, following.

"So's washing your hands after you get back from the cemetery," said Oscar, holding the door for her and Nell. "Old Jewish custom."

"Funny, you don't look Jewish."

"In the jewelry business you meet a lot of Jewish people, and you come to respect what they have to say. At my age I'm practically a professional funeral-goer, and I can tell you for a fact that it's a good thing, psychologically speaking, to wash your hands of death. Sanitary, too. Bathroom's by the front stairs."

"I know where it is," said Molly, reaching into her pocket. "But you look at this in the meanwhile."

Molly placed the ring on the kitchen counter and followed Nell through the door to the hall.

When they returned, Oscar was squinting at the green stone through a loupe and shaking his head.

“Where did you get this, Molly?” he said, strangely sober and very businesslike.

“It was my grandmother’s.”

“I see.”

“It’s glass, right?” sighed Molly.

“Hardly. It’s the best emerald I’ve ever seen.”

“An emerald!”

“You’ll have to give me a little time to raise the money if you want to sell it.”

“What’s it worth?”

“To me, about forty thousand dollars.”

Molly opened her mouth, then closed it. Nell held a hand to her forehead and collapsed theatrical into a chair at the kitchen table. Oscar’s mutt, a playful little hairball named Pythagoras, attempted to revive her by licking her hand.

“You’re kidding, aren’t you?” Molly finally managed.

“All right,” smiled Oscar. “You drive a hard bargain. Forty-five. And that’s my best offer. Interested?”

“I don’t know,” stammered Molly, glancing at Nell. “We have to think about it.”

“Up to you,” said Oscar, handing her back the ring. “You might be able to get more from a dealer in a bigger city.”

“You know we wouldn’t give it to anyone but you.”

“Well, I appreciate that, because you know I intend to make a profit on you. A small one, of course. You did okay this time, kid.”

Molly tried to smile. None of this made any sense.

When she had first come to Pelletreau, Margaret Jellinek had barely been able to feed herself and her daughter. Molly clearly remembered the horror stories of hunger and privation that her mother had told about her own childhood in order to get them to eat their vegetables. There must have been truth to some of those tales. Now it appeared that Margaret Jellinek had had a forty-five-thousand-dollar emerald ring on a chain around her neck all that time.

“Do you have any idea where this ring might have come from originally, Oscar?” Molly asked.

“There was an SC & P mark on the inside, pretty worn, but I could still make it out.”

“Yes, I saw that. What does it mean?”

“It was the retailer’s mark. Scanlon, Carrier and Polk, the Boston equivalent of Tiffany. They went out of business about thirty years ago.”

“Boston, Massachusetts?”

“Of course, Boston, Massachusetts. You don’t get stones like this and high-quality custom settings in Boston, Arkansas. That any help?”

“Not much,” said Molly. “But thanks anyway, Oscar.”

Molly didn’t know anything about Margaret Jellinek’s childhood except that she had grown up in New England. The fact that the ring had come from Boston seemed to connect it to her youth. Was it an heirloom? Had it been a present from a suitor? Unfortunately if the store had been out of business for three decades there would be no way to trace the original purchaser.

“Well, just give me some time if you decide you want to sell,” said Oscar. “Like I say, I’ll have to make some calls to raise that kind of money. You might put it somewhere safe in the meantime. It really is a beautiful stone.”

Forty minutes later the beautiful green stone that hung like a fruit from a golden stem was in the safe-deposit box at Pelletreau Trust and Savings, alongside various family papers, the deed for the house, and the passports Molly kept ready for the Mexican vacation that she planned to take with Nell some day.

Molly hadn't said a word during the whole drive from Oscar's house—perhaps some kind of record for her—though Nell didn't appear to have noticed.

Since their mother's death Molly's life had been an endless scramble for money. Yet even with twelve-hour days and seven-day weeks she was barely able to keep their heads above water. Plunging property values in Pelletreau had decimated Molly's equity in the house. Any cash she had left over after paying the bills went back into inventory, which seemed to move more and more slowly these days. Margaret Jellinek's funeral had all but wiped out their cash reserve.

Suddenly, however, Molly had a ring that she could sell for enough to turn everything around. A ring that was the only thing left of her grandmother. A ring Maggie Jellinek had apparently refused to part with, no matter what.

"You don't think she stole it, do you?" Molly asked in a quiet voice, finally putting into words what had been bothering her since Tessie had pressed the ring into her hand at the cemetery.

Nell raised an eyebrow and scrunched her lips into one of her famous don't-be-an-idiot looks.

"But it just doesn't make any sense!" Molly exclaimed, as she turned the van into the driveway at Enchanted Cottage Antiques. "Grandma was about as sentimental as an Otis elevator. I don't care whether that ring was a family heirloom or party favor from the Shah of Iran, you know she would have sold it in a minute to feed herself and Mom unless there was one hell of a good reason why she shouldn't. And if it was so important that she shouldn't sell it, how can we?"

Nell wasn't paying attention, however. She was staring out the window at a white Mercury Sabre that had turned down Porcupine Road behind them and now continued on, down the road in front of the store.

Molly caught only a glimpse of the man behind the wheel as the car sped away. He was wearing sunglasses. A red-haired man with a bushy mustache.

Three

“There it is again!” exclaimed Molly, glancing out the front window. “A white Mercury Sable.”

Nell was sitting by the cash register, brushing epoxy onto the two halves of the broken foot of a nineteenth-century ironstone creamer. She didn't look up from her delicate work.

“Either they've got a white Mercury Sable convention around here somewhere,” said Molly, “I've been seeing the same car all week. I just wish the road weren't so far away so I could see who's doing the driving. Do you think it's that same man with the red hair and the mustache?”

Molly instantly regretted her words. She hadn't meant to say so much. There was no point troubling Nell with her irrational worries. Not Nell, of all people.

“Of course, it is a pretty common car. It's probably not him at all. I'll bet you think I'm nuts, don't you?”

This time Nell did look up—and nodded enthusiastically.

Molly and her sister hadn't been out of the shop for several days now, trying to adjust to a world without their grandmother in it, living on the peach cobbles, country hams, and tuna-noodle casseroles that Margaret Jellinek's friends had thoughtfully dropped off.

Summertime was tourist time, and there was enough traffic heading toward Charlottesville on U.S. 29 to assure a small but steady stream of customers into Enchanted Cottage Antiques. A few people had actually bought things, mostly ten-dollar odds and ends, but Molly had also sold an American Empire mahogany chest of drawers with a heart inlay on the black splash. It had been in the shop for years and Molly had despaired that anyone would ever take it off her hands. Miraculously a Yuppie couple had left a four-hundred-dollar cash deposit on it yesterday and promised to return with the four-hundred-dollar balance when they picked it up tomorrow or the next day on their way back to Atlanta.

Despite the prospect of being a little ahead for a change, Molly had been having a hard time keeping her mind on business. Margaret Jellinek's emerald ring kept burning a hole in her pocket. What the hell could she do with forty-five thousand dollars! But how could they sell something like that without knowing why Grandma had held on to it all these years?

The ring wasn't the only thing that was troubling Molly. She was also worried about the way the doctors had found their grandmother at the nursing home. The picture of Margaret Jellinek in her bed, her head on a pillow on her chest, kept flashing in Molly's brain like a neon question mark.

Why, Molly wondered, if Grandma were having another stroke, would she have taken her pillow off from beneath her head and placed it on her chest? It made no sense. Throw it on the floor, yes, but would she have had the strength to do even that if she were dying? Certainly no nurse would have placed a pillow on a patient's chest. If anything, a nurse would have plumped the pillow up and put it where it belonged.

So, why had Grandma's pillow been on her chest?

Of course, dying people did inexplicable things, Molly knew. Maybe Grandma had just wanted to lie flat. Maybe she had gotten the pillow out from under her head and rested it on her chest until she could decide what to do with it. That made sense.

But the image of Margaret Jellinek, cold and dead, with the pillow on her chest wouldn't go away. Molly couldn't stop thinking about it.

Other pictures kept springing into Molly's head, too, ones that were alive, almost like a little movie.

Hands taking the pillow out from behind Margaret Jellinek's head and forcing it down over her face. brief moment of struggle, then stillness. The hands discarding the pillow, its work done, and leaving where it falls, there on Margaret Jellinek's chest.

Who would do such a thing?

There was only one candidate. The man who had been with her right before she died. The redheaded stranger with the bushy mustache—the man who may have shown up again at the cemetery driving Mercury Sable and who might have driven by the house a dozen times over the last few days. Had he somehow found out about the emerald ring worth forty-five thousand dollars that was supposed to be on a chain around Margaret Jellinek's neck? People had been murdered for much less; nothing at all had been taken from Molly's mother by her killer. Except her life.

"I can't believe I'm being so paranoid," muttered Molly to herself, glancing out the window again. The road was empty. The afternoon heat rose off the pavement in waves, making the trees across the street shimmer like a mirage.

"Where's that program you found?" Molly asked, walking over to her sister. "The one with Grandma's picture?"

Nell nodded toward the counter. She had finished her repair and was bracing the creamer with pieces of Styrofoam so it could dry. Her hands were sure and steady.

Molly reached under the counter for the "Playbill," wishing she had her sister's patience, and stared at the picture of the young Margaret Jellinek on the cover.

"I've got to do something to get my mind off Mercury Sables," she announced. "I need a project, something to do with my idle little brain, or I'm going to crack up. What do you say we find out about Grandma? About the ring, maybe, and about her being on the stage?"

Nell rolled her eyes. She'd been down this road with Molly's projects before. Once they had spent an entire day mixing snails, quicklime, and Gruyère cheese to test out a glass-mending recipe that Molly had found in an old book. Another time Molly had dragged Nell off in the middle of lunch and driven all the way to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, just to learn more about the Amish name, Zook, which she had found impressed on a spoon.

"You know who might know something? Clyde, that's who. I'm going to call him."

Calling Clyde was just the sort of mad, impulsive thing that would make her feel better, more in control. Nell, however, scrambled off her chair and intercepted Molly before she could pick up the receiver. She shook her head furiously.

"It's okay," said Molly. "He can't do anything to hurt us anymore."

Nell shook her head again and clenched her fingers around Molly's hand. Molly had to pry them off.

"Will you cut it out? You're just being silly. There's nothing to be afraid of. I can handle Clyde, I promise. You want to find out about Grandma, don't you?"

Nell stared at Molly for a few more seconds, then returned to her chair. The fear was still evident on Nell's face, mixed with unconcealed anger at Molly, who paid it no mind. Sometimes you just had to act, and this was one of those times. She looked up Clyde's work number in the phone book and dialed.

"Pelletreau Fuel and Lumber," answered a voice on the seventh ring.

"Clyde Cole, please," said Molly. Did he still work there? Was he even still alive? She hadn't spoken with Clyde for years.

"Who wants him?"

"His stepdaughter. Molly O'Hara."

A few minutes later a gruff, too-familiar voice came on the line.

"Well, if it ain't little miss antique dealer. To what do I owe this honor?"

The palm of Molly's hand was suddenly damp against the telephone receiver. She fought down a wave of disgust. ~~Maybe this hadn't been such a great idea, after all.~~

"Hello, Clyde. How have you been?"

"What's it to you?"

"I'm just being polite," she said.

"Save it. What do you want?"

Clyde had been the main suspect that terrible Saturday afternoon seventeen years ago. Molly had come home from the movies and had found her mother sprawled on their living room floor, a thirty-eight-caliber hole in the center of her forehead.

Clyde's alibi was unshakable, however: he had been at Cousin Hecker's American Tarheel Bar and Grill, drinking with the boys. Six drunkards and Cousin Hecker himself had sworn to it. So had a pair of off-duty cops who had gone to the bar to watch a baseball game on TV.

Hearing the perpetual sneer in his voice, Molly once again felt the same revulsion and helplessness she had experienced as a child. When she asked him to turn down the television so she could study, he would laugh and order her to fetch him another beer or just blow cigarette smoke in her face. If she ever expressed excitement over anything, he would make fun of her and call her names.

Clyde had been the girl's legal guardian after their mother's death. Until Nell turned sixteen and Molly was able to get them their own place he had insisted on "raising" them himself. That he had no talent or feeling for the job didn't matter—all he knew was that Molly and Nell were his property.

"Grandma died," she said simply.

"Yeah, I heard. Can't say I'm really sorry. She was always a mean old bat. You gonna tell me what you want?"

"I wanted to ask you some questions about her," said Molly, ignoring the insult.

"About the old lady? What would I know?"

"Did she ever say anything to you about her career on the stage?"

"Her what?"

"Her stage career," said Molly. "She was a big Broadway actress."

"Yeah, right," snickered Clyde. "What are you, nuts?"

"No, really. Did she ever—"

"Come on," barked the cruel voice. "That worthless old lady never did nothin' in her whole life. I'm in the middle of a job here, for Crissakes. Anything else you want to know?"

"No, that's all," whispered Molly.

The line went dead.

Molly slowly placed the phone back in the cradle. Nell shot her a look that at the same time said both, "I told you so" and "what now?"

Molly knew that she deserved the I told you so, and she already had an answer to the what now?

"We're going to see Daddy," she said simply.

Molly's mother had thrown Tim O'Hara out of the house shortly before Nell's fourth birthday. A month after the divorce became final he had married a woman whose family owned a candy company in the Moorehaven suburb on the east side of Pelletreau.

Molly had not seen her father since then, but she knew where he lived. Moorehaven was the wealthiest part of town, and Molly often came here to yard and garage sales—rich people were the ones most likely to be selling quality things, and surprisingly often they didn't understand the value of what they had. Molly had made it a point to find his big white house on Daisy Hill Lane long ago. She and Nell had driven past many times, but had never had the courage to knock on the door.

Today was different.

~~Even Nell, normally so shy, didn't hesitate to get out after Molly drove up the long driveway and parked the van in front of the big, beautiful house.~~

Molly straightened her clothes. Nell reached into her pocket for a comb, which she ran nonchalantly through her hair, as if she did so on a regular basis. They looked briefly at each other and shared a pair of nervous smiles. Then Molly knocked three times on the frame of the screen door at the same time that Nell pressed the bell.

After a moment a woman came out.

She was about Nell's height, an attractive brunette with full lips and an athletic figure. She wore spotless tennis whites and two-hundred-dollar running shoes. Her wristwatch was a gold Rolex.

"Yes?" she asked with a smile perfect enough to persuade people to change their brand of toothpaste to hers.

"Hi," said Molly. "I'm Molly O'Hara. This is my sister, Nell. We'd like to speak with our father, please."

The woman stepped back as if hit in the face. Her smile never wavered, however. It seemed actually to grow even wider if that were possible. And whiter.

"Certainly," she said after a moment, barely moving her lips. "I'll tell him you're here."

The woman went back inside. After a moment Molly could hear raised voices, sounds of a man and woman arguing. After another moment a man came out and closed the front door behind him.

He looked almost exactly as he did in her memories and in the snapshots of a smiling teenager that Molly had found in a shoebox after Evangeline O'Hara Cole had been murdered: a thin man, about five feet ten inches tall, with a weak chin and a scraggly mustache. He was dressed in khaki pants, a yellow polo shirt, and brown loafers without socks. He didn't look exactly thrilled to see them.

"Hi," he said in a cautious tenor, his eyes darting from Molly to Nell. Then he glanced over his right shoulder back at the house. "I'm Tim O'Hara."

"I'm Molly. This is Nell."

"Yeah, my wife told me. You're Angie's girls."

"That's right," said Molly softly, too proud to point out the fact that he had had something to do with their existence as well.

"So what can I do for you?" he said, trying to find a suitable place to park his hands. He tried several combinations of under his armpits and behind his neck before settling for the pockets of his khaki pants. "I'm sorry I can't invite you in, but Susan is just making dinner now. That's my wife. Susan."

"Of course," said Molly, struggling to contain her disappointment. "I understand."

Making dinner—what a great excuse not to invite in your daughters whom you haven't seen in over twenty years. Nell just stared wide-eyed at Tim O'Hara, her expression a blend of uncertainty and startled recognition.

"Look," said Molly, coming to her sister's rescue, "we don't want to take up too much of your time. There are just a few things I thought you might be able to help us clear up about Grandma. You know she died."

Tim O'Hara stared back blankly.

"Margaret Jellinek," said Molly. "Our grandmother. She died last week."

"Oh, Maggie," he said, looking almost relieved. "Yeah, right. Dead, huh? Sorry about that. My condolences."

"There are some things we don't understand, and we thought you might remember."

"Well, I was sort of persona non grata with Maggie," he said. "She was pretty pissed when Angie and I eloped. I don't know that I can tell you much."

"Did you know that she was once an actress?"

“Yeah? I never heard anything about that.”

“Do you know where Grandma lived or what she might have been doing before she came Pelletreau?”

“No,” answered O’Hara. “You really would do better asking somebody else.”

“What about Grandma’s marriage?” asked Molly in a measured drawl. “Did she ever talk about that?”

O’Hara broke into a strange, unpleasant chuckle.

“Oh, sure,” he said. “That was the whole problem. Between Maggie and me, I mean. Maggie ran off with a guy her family didn’t approve of when she was a teenager, see? Dick Jellinek was his name. Richard Jellinek. He walked out on Maggie when Angie was just a baby. Deserted them.”

“I never knew that,” said Molly, surprised.

To her Richard Jellinek had always been just “Bride’s Father” on the yellowing copy of Angie and O’Hara’s marriage license that Molly kept in the safe-deposit box. Grandma had never even mentioned her ex-husband’s name, let alone that she had fallen out with her family because of him or that he had deserted her. At last they were finally getting somewhere.

“That was why Maggie was so furious when Angie and I eloped, I guess,” O’Hara went on. “The old lady had wrecked her life by running off with a man, and she thought that Angie was going to do the same with me.”

Obviously Grandma had been right.

Tim O’Hara smiled guiltily, like a taxpayer who had just admitted too much to an IRS agent. Molly glanced over at Nell, who seemed confused and uncomfortable. She alternated staring at the ground and stealing peeks at her father, as if she expected he might suddenly give her a hug or break into some of the way he used to when they were little.

“Did you ever hear anything about Grandma’s family?” Molly asked, trying not to let her feelings show on her face.

“Well, they were rich, I know,” said O’Hara.

“Excuse me?” said Molly.

“Yeah, the old lady got a little tipsy one night right after Angie and I got married, and let slip her folks were loaded. She claimed they owned a castle or something.”

Molly couldn’t speak for a moment. The notion that her grandmother had grown up wealthy was like hearing that an umbrella had once been a rose.

“Why didn’t she go to them when her marriage broke up?” she said finally.

“Yeah, that’s what Angie wanted to know,” said O’Hara. “But the old lady wouldn’t say. She was too proud, I guess. Too stubborn.”

Molly shook her head with disbelief. Had Grandma really lived in a castle? She had always told Molly that all of her family was dead. Were there still relatives somewhere, wondering where she was? Molly looked over at Nell, but couldn’t catch her eye.

“The more Angie thought about it, the angrier she got,” continued Tim O’Hara. “‘You mean, I could have grown up rich in a castle instead of dirt poor in Pelletreau?’ she hollered at Maggie once. ‘You wouldn’t have been happy, believe me,’ Maggie yelled back. Angie barely spoke to the old lady for a year after that, she was so pissed.”

“Poor mom,” said Molly softly.

“Yeah,” said O’Hara sympathetically—or was it pity? “It would have been just as well if she had never written to them.”

“Mom wrote to Grandma’s family?” asked Molly, amazed. “How did she find out who they were and where they lived?”

“Right before we split up Angie was over at her mother’s and found an insurance policy in some of

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