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-Dialogs on the Infinite-

In the morning, she decided to fit another piece to the David Emory puzzle.

Marjorie Maxwell's cottage wasn't difficult to find; it was the only one that was even remotely close to David's place, just under a mile away. And a cottage was exactly what it was.

She had thought that the Emory homestead was ridiculously picturesque. The Maxwell house made David's charming home look like a cinderblock bomb shelter. Picket fence. Rose arbor. An honest-to-god thatched roof. An immaculate 50s-era Buick in the gravel drive. And a pair of residents who might have sprouted from the earth of their English garden.

Marjorie and her sister Martha were ancient, deeply wrinkled Hobbits, adorable, grey-haired and Puritan thin. Their warm, bright, lace-curtained living room smelled of lavender, baking bread and wood stove. Every space was given over to sewing surfaces and a huge spinning wheel. From seemingly every corner, every sill, every chair, a cat watched the proceedings, just as David had described.

Despite their advanced years, the sisters were energetic, old-line New Englanders, industrious and purposeful. Their hands were never still. Every word of conversation was accompanied by the whirr of the spinning wheel and click of the treadle sewing machine. Marjorie, the spinner, was the talker of the two. Her sister seemed content simply to listen, nod and smile. "Did you come to pick up the things for David?"

Marjorie fetched up six neatly-twisted skeins of white handspun yarn. McGill held them to her cheek. The wool had presence in her hand, a soft weight, a trace of oil that spoke of living things. She had never been a big fan of handcrafts, but there was something touchingly alive about this product of an old woman's labor. The spun wool, to the loomed cloth, to the finished product on David's back: the circle completed. It was all very satisfying, somehow.

"All that yarn in David's barn: Did you make that? And the jacket?"

"Oh yes. The yarn from David's wool, and the jacket from David's cloth. How is he? We haven't seen him in several weeks."

Marjorie had assumed an acquaintance of longer standing; McGill didn't try to correct the error. She didn't mention his stay at St. Amelia's. That was for David to tell. "He's fine. He's well," she said. The smell of lavender was making her euphoric. She wished she could have been one of their cats. She wanted to curl up on the doiled couch and nap the morning away in the sunshine. "You've known him for a long time, I guess."

"And his parents. And his grandparents. I taught him to weave when he was eight years old."

"Marjorie, what was he like back then?"

"Oh, I don't know. He was a sweet boy, then. He's a sweet boy now." *Sweet* wasn't what she'd hoped for. And it was far from all there was. Behind that milk-and-cookies smile, McGill caught a glimpse of the fierce protectiveness she'd seen in those who knew David well—Eli Cline's steely loyalty, but dressed in an antique lace glove.

"You're asking me, I think, how he's different between then and now?" Marjorie was more savvy than she'd let on. "He's more complicated, now. In some ways, he's still so very young. And he's not as strong as he thinks he is. Why do you ask?"

"I just find him...interesting."

Old women were wonderful. Old women missed nothing. They saw things you hadn't yet guessed. "Of course you do, dear," said Marjorie Maxwell.

McGill was letting herself in at the front door. Trying to. She never could figure out which key was which. Footsteps came quickly up the walk behind her. She turned, startled.

It was Jon Arledge.

What the hell? He knew where she lived. He had followed her home. This was creepy.

"What are you doing here?"

He smiled at her from behind his aviator sunglasses. She couldn't see his eyes. He was all Ivy League casual, starched and pressed and expensive down to his fingernails. As cool and slick as a reptile in the rain. "Do you know where he is?"

"He who?"

"David Emory."

"Why would I know that?"

"You were seen coming out of his home."

Alarm bells. "How do you know that?"

"No one escapes attention in a small town. Could it be that you haven't discovered this?"

"Could it be you haven't discovered that it's illegal to stalk people?"

"I'm not stalking you, Ms. Forester. I'm looking out for you."

"Whatever you're calling it, this Captain Ahab thing of yours is not very attractive. You're obsessing over nothing. David is harmless."

"And how many hospitalizations would it take to convince you otherwise? Two? Three? Five? You don't know him well enough to have an opinion, I assure you."

It was true: She knew David Emory nowhere near well enough to defend him in anything, from anyone. But she was coming to understand that she would have defended Charles Manson if Arledge had been on the opposing side. "Here's a thought: Maybe next time you can follow *him* home and tell him how concerned you are."

"Do you know how he came to me this last time, when you met him?"

"He collapsed. At an execution."

"Exactly. But there have been no executions in New York State for more than 30 years. Have you asked yourself what he was doing at an execution at all? In another state? A place he had no legitimate reason to be?"

"Listen to me, Ms. Forester: Be very, very careful around David Emory. Sooner or later, he is going to harm someone. When he does, it won't matter whether he's been out of the hospital for two weeks or ten years. Whoever is close to him will suffer."

The sweet afterglow of the Maxwell's living room was snuffed, stolen. McGill was all scrapper, now. "Jon—I'll call you that since we're on such intimate terms—take it up with him." She saw herself in his slick sunglasses, and saw his superior smirk harden. She was about to make an enemy, and she couldn't have cared less. "Now get off my property. And don't ever come here again."

She slammed the door, slammed her bag onto the kitchen counter, slammed a few counter doors just for punctuation. She had started way wrong with Arledge as far back as their first meeting, but he'd taken it too far. Was this his bizarre idea of courtship? Was it a genuine concern for her wellbeing? Maybe he did know his patient better than she did. Maybe he was just an ass. But he was dangling David in front of her like a perverse little carrot, playing her curiosity to recruit her to some personal crusade. She didn't like it. *Did she know where David Emory was....*

The fact was, within five minutes she did know. As soon as the phone rang.

"Yeah. Talk."

It was David, pulled up short by the exasperation that hadn't been intended for him. "Ahhh...I think I've caught you at a bad time."

"No, no, it's okay. I was just chasing away a pest. What can I do for you?"

"Are you busy around one? I wanted to invite you to lunch."

Two invitations. In two days. Not good. "David...you know I'm married, right?"

An uncomfortable hesitation. That appealing awkwardness again.

"You know it wasn't, ummm... that kind of an invitation. Eli will be here."

She laughed, embarrassed at being so full of herself. "In that case, yes, I'd love to come. Where shall I meet you?"

Instantly, the gaff was forgiven. Discomfort was not allowed to live long in David Emory's company. "Come here to the house. See you at one."

His call had tickled her, she had to admit. Social invitations weren't all that common—at least, not ones without the strings of Ty Florey attached. He was a hot commodity; people got close to you to try to get closer to him. As for her other opportunities, the self-congratulatory ego-fests that were part of the writing business, they held not a scrap of appeal for her. Invitations came in a unending stream. Without exception, she turned them all down. Were they to stop coming, she wouldn't be particularly sorry to see them go.

But this one, this was different. This was going to be good.

She showed up at David's place a socially-incorrect five minutes early, a bottle of wine in each hand. David answered the door on the third ring, elegant in pale grey, wiping his hands on the crisp white chef's apron tied around his waist. She'd caught him in mid-preparations. He was flushed with activity and, charmingly, he was a bit flustered; evidently, his "join me for lunch" logistics were a little rusty.

As distracted as he was, his big smile switched on when he saw her. He seemed genuinely delighted that she'd shown up.

"Come on in. Oh...wine. Thank you. I forgot to ask whether you like Thai food."

"It's my favorite."

"Good, good. I wasn't sure what I was going to do if you said no. Eli will be along shortly, I expect. He makes a point of never being on time for anything."

"You're sure he's coming?"

"Eli eats sausages out of a can. If there's food in the invitation, yeah, he's coming."

"Shall I join you in the kitchen?"

"Probably not a good idea. I'd try so hard to impress you that I'd probably cut a finger off. But there's wine open over there on the coffee table. Make yourself at home. I won't be long."

She poured herself a glass of the same good white varietal he'd offered her yesterday in the barn; helped herself from a platter of rumaki and parmesan crisps warm from the oven. She settled in on the couch, and, as she'd done in Cline's office, she indulged herself with the property-anthropology she'd been too preoccupied to undertake the last time she was here.

A little ashamed of herself, she went for the snark first. She looked for the taint of money in his living space; that sense of privilege that had always chapped her raw. She didn't find it. The place was not fussy. It was tasteful. And comfortable. Good furniture. A lot of beautiful New England antiques, well used but well cared-for. Lamps placed for reading. Bike in the hallway. No sign of a pet.

There were more of the superb, unearthly, grey abstract paintings on the walls, David's work. Conversely, he kept no self-important evidences of his weaving around the place; no wall hangings, no rugs, no fiber-art, no pillows. She supposed that, outside of the elegantly simple white jacket she'd seen him wear, he gave most of it away.

On the coffee table, next to the food, Poet Charles Wright's *Buffalo Yoga*, with David's reading glasses left to mark his stopping-place. The *Sibley Guide to Birds* with a pair of binoculars resting on top. A stack of books beside it, and a wall of books behind that, a collection that described a questing intelligence. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica*. James Hillman's *A Blue Fire*. E.O. Wilson. *The Tao. The Tao of Physics*. Socrates, *Dialogs. Between Silence and Light*, about the spiritual architecture of Louis I. Kahn. Books by Stephen Hawking. ??ART THEORY?? Hunter Thompson. Isaac Asimov. Nabokov. CDs that confessed a taste in music as all-embracing as his taste in books.

A laptop in its own bookshelf space. A sweater thrown over the arm of the sofa. A hearth, recently used. Everything just tidy enough, but not too much. It was all so... normal. Maybe he had bodies buried in the basement as Doctor Arledge had hinted, but where was the crazy in all this?

David has a rich inner life, Cline had said, not altogether ironically. This was evidence of it: a life that was solitary but not nearly empty. More and more she wondered why someone so essentially present, so fully realized and comfortable in his skin, could have isolated himself as completely as David had done. This place was an island—a wonderful one, given, but an island nonetheless.

Eli arrived to the disquieting sound of gunfire in the near distance. He let himself in. "Those damn kids are back out there in your woods again, David," he shouted toward the kitchen. To McGill, he said "The little bastards shoot anything that moves. Somebody's gonna get killed."

David came out with a platter of cheese. "They're Jeffrey's kids, Eli. Nobody's going to do anything about the sheriff's kids."

"I'll do something about them—with an ass-full of rock salt."

"Look. McGill brought wine."

"Oh thank God. I was afraid she was going to bring her book. Feed me."

It was her own fault, the turn the conversation took.

David was one of those easy, natural hosts who made his guests feel welcome without trying. As he warmed to the task, his moments of gawky social discomfort were replaced by flashes of grace. He was amusable. Engaging. And the man could cook.

David was good at conversation, engaged and responsive. He listened, at times, with an attention that was almost unnerving, yet he tempered the effect generously with that warming, childlike smile of his. He had an endearing way of tilting his head to the side when he grinned at you; of tossing his head when he laughed, and he laughed a lot. The laugh was a surprise—even to him, it seemed. He laughed as if he had forgotten how; as if he were laughing at the joy at discovering laughter again.

And he had a liberal hand with the wine bottle. The more he poured, the more interesting the conversation got.

It started innocently enough. "David, I noticed you don't have a pet."

"That surprises you?"

"I didn't expect it—somebody with such an affinity for animals..."

"That's not my choice, exactly. I like animals, but...."

"David, they follow you in the road."

"I can't get them to stop. I've tried."

Eli, a wry broadside. "I know the feeling."

"Sometimes they get hit by cars. Then I feel terrible."

McGill said "You know, David, I was curious...."

David sat forward. McGill being McGill, he should have guessed that she would take even the most casual conversation as far as it would go.

"Tell me about the first time."

"The first time animals followed me?"

"No, the first time for everything."

No hesitation, this time. His eyes wandered after the memory. "It was a cold day, I remember. Down in the City. The November before the fire at the mill. A bird hit a window. I picked it up; held it the way you do, you know, hoping it will come back. But it didn't. And when it died, I felt something happen."

His eloquent hands fluttered an ethereal outline around his chest. "It was like a door opening. And something came in. Light and small. Suddenly, for just a second, I was that thing....that quick, bright thing lifted by the air. I knew what flight was. I saw trees and branches differently; berries. Bugs. I could see color." He gave a delighted little laugh. "I'd never seen color before. And then the feeling was gone. But the...the thing...the presence...was still there. It had weight. And substance and character. I didn't know what it was. But it was wonderful."

He paused, carefully gathering the right words. "Have you ever heard the expression 'When you witness one death, you witness them all'? Everything was different for me after that. Death was different. I could no longer say 'that was just a bird that died' or 'that was just a dog' or 'that was just somebody I didn't know.' There was no *just* in anything. It was all...I don't know how to say this...greater. More meaningful. Every time I opened the door inside, I got a glimpse of something human beings don't get to see. That limitlessness: It's a very humbling thing."

"A look into the void."

"No...not a void, because it's not empty. And not full because there's nothing to fill. I can't call it *everything*, because you have to stand outside of everything to know that it is everything. This is just..." that awed, aimless flying of hands again "...is."

"*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*," Eli said in Hebrew. *I am that I am.*

McGill quoted. "You mean, it's kind of like 'an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together.'"

"Yes. Who said that?"

"Obi-wan Kenobi."

Eli howled. "I love this woman."

Their host took the ribbing in good spirits. "I know, I know. After all this time, I have a hard enough time believing it—and I'm the one living with it. But it is what it is."

"David, I don't know what you think you're seeing. But there are no dead relatives waiting to greet you when you die; no floating above your body, no going toward the light."

"No, those things are real—except maybe the dead-relatives-waiting part. So far the only one waiting has been me."

"I don't believe that. These aren't cosmic phenomena. They're the brain's synapses shutting down. Science knows this."

"Ah, science," Eli said caustically. "Conversation over." He put his fork down. "How do you explain the nursing home pets that know when a person is going to die? How do you explain the 21 grams?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Science. In a controlled experiment in the last century, a physician weighed dying men before death and in the moments after. The difference was 21 grams. The weight of the soul."

"Sorry. Not buying it." She could have left it there. But she had a point to make. "Tell me this: Why *you*, David?"

"Don't know. Don't need to know. Carpenter builds a house...doesn't necessarily know who's going to live there. Or why."

"Are they animal souls? Human souls?"

"What's the difference? Souls are souls. The rest is window dressing."

"Why would they want to come to you, these souls?"

"No idea. For safekeeping, maybe. Some wander, like the ones in accidents—they're the worst: They can't get their bearings; they need to be pointed in the right direction. The rest? Maybe they're the ones with no place else to go. If they don't want to come to me, they don't."

"Wouldn't they want to...go on?"

"Not the ones that come to me."

"Where do they go...after?"

"They don't. Go anywhere. Not so far."

"And what happens to them if something happens to you?"

"I don't know. I guess I'll find out one of these days."

Her next question was loaded. Like a shotgun. "Do you believe in God, David?"

Eli reached for the wine bottle. "Here we go."

David held up his hands. "Sorry. Too big a question."

"Not for most people."

Cline snorted. "Quod erat demonstratum."

"Seriously."

David said, "Let me ask you the same thing, McGill."

"Don't go there, Em," Eli muttered. "I'm warning you."

"The question's on the table, so it's fair game. I'd like to know."

"The jury's still out on the God thing for me," she answered bluntly.

"The soul? No. I watched both of my parents die within a year of one another. There was no upside. When you're dead, you're dead. The end. Nothing stays. Nothing goes anywhere."

She had momentum, now. Between the wine and the passion of the debate, she couldn't have stopped if she'd wanted to. "But let me backtrack. You can't do anything with this gift of yours, correct? You can't channel it or put it to use? If you're just wandering around collecting things, what's the purpose? What's the point?"

Eli spoke up. "You mean it has to have a mission? Like what—saving Mankind? Why does there need to be a point? Why does it need to *do* anything at all?"

"That's very Talmudic of you, Eli. But you're taking an awful lot on faith."

"Exactly. Let me ask you this: What if the question *is* the reason? Is a higher state of being made of knowing? Or is it merely the opening of a door to more questions? What if this thing of David's is nothing more than questions: Isn't that enough?"

"It's a human interpretation of an essentially empty universe."

"And if the universe is just us and energy, is it any less wonderful? You asked if David believes in God. You didn't ask me."

She grinned. "I was afraid to."

"The answer is no. But if there were a God, what do you think Yahweh would think about all these inconsequential little bio-blobs so absolutely sure they've got it all figured out, and so willing to tell you exactly what to believe?"

"What if it's the asking that's sacred? That priceless, inestimable ability to look at an unknowable universe and say, humbly, I don't know. When the question is enough, McGill: That's faith. When you can be content to do nothing more than let it all come into you—for reasons you will never understand: That's worship." He drained his wine glass and held it out to be refilled. "Thus endeth the lesson."

David was grinning in unrestrained delight. "That was fun."

"I don't know about you," McGill said, "but I'm worn out."

"Coffee, anybody? Prozac? You two, sit. I'll be right back."

As David left the room, McGill caught Cline watching him, as if seeing something in the younger man that he hadn't seen in a while, something he approved of. He caught her watching him; scowled at her. "What are you looking at?"

"Him. You."

"Him, me—what?"

She dared him with her smile. "You're cute together."

"Cute." A murderous look. She loved getting under his skin: It was so easy. "Young woman, you do love to live dangerously."

"No, it's not that. You surprised me. He surprised me. I never expected any of this."

"Then you'll have to stop making things so interesting."

"Do you think I went too far?"

"You invented 'too far.'"

"He's got me curious, I'll give him that much." She drew patterns on the tablecloth with her spoon. "Speaking for a second as if I were actually buying all this? He's so different today. Not the David from a few days ago."

"Why should that surprise you?"

"I don't understand why his...his gift...would affect him that way."

"Think about it. There's only so much the human organism can take. We're born with an infinite capacity for love, yes. For forgiveness, yes. But one soul is all we're issued. There isn't room for more. Not for most of us, anyway."

"Why does he do it?"

"I don't know. I don't know that *he* knows. Maybe he thinks he's doing good. Mostly, I think he can't help it. He never could turn himself off.

"The problem is, David isn't afraid of death. I wish he were. I wish this thing scared the crap out of him. Because sooner or later, one more is going to be the one too many."

"That's not enough to get him to stop?"

"Apparently you don't know David."

She reached for the wine bottle and refilled both their glasses. "Did he tell you that Jon Arledge came to see me at my house? He was lobbying for an ally in the David Emory witch-hunt. He was trying to tell me something about David at an execution."

Eli reined-up. Hard. He sidestepped the subject so fast he could have given himself whiplash. "Jon is a self-righteous idiot. But unfortunately, he's a connected one who gets what he wants in this county."

The Pay Attention bell was going off in her head. Eli was stonewalling. "Eli, what is it about the execution?"

David returned into the room, coffee-laden. "What did I miss?"

Eli steered the conversation decisively to safer ground. "We were talking about Jon."

David grimaced. "And everything was going so well."

"David has been Jon's personal project for years. There's been bad blood between his family and the Emorys forever—property, money, influence. And now that he's decided that David is a danger to the community, he thinks he's legitimized a grudge that really started long before he was born.

"He gets his hands on David once every couple of years, when he can catch him incapacitated. Locks him up, throws the key away. It's medieval, what he does to him in that hospital: electro-convulsive therapy, for God's sake. He shoots him so full of anti-psychotics he can't see straight. The drugs only make it harder for David to find his way back. And of course David won't talk to him about what's wrong, which Jon chalks up as one more symptom.

"After a while, couple of weeks in, David always manages to struggle back on his own. Jon runs out of legal means to keep him inside, and so he pronounces his latest psychiatric miracle cure and lets him go. Then David has another episode and it starts all over again. How many times so far, Em?"

"Five. Five too many."

Eli's pager went off. "Shit. I gotta get to the hospital. Mike Dockery's boy broke another limb. The little klutz."

“Don’t forget to tell your patient that his doctor is drunk.”

Cline snorted. “Drunk—please. How long have you known me? Besides, I’m not getting within ten feet of that kid. Not when I can terrorize my snot-nosed resident Daniels into doing it. I do love making him sweat.” He downed his coffee at a gulp headed for the door. “David, you haven’t forgotten how to cook. McGill, thanks for the seminar.”

McGill reached for her purse. She fumbled her car keys out of her bag. “Maybe I’ll call it an afternoon, too,” she said.

David plucked the key ring gently out of her hand. “Bad host. Bad. Too much wine, too little time.”

“Guess I don’t have Eli’s constitution. Drive me.”

“I haven’t driven in fifteen years. We’ll go through the woods. It’s closer than driving, and we could both use the walk. Come on—I won’t let anything happen to you, promise

-The Consequence of Notebooks-

"...That big meadow was a forest 150 years ago. It's all grass and wildflowers now, but think how was back then. Think what it took to clear it with oxen, one stone, one stump at a time...."

As they walked down the path, David once again held forth on meadows and frogs and hummingbirds—anything that was ahead, above, behind; a nonstop monolog meant to keep McGill's in-the-woods willies at bay. He was good at reading people, she was discovering; better, she suspected, than she was. What she did through impetuous craft he did through the patience of his nature, informed (if she were to believe it) by everything he carried inside him. Whatever he was doing, it was working.

McGill's cellphone warbled, a sound totally wrong for the space. *Got Crazy*, it sang.

"Hi! Whatcha doing? You workin'?" Ty was too bright, too chipper; the way he'd so often sounded before rehab, when he was hitting the meth hard. He spoke as if nothing bad had happened between them; as if nothing in the world could possibly equal the pleasure of a phone call from him.

"So you're talking to me again? Where are you?"

"Not in Tokyo. Where are *you*?"

She looked around. David had disappeared tactfully into the woods.

"I'm having lunch with friends, Ty."

"When did you get friends? Are these real friends, or the written-down ones?"

"What did you want?"

"Sounds like you're outside."

"Yes, and?"

"I heard a man's voice."

"There are a lot of people here." Why had she lied? Why had she done what guilty people do? "Was there something you wanted?"

He was instantly petulant. "Don't get snotty with me. The whole Japan leg went away, so I'm free until the East Coast dates start. I'm home, at the loft. I thought maybe you'd want to be here too."

Distance from him had made her bold. "Sure, Ty. Let's be one big happy family again. We can adopt Manny, and you can give him your cellphone for keeps. Anything else?"

"Yeah. Why are you such a bitch?" The line went dead.

McGill caught up with David on the path and fell into step behind him, in sulking silence. Sensing that something had happened, he let his monologue lay where it had fallen, discreet enough not to probe her mood, smart enough to let it do the work of distracting her from her fear of where she was. They walked without conversation the rest of the way to the house. David had navigated them to just across the street from her front door.

She invited him in, dug two wine glasses out of a packing box and filled both of them. She didn't ask what he wanted. She was drinking, he was joining her, that was all.

He accepted the unasked-for wine gracefully, and looked admiringly around her chaotic, half-furnished living room. "This is nice. Minimalist. I like it."

"Like a warehouse, you mean. I'm living out of boxes."

"No, I meant it looks right for doing what you do. Focused. Not a lot of unnecessary distractions. Like your book."

"I thought you hadn't read my book."

"I lied."

She dumped a stack of magazines off the couch to give him a place to sit. The room might be half-naked, but at least the furniture was comfortable. The afternoon light touched the cut-crystal teardrop she'd hung in the window, and suddenly the room was filled with waltzing rainbows. Enchanted, he let the light play over his fingers. He might not see color, but he knew what happened when light met prism. "Funny, I wouldn't have taken you for a rainbow person."

"Yeah, rainbows, unicorns, little fuzzy kittens: You've discovered the secret me. Now where were we? We were talking about your gift."

The hesitation. But a more amiable one, this time. "We were talking about a lot of things."

The wine was talking. The wine was making it easy. "I want to ask you a question."

She was tipsy and it amused him. "I don't think I could I stop you."

"David, could you take a living soul? Have you ever tried?"

His shoulders spoke: David's tell—but what was he telling? He turned the question away. The deflection was chilling. "For somebody who doesn't believe the answers, you ask an awful lot of questions."

He took back the moment; his was a perpetual need to erase awkwardness and set a conversation back on level ground. "Tell me about being a writer."

She didn't answer right away.

"Wrong question?"

"No. It's just that nobody ever asked me that before." She thought about it. "It's hard work."

"Well sure. You could get a blister." He laughed apologetically. "I'm sorry. Go on."

"What's it like...? Half the people you meet hope you'll write about them. The other half are worried that you will. It's solitary. Afterwards, it's lonely."

"But not during."

"During, it's wonderful. It's as if the ideas are hanging in the air. You pick them like fruit. The people you're writing about become more real than what's around you: You re-create them and you are them... the work isolates you, but it also fills you up... and it's all so delicate that a breath could blow it away." She halted her rambling, self-revealing flight. She looked to David, dreading the frozen, overly-polite look of pseudo interest she knew she'd find there. But David was smiling.

"Remember those words," he said; "the next time you're tempted to ask what my life is like."

Got Crazy sang over the cellphone again. She switched the phone off and tossed it onto the table behind her.

"Your husband really wants to talk to you," he said. "I should go."

"My husband will wait. How did you know that was him?"

"The ringtone. You don't strike me as a headbanger."

"You got *husband* from a ringtone."

"Yep..." he smiled mischief again "...and the part of your dustjacket that says 'Ms. Forester is married to rock icon Ty Florey.' How long have you been married?"

"One complete decade. That's about 70 in rock-icon years. You?"

"Twelve."

"And she died, you said..."

"Fifteen years ago. Tomorrow." She would have bet that he could also have quoted the hours and minutes. Fifteen years was a surprise. From everything she'd heard, she'd been sure that the wound was a fresh one.

"You never married again."

A bleak grin. "Yeah, well. I can tell you from personal experience that being a mental patient is a real chick magnet."

"After her suicide..."

"Ellen. Ellen was her name."

"After Ellen died, was that when you got to know Dr. Arledge? The first time?"

He nodded. "I had a tough time. After."

"So he put you in St. Amelia's after she killed herself."

"No, after I did."

"Did what?"

"Killed myself."

"You tried to..."

His voice was eerily casual. "Oh no, I succeeded."

She flat-out had nothing to say to that. Nothing except, "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right. How could you know? I got to Ellen too late to do anything for her, and Eli got to me in time. And then there was the institution, and Jon Arledge. The rest you've heard. It was a very long time ago."

"David, tell me about the execution."

A veil dropped over his expression. His amiable sincerity faltered, and a dark refusal took its place. "That's the one question I won't answer. And please, don't ever ask me that again."

For the second time in her experience of him, McGill had no idea what to say next. Every time she thought she'd gotten closer to understanding who he was, he skated off in another direction. In the uncomfortable silence, she fumbled for the wine bottle. Her purse and everything near it went skittering off the table behind her.

David knelt to collect what had fallen. His back was to her, his head was bowed. He stayed like that, motionless, for a curiously long time.

"David?"

His voice had an unfamiliar cast, icy and out of character. "So would you say you've got enough now?"

She didn't understand. "Enough?"

She came around him. God.

Her notebook was open in his hand. Open, as he'd picked it up. *As he'd read it.* He handed it up to her. He looked stunned, as if someone had sucker-punched him.

In her alarm, the lies were quick to come. "It's a sketch, David. They're notes. They're fiction. They don't mean anything."

His voice was small, buried under swallowed anger. "Is that what all this has been about? Material?"

She'd learned long ago that the answer to that question was always *no, I'm not writing about you*—even when you were. "David, I'm not writing..."

"If all you wanted was an interview, you could have asked. And I could have said no." He stood. He laid the book on the table. He didn't say anything else. He walked to the door and shut it behind him.

She ran after him. "David, stop..."

He hadn't gone far. He was standing across the street, at the edge of the path through the woods that had brought them there. Something lay in the road beside him, a shapeless bulk in the fading of the day.

It was an owl. A beautiful owl. Bloodied. Shot. By the kids who'd been firing rifles earlier in the day, probably. It was alive, but it wouldn't be for long. Its round, alien eyes blinked up at them in terror.

David, intent on the creature at his feet, didn't seem to know she was there. He lowered himself slowly, until he was sitting on his heels beside it. His face was compassion and curiosity and purpose. He knew exactly what he was doing.

He touched his fingers to the creature's feathers, tenderly; lovingly. He drew a long breath, like opening a door....

She wanted to know. Had to know. Her questions came out in a rush, one after another: *What are you going to do, what does it feel like, what do you see?* But something was wrong. What she'd observed in David the first time—the smooth, meditative shift from the outside in—was thrown off-kilter. He was half with her, half with the terrified creature, pulled in two directions at once and fully in neither one.

She kept up the assault of questions, tracking the expressions that fast-forwarded through his face. His focus swung wildly, as if he wasn't sure where to be. Vertigo stole his balance and toppled him onto his hands. The divided attention was devastating; she hadn't realized how bad it would be. By the time she pulled herself back, the damage was done.

“David, I’m sor....”

He silenced her with a gesture; turned away from her and instantly forgot her. He pulled his legs back under him, collected himself and refocused. Suddenly, he was utterly at peace. He bent forward at the waist as if he were listening. His body went very still. He locked his eyes on the owl...and the owl looked back. The alien expression knew him. And its fear smoothed away.

David drew the long breath and began again.

His face changed, consumed by a fathomless, aimless loss. Confusion took its place there—as if he were trying to watch one thing among a million things, with an awareness of every one of them. He had become a Self suspended and directionless; irrelevant.

As the creature took its last breath, she saw it happen...the moment that bloomed in David. In his face was the transit from the grief and bewilderment of loss to something *other*... when he was, just for a moment, what he’d taken in; when he breathed, felt, soared as it did. He was alive to the night, seeing things in the unyielding blackness that her earthly eyes could not, a vision that broke from him in an exultant smile.

Not crazy. Not crazy. This was real. This was exactly what he had said it was.

Suddenly, his hand grabbed hers. He pulled her down beside him. She was falling. Falling. The bungee jump into the dark...a choking vertigo....

Light erased the night.
She could see wide and far and deep,
in colors unknown to human eyes.
Tiny things moved through distant woods;
her hearing picked them out among the leaves, as sure as vision.
She was no longer skin and hair and shrouded senses.
The breeze ruffled feathers. Her heart beat differently.
Her breath filled different lungs.
She was lifted into the air on silent wings.
Darkness no longer frightened her. Darkness was home.
In this moment, in this new thing that she had become,
she saw David at the periphery, at the center, everywhere.
A welcome, a beacon. Relief and refuge was in him.
This was the place she must go.
And beyond him, a hint of something infinitely more.
The all of it. The all of them.
The place you wouldn’t want to come back from....

The moment passed. It had lasted only a few seconds. But when it was over, she sat in the dirt, speechless, stunned, unable to move, barely able to breathe. She was filled with something that effervesced in her eyes and shimmered behind her heart.

Beside her, David breathed a long exhale, the companion breath to the one that had begun his journey. As he came back to himself, the knowledge of what McGill had done came back with him.

He pushed himself slowly to his feet but, uncharacteristically, he didn't offer her his hand. His expression was defiant. It said, *Do you think for a second that you could even begin to write about this?* This, the look said, was only a fraction, a shadow, of what he went through. The look said that this was something he would never share again. And worst, worst, the look spoke his bottomless disappointment. In breaking faith with him, McGill had tested his good nature to its limit; had stolen from him something of indescribable value.

She struggled to stand. "David..."

He pressed his fingertips against his eyes. "Go. Go." She didn't move. "All right, then I will." He stumbled away, down the path. She watched him until the darkness swallowed him.

Birds. Lost pets. Wild things. And people. There was no difference. There were no small souls. And now that it was true to her, she wanted to know more.