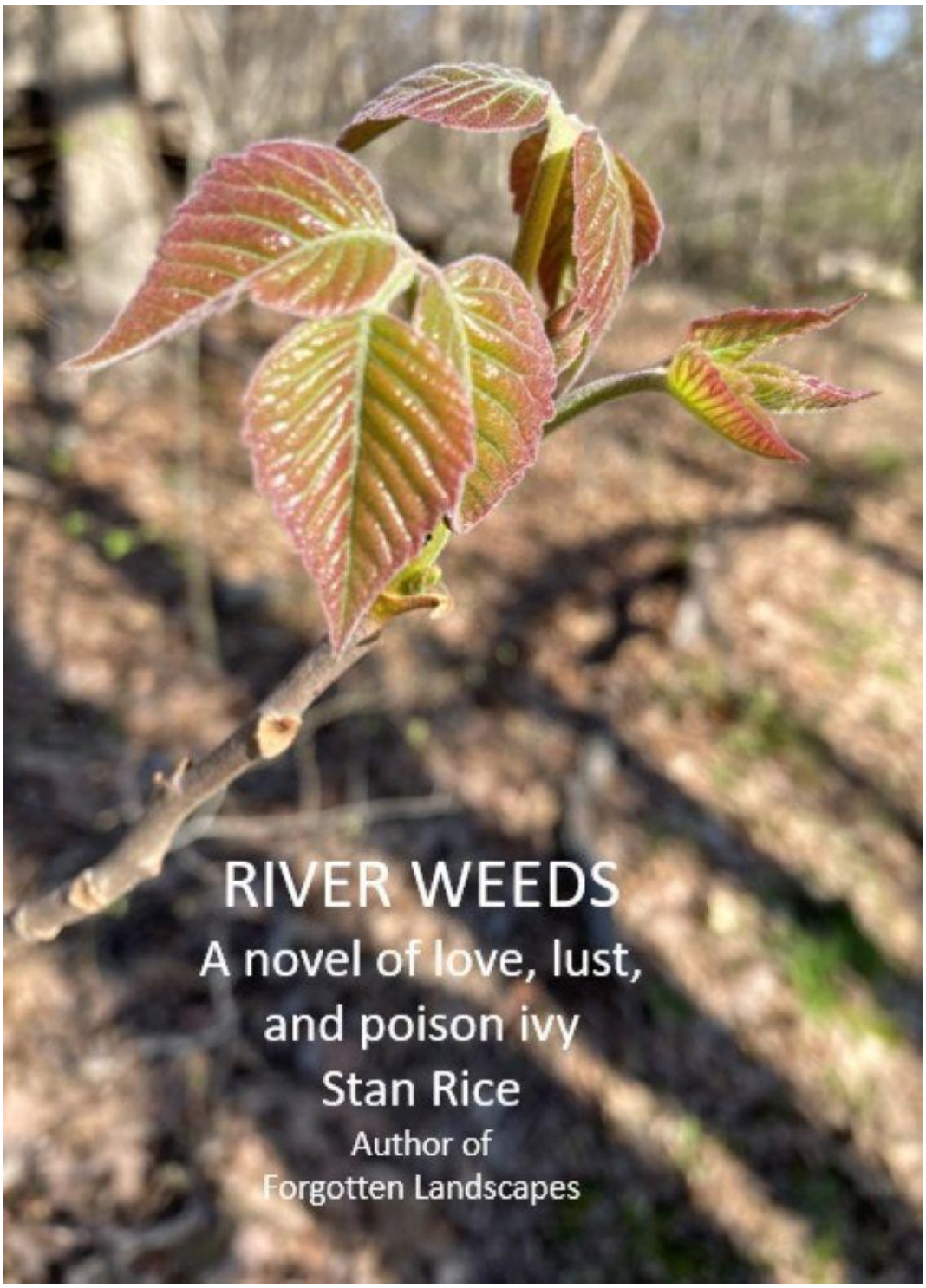

RIVER WEEDS
A novel of love, lust,
and poison ivy
Stan Rice
Author of
Forgotten Landscapes

RIVER WEEDS

A novel of love, lust, and poison ivy

Stan Rice

Cover image: Toxicodendron radicans, author photo.
No portion of this novel was written using artificial intelligence.

Works available or soon available by the same author:

Novels in Sets:

Trail of Tears: Novels of Cherokee Identity:
- Nancy's War: A Novel of the Last Cherokee Warrior Woman
- Elizabeth's Exile: A Novel of a Cherokee Refugee
- Edd's Land: A Novel of Four Cherokee Brothers in Early Oklahoma

Individual Novels:

The Princess of Kashgar
Meet Me in Strasbourg
Deru Kugi, a novel of an alternate Japan
Rima, a Modern Retelling of Green Mansions
River Weeds: a Novel of Love, Lust, and Poison Ivy
Confessions of Conseil: What *Really* Happened on board the *Nautilus*
Billy Stormfield's Visit to Hell
Glass Cathedral
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Short stories:
Blood-Brain Barrier: Stories from the Borderlands of Science
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Table of Contents, River Weeds

Summary of *River Weeds*

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Author's Notes on *River Weeds*

About the Author

Summary of *River Weeds*

Marten, a young scientist, meets Rea, a stunningly beautiful young Cherokee woman who works at her family's convenience store. To their mutual surprise, Marten and Rea kiss within minutes of meeting. Her bitter white stepfather, Earl, forbids her to get an education. But Marten discovers Rea's secret place down by the river where she reads and writes. This soon becomes their love nest. Marten helps Rea get involved in his research on poison ivy. She keeps a vial of urushiol, the active ingredient in poison ivy sap. Marten and Rea get married.

Rea knows her stepfather intends, someday, to rape her. Only someday is now. Earl removes the bolt from Rea's bedroom door. She and her mother decide to move in with Marten right away. They go to Earl's house when they think he is away, but he is there and tries to rape Rea. During the commotion, Rea pours the urushiol extract into Earl's whiskey, which he drinks. Urushiol takes a couple of days to induce inflammation. When Earl later pursues Marten into the swamp, he falls in and drowns because the inflammation—from inside his throat—has closed off his breathing.

Police investigations slowly piece the story together. The Cherokee tribal defense attorney at the preliminary hearing claims Rea acted in self-defense, but the District Attorney establishes that urushiol acts slowly—a couple of days—thus Rea's act of keeping the urushiol in her drawer was premeditated. Despite the background of vocal tribal support, Rea goes on trial for manslaughter.

Chapter 1

The air from the broken window of Conway's old Dodge Coronet scattered papers around the seats. Conway, Thurman, and I had to use our loud classroom voices to be heard over the grinding of the old, rebuilt engine. We were silly with exhaustion, and my two friends, desperate for entertainment, kept up a continual stream of wisecracks based on things they saw along the freeway. Thurman concentrated on driving, I on staying awake.

We were driving southwest along I-44, returning to Springfield from Rolla, where the Missouri State Academy of Sciences held its 1985 Spring meeting at the University of Missouri. On this clear, sunny, warm day, the black oaks and hickories were newly leafed out in the light green that they would only briefly have before turning dark.

We were just past the town of Sleeper (not far, Conway remarked, from Missouri State Highway ZZ) when Conway pointed to a billboard which advertised a restaurant. "Home of the little round pies," he quoted the slogan. "They are related to the more familiar mag-pies. Every spring the little round pies migrate with great pie-ty from all over the continent to return to their Missouri breeding grounds…" He squealed at his own humor. His speech was a little slurred, his teeth a little crooked, his moustache not quite symmetrical, and his baseball cap was just barely offsides. He looked not quite normal, but the mind of this early middle-aged Associate Professor of Mathematics at Drury College was frighteningly sharp. The glint in his eye might have been the fire of intelligence or of madness or, as is so common among the mathematicians I have met, both.

Thurman was the other half of the college's mathematics department. Also early middle-aged, Thurman had a grim face, and one could never tell the expression of his eyes behind the shades he always wore. He sounded dead serious until one listened to what he said. He would not allow Conway to outdo him. A truck went past us, belonging to a company that marketed hot dogs. "Remember those advertisements, years back?" said Thurman. "They always played the Oscar Meyer Wiener theme song. Performed, I believe, by the Vienna Sausage Philharmonic."

"It was the Frankfurter Philharmonic," said Conway.

We came up behind another truck. We were beginning an uphill incline, and the truck farted as it geared down. "Must be carrying a load of beans," said Thurman. It was.

We returned with our load of souvenirs as with booty from a conquest. At the university, we had purchased postcards and T-shirts and notebooks at the bookstore. This was back before everyone had email and websites. We also had notebooks full of xeroxed sheets from the meetings, the most important of which contained names, professional addresses, and office phone numbers of the attendees, with whom we could correspond, whom we could invite or be invited by for speaking engagements, or with whom we could collaborate in research. For our

professional advancement as professors, all we had to do was to get someone to invite us to give a talk at their institution.

I listened only a little to my friends' jokes, for the name-and-address sheet contained contact information for a female graduate student at the University. She was a short, trim, lively redhead with an impish smile and a quiet voice. During her speech (about weed seed germination) she wore an elegant blue dress that conveyed a great deal of information about her figure. Helena! I could hardly sleep the night we spent in a room at an empty university dormitory. Thurman's thunderous snoring in the bunk above mine, and Conway's mumbling in the extra cot, didn't help. I held the paper with the grad student's name, trying unsuccessfully to think of an excuse for contacting her.

"What's her name?" Conway asked me.

"Is it that obvious?" I asked.

"The look on your face told it all," said Conway.

"I'd be careful if I were you," Thurman announced. "I saw her hanging around with that big hairy chemist. The one that gave the talk about alkaloids. Those alkaloids are dangerous…"

"Marten's got nothing to worry about," interrupted Conway. "He's got all the poison ivy on his side."

I laughed this time. Indeed my talk had stirred up some lively interest. I reported the results of my previous summer's research, in which I had measured the thickness and chlorophyll content of leaves of *Toxicodendron radicans* from different sunny and shaded locations. The leaf thickness and chlorophyll patterns of poison ivy were exactly the same as those of all the other species, and I had no reason whatsoever to do research on this species other than its notoriety. I was practically the only botanist in the country to attempt research on poison ivy, and even the mathematicians and social scientists who knew nothing about plant physiology came to hear my talk just to see what this crazy young botanist, just out of grad school and beginning his career at Drury College, looked like. I must have disappointed them, for I have a soft round face, a very undramatic scholarly demeanor, and speak with a droning voice which was pleasant but frequently put my students to sleep.

I had tried to be witty and enthusiastic during my presentation, knowing that somewhere in the audience the woman with the blue dress was listening. I imagined her on the other end of the phone saying, "Oh, *you're* the one who studies poison ivy."

But I could not begin to match the interest that Conway and Thurman generated in their presentations. Every year, the math sessions were sparsely attended, except for the sessions with Conway and Thurman. The conference organizers had gradually learned to schedule their papers at times when no parallel sessions were meeting. This year Conway rode up the aisle to the podium on a unicycle, and addressed the audience on the topic of "There is no such thing as zero." Immediately afterwards, Thurman rose to the podium, began throwing candy to the audience, and spoke about "Sex and violence in the Fifth Dimension."

For two days we had taken notes on speeches that were delivered rapidly by scientists who wanted to cram as much information as they could into fifteen minutes. The breaks, mixers,

and meals were times of animated conversations with colleagues from other colleges and universities, and which often lasted into the night. Sometimes they were even about science and math. Drained of energy, my two friends and I swam now through the spring weather as a discharged electric eel, with three brain lobes (positive; negative; I was the ground) slips through muddy water.

"I seem to recall," I said, "that there was a geeky sociologist from Evangel College who was following you around," I told Thurman.

"She's in for a surprise," he answered me. Conway and Thurman had never told anyone whether they were gay. Then he continued, "Yep, Marten's got himself a crush all right. Didn't he brush up against her at the mixer? 'Oh, excuse me, I'm sorry,' he said, but he wasn't sorry. Not Marten. All those people around, you could hardly hear the person you were talking to, so Marten had to get close to her to speak. Right?"

"Well, yes, we did talk a little bit," I allowed.

Then Conway began singing. "Some enchanted evening…"

Thurman provided the next line. "Drinking lots of whiskey…"

Conway came back. "And you're getting frisky…"

Together they sang, loudly, "Inside a crowded room…"

"So, how you gonna make your move?" Thurman asked me. "Whatever you do, don't let Tom get hold of that phone number."

He referred to the other half of the biology department, Tom Pettigrew, the zoology half. He had tenure and never went to scientific meetings. We were friendly enough with one another, but never did anything together. He socialized with women from the local bars, not with scientists. Certainly not with female students at the college. For a professor with tenure, messing around with students was about the only way to get fired. He once told me brainy women made him feel uneasy.

Thurman continued, "You could even invite her to our annual Math Department statistics Halloween Party."

"That's just you two," I said.

"And a few students," continued Thurman. "Fun, though. Everyone comes dressed as his or her own statistical test. Last year skinny Jill Kinney came costumed as a *chi-square:* she stretched out her right arm and left foot in a straight line and curled her left arm and right foot, making an imitation of the Greek letter chi (χ) and she even wore a little "2" on her hat for an exponent. And Roy came with drawings of fish all over his sweatshirt and sweatpants: he was a Poisson distribution."

"French for fish," interjected Conway. "A Poisson distribution of numbers is exactly like a bell-shaped curve only different."

"And then there was the guy who came as a normal deviate…"

Conway interrupted Thurman, to continue the topic of the woman at the meetings who had caught my attention. "If Tom gets a hold of her number, he will begin a zoological

investigation: first of her behavior, then proceed to her anatomy. Tom's investigated quite a few women. A sample size of…what would you say, Thurm?"

"Maybe sixty, with a standard error of plus or minus twenty." Then Thurman continued, "Speaking of experimental subjects. This girl of Marten's…"

"She's not my girl," I said.

"That's the spirit. That girl of Marten's, I think she would be a good experimental subject for the re-estimation of the Meeh coefficient. You know what that is, don't you, Marten?"

I said I wasn't sure.

"The Meeh coefficient," continued Thurman, "appears in the mathematical equation that expresses body surface area as a logarithmic function of body volume. It depends on the shape of the organism and is different for every species, and for every woman, I mean, individual. Among humans, the coefficient seems to be about 11.2. This subject was first investigated by a German named Meeh."

"I thought he was named Braunscheisser," interjected Conway, who loved to invent German scatological words.

"Measuring the body volume is straightforward," said Thurman. "Just have the girl get into a bathtub of water and measure the displacement of volume. The Archimedes method. Archimedes supposedly jumped out of his bathtub and ran through the streets naked when he figured out this easy and foolproof way to measure volume. But your girl, Marten, would just have to run around in your apartment after getting out of the bathtub.

"The tricky part is how to measure the surface area of her body. Meeh did it by completely covering the torso of an experimental subject (who had to be naked) with graph paper, then added up the little squares. He had to be careful and get the paper into every little crack and crevice."

"You're full of it," I said, glancing out the window at billboards announcing the Second Coming of Christ, when all souls would arise, perhaps naked, out of their graves.

"You seriously underestimate the weirdness of scientists," said Conway. "Ever heard of Sir Francis Galton?"

"Yes," I said. "Cousin of Charles Darwin, and the father of modern statistical mathematics."

"Right," continued Conway. "He invented the correlation coefficient as well as the G-string. G-strings were called Galtons for a while. Right. He was definitely at the cracked edge of the bell shaped curve." Both Conway and Thurman laughed at the joke they had made so many times. Mathematicians have so little material to choose their jokes from. Conway continued. "When he was in Africa, gathering observations for his racist genetic theories, Galton saw a naked South African woman. She was steatopygious and proud of it. That is, her buttocks jutted back and formed a shelf that you could have lined up a row of glassware on. Her derriere was famous among the Dutch and English colonists. She was called the Hottentot Venus, back when it was acceptable to call a South African a Hottentot and a beautiful, or at least sexual, woman a Venus.

"Since Galton lived, breathed, and drooled numbers, the thing he most wanted to do when he saw her was to measure her buttocks. That's certainly what *I* would want to do. Right. But being a Victorian prude, he would not actually touch her with a measuring tape. So he had her stand in front of him while he used his surveying equipment to estimate her width using trigonometry."

"Back to the Meeh coefficient," said Thurman. "Using graph paper to cover her body is, itself, a method fraught with error. Paper can never fit snugly against the body or into every crevice. I suggest that Meeh's study be redone, this time using petroleum jelly instead of paper. Then just measure the amount of petroleum jelly it takes to cover her body. Your girl, Marten, might not only volunteer to be the subject of measurement, but also a co-author of the paper."

"This assumes a uniform thickness of petroleum jelly, and a way to accurately measure it," I said.

"You would have to be very careful and very gentle in applying the gel, and watch very closely while you were doing it. Of course," continued Thurman, "you would have to replicate the study numerous times to determine the reliability of the method. And then, to keep the estimate from being sex-biased, she would have to make the same measurements on you. Maybe you could measure one another at the same time…"

How could I tell them that, however much I enjoyed sex, it wasn't a sexual encounter that I primarily desired from my new acquaintance? However much I was thrilled by fantasizing about her body, what I wanted even more was just to have a quiet conversation with her, and watch her eyes sparkle as she told me about herself. Would she find me boring? She had kept careful records on thousands of ragweed seeds in carefully labeled mesh bags in the soil. I certainly could not be more boring than *that*. I said nothing to my friends about it; somehow, I couldn't fit the subject into the form of a joke.

Thurman continued. "Once you have established the reliability of the method, you would then have to get lots of other experimental subjects, since no two women are alike. Or maybe they are. You would be honor-bound, as a scientist, to find out. Body type? Race? Height? Age? You need to include all kinds of variability in your sample."

"Why is it that, whenever the subject of relationships between men and women comes up, you always turn it into a conversation about sex? Isn't there anything else to the relationship?" I hadn't intended to disturb the jolly mood, but the words were out of my mouth before I noticed them.

"Like what, for instance." Thurman's question wasn't a question.

"Well, True Love, for example," I said.

"*True Love?* That sounds like a supermarket romance. True Love isn't natural."

We were passing a field that was particularly crowded with little cedar trees. Conway took the nearest exit and stopped next to some of the cedar trees along the frontage road.

"There's one," said Thurman.

"One what?"

"There's another and…there's gobs of them. Bagworms! The female caterpillars eat cedar scales, then they hang their chrysalis and cover it with studs of dried scales. Kind of artistic, hanging there from a little silk thread. Then a male moth emerges, and he finds a female moth while she is still inside the chrysalis, pokes in his intromittent organ, and fertilizes her, neither of them seeing what the other looks like. Can you imagine what the human equivalent of this would be? The ultimate in casual sex, invented by a moth. Us humans, Marten, are pretty tame in comparison with our perverted animal cousins." We got back in the car and onto the freeway.

Just when I thought the conversation would take a turn to something less carnal, Conway turned to me and said, "I guess my friend here is saying that True Love is a poetic fancy, not a natural phenomenon. Do plants have True Love?"

"Not that I know of," I answered. By this point I had pretty much lost the nerve to write to, much less call, the young lady, and had slipped the address sheet back into the folder. I had gone through high school, college, and graduate school without forming any lasting relationships with females. How could I begin now? I had considered calling a dating service, until Conway told me about the crudeness of both their statistical procedures and their sexual subject matter.

We passed a sign, *Welcome to Conway!* Thurman speculated aloud at what a town named after Conway might be like. Cars would drive on the sidewalks and pedestrians would walk in the streets. Instead of churches there would be pubs where people would sit around and inflict puns on one another. The cars would run on whiskey, while the people drank crankcase oil. He was probably referring to Conway's love of thick brown Irish stout beer. The supermarkets would all have those smelly Japanese fermented radishes Conway liked so well. The homes would all have mathematical coordinates, and the streets would not be named. Everyone would have a serial number stored in a central database, along with their Meeh coefficients, measured every few years.

The red soil of Webster County surrounded us. We drove past Twilight Church (where the trusting souls are not awakened from their mental slumbers, Conway remarked). We had just driven past Marshfield when Conway decided we needed gas. We took the next exit, and stopped at a little independent convenience store that was adjacent to Whitey's Authentic Hickory Smoked Barbecue. The sign showed a pig with a cook's apron and a skewer, standing over a barbecue altar. "The swine have desecrated the temple, even unto the sacrificial altar," said Conway. The sign boasted that they had "baked bean's."

We drove up to the gas station, simply called *Earl's*. The station manager, an older white-haired middle-aged man whose bulk spilled from a dirty blue shirt and who wore a brim cap, watched us approach. *Earl,* his shirt pocket said. While Conway and Thurman prepared to fill the gas tank, I walked toward the door of the convenience store to pay for the gas. This was before credit card readers on gas pumps were widespread.

A sound system played music. It was "Something happened to my heart the day that I met you…" *My Love.* I could not tell if it was the original Petula Clark or an easy-listening knock-off. I was only about six years old when I first heard it.

My love is warmer than the warmest sunshine, softer than a sigh,
My love is deeper than the deepest ocean, wider than the sky…

I grew up and went around the block a few times with love, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, but never in a lasting relationship. This song, like hundreds of others, was about True Love. I curled my lips in a little snarl. There probably is no such thing, I thought. How could there be? I knew what love felt like from the inside, and I knew that I was, myself, as inconstant as the wind and waves that would efface the *Love Letters in the Sand* almost as soon as Pat Boone had written them. I knew that I, personally, would never be able to tell any woman, even Helena, even the woman from my graduate school days for whom I still pined, that my love was deeper than the deepest ocean. No mere human could ever say anything like that.

My love is brighter than the brightest star that shines every night above,
And there is nothing in this world that can ever change my love.

Back when I first heard these words, I had never felt anything as strongly as I later felt sexual love. And yet I knew that, when I grew up, I wanted someday to feel something this strongly, something that would consume me.

As I entered the convenience store, I saw Conway jabbing the gas nozzle into Thurman's ribs. Thurman threw up his arms.

"I say!" Thurman assumed a fake British accent. "I say! What is the meaning of this unseemly hullaballoo!"

"'And over yer money, yew bloke! And look shawp about it!" ejaculated Conway.

That was the end of the little dramatic skit. But Earl debouched himself from the wall against which he had been leaning, exhaled forcefully, and frowned as he approached Conway and Thurman.

Behind the cash register a woman who appeared to be in her early twenties was reading a book. She looked up at me. I instantly realized that she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Her skin was smooth and brown, and her long hair was as dark and straight as truth itself. I was so struck by her glinting dark brown eyes that I only quickly glanced at her body. I approached her.

"Ten dollars for the gas for that old car outside," I mumbled, unable to look away from her eyes. She quietly took the ten dollar bill and pressed a button to allow Conway and Thurman to use the gas pump.

Just then, a big fat man with broken teeth entered, the door jingling behind him. "Fifty for diesel for the big rig," he said.

"Please pay first," said the woman. Her voice was rich and deep.

The fat man approached. "I've got an account here," he said. "You can add it to my bill. You don't reconnize me? I come in here a lot, on my KC to Tulsa run."

"Show me your identification," said the woman.

"Earl knows me," he said.

"Then get Earl to come in here and verify who you are." She flicked her head just a little but was otherwise motionless and calm.

The trucker looked at the woman. "You dark women can be really sexy," he said. "Where you from?"

"I'm from here," she said. "Now, show me some identification."

"No, I mean, where are you from, before here."

"I'm from here," she repeated.

"Mexican? Ay-rab?"

"I'm Cherokee. Identification? Or cash will do."

"You sure are a good-looking woman, Pocahontas." He looked outside and saw that Earl was busy, so he pulled out his wallet and showed her his drivers' license, Class C. The woman found his name and made a note on the list of accounts. She said, "Fifty," and pressed another button.

Through the window I saw Conway holding the gasoline nozzle so that it formed a proboscoid extension of his nose. He hummed like a mosquito, maneuvered towards the car, and inserted the nozzle in the gas tank. Thurman slapped him loudly on the back. "Got you, mosquito!" Earl approached and was standing beside them.

"What you working here for?" the trucker asked her. "You could be raking in the money at Tiny's." I assumed he meant the strip club a few exits away on the interstate.

The woman simply repeated, "Fifty. Safe travel."

When he left, I glanced at the woman again. But also at the book she was reading. It was a public library book, a biography of John Muir, the nineteenth-century American naturalist and conservationist. She noticed my surprise that she was reading a book for the pleasure of it, especially that book. I might have expected her to be reading something entitled True Love.

"John Muir!"

"You know who he was?" Her smile was barely visible. She did not move her head.

"Of course, I do! I am a college biology teacher. I am so happy to see anyone reading books about nature."

Now she smiled fully at me. Perhaps it was because I was one of the few men to oggle her book rather than her boobs. "He was a fascinating man. I wish I could have been him. He was brave enough to climb up a tree in the middle of a blizzard and stay there, happy. He was able to live, really live, in the cathedral of Nature, and to devote his full energy to doing what he thought was right. I cannot do either of those things."

"Why not?"

Her laugh was a gentle caress. "I have to work here. I read nature books…" She indicated a pile of other books on the counter behind her: birds, ecology, *One Day at Teton Marsh*. "…whenever I can. On my days off I go down by the river and sit and read. Even the days when I work, I have a lot of time on my hands. My stepfather…" A motion of her head indicated the white-haired man outside. "…won't let me go to college. Says it's a waste of time and money. I

have other books, but I have to hide them from him. If I can't go to college, I'm saving up money to go visit some national parks."

"Like Yosemite?" I said, pulling a little keychain with a brass image of El Capitan from my pocket and showing it to her. "Where John Muir spent so much time." She touched the keychain, and my hand. "What a temple of Nature!" I said.

"Open grasslands allowing a spectacular view of Half Dome and El Capitan," she said. "But not, I think, a temple of nature. The whole valley would have been filled with trees, allowing no view of the mountains, except that the Natives who lived there kept the little tree saplings cleared away by setting fires. The beautiful natural landscape of all of North America was actually the product of Native fire management. At Yosemite, it was the Miwok tribe that did it."

How often I had taught about the natural world and even about the regenerative role of fires in the landscape, without once thinking about how those fires might have been set by Native Americans for purposes of…landscape management? In just a few seconds, this woman, a cashier at a C-store, had blown open my smug sense of superior education. I was very close to telling her that I was planning a visit to Yosemite this very summer, and that I wanted to take her with me. Less than two minutes after scorning it, I had become a disciple willing to lay down my life at the altar of True Love.

Driven to desperation by my discovery of this wonderful woman, I did something that was clearly unethical, but urgent. I was taking a big risk. Or maybe not, since I might never see her again. I leaned toward her and said, "I would very much like to kiss you."

I expected her to slap me. But she said, "I was thinking the same thing."

Our kiss was quick and light.

Voices from outside interrupted us. The young woman rose from her stool and turned towards the window. Her jeans fit tight over a slender form. Her strong legs had evidently done much walking in her torn, dirty tennis shoes. She looked out the window. "No, Earl, don't…"

Earl was accosting Conway and Thurman, a cigarette dangling from his lips. "What fucking kind of bastard shit-heads you think you are, anyway? Gawd-damn you shit-asses anyway. You act smart around me, you gonna pick your teeth up offen the ground!"

Conway and Thurman were immobilized in surprise. The woman rushed through the partition door and stood just outside the store. I followed, thinking only at the last minute to grab my keychain. Absent those keys, I would not get into my apartment.

Then Thurman spoke with the voice of a television announcer. "Do you suffer from constipation? Relax! Try our new laxative…"

Earl made a sudden move but stopped when Conway came to Thurman's aid. "Don't say no until you give our product a free trial…"

Earl's camouflage cap was inscribed in fancy pioneer script: *You can have my wife, you can have my dog, but leave my guns alone!* He glanced at the license plate left over from Conway's previous life at the University of Illinois. "Ill-annoy!" He yelled. "I coulda guessed it! All you folks from Ill-annoy and Michigan are shit-asses." He lifted his hands in a gesture of

strangulation. The woman ran up behind him, and again I followed. He heard us and turned around. She said nothing but he snapped at her viciously, “Girl, you scram.”

When Earl lurched towards Conway, the woman touched his arm. The slap he delivered across her face echoed off the metallic carport roof. She bent over in pain and held her hand over her mouth. I wondered if it had broken her perfect teeth. Without thinking, I put my arm around her shoulders. The man turned on me, even more angry at my show of empathy with his stepdaughter than with my friends’ banter. Conway and Thurman hid in the car.

“You slimy runt!” Earl chanted. His quiet intensity made me tremble. This is the first time I had ever seen Conway or Thurman frightened. “Get your stinkin’ paws offen her.” He moved towards us. I blocked the woman. “Now you remember this—if I ever, ever see any of you again, I’m gonna kill you. I’m dead serious. I’ll kill you.”

The woman ran and disappeared into a little white house behind the store. When Earl saw my eyes follow her, he became even angrier and moved towards me. Frightened, I grabbed a windshield squeegee from its pool of blue cleaner. I brandished it, launching two droplets into Earl’s face. His foot caught me soundly in the chest at the moment that I smote his face with the squeegee. His cigarette fell from his lips. Conway had left the nozzle on the ground during the confrontation. It left just a tiny pool of gasoline.

When the explosion came, it was a brief but very big flash. Conway and Thurman sped away. I ran towards the white house, then beyond it, down a little street that dead-ended in cedars and grasses. I saw a trail, muddy and littered, leading through the grass. I ran along it. Soon I was on the soggy banks of the James River.

Chapter 2

I was planning to rest a moment, catch my breath, then find the freeway exit and wait for Conway and Thurman, who would be cruising around looking for me. I found a huge stump, sawed long ago, and sat upon it, stunned.

Only then did the fullness of the experience of the last few moments become vividly real to me. My overwhelming emotion was unspeakable disgust for Earl, who reeked hatred like musk from every pore. I imagined his face and wanted to shred it with claws I did not have. I gasped with joyful anticipation at the thought of this face being burned severely by the fire. I hoped that his charred skin would hang over his exposed gums, and that his eyes would never again be able to close. I nearly fainted with this intoxicating mixture of exhilaration and anger. My vision went blank as I listened to the gentle breeze.

The susurrus of the leaves gradually restored me. My eyes closed, I heard robins, red-winged blackbirds, crows, and blue jays. I thought about the woman, Earl's stepdaughter, as different from him as a human could be. I thought over and over about our kiss, and the breeze caressed me as I imagined she would. When I opened my eyes, the green of the new grass that had just begun growing as the river receded from winter rains was more intense than any green I had ever seen or imagined. I felt faint.

I saw a black plastic bag in the fork between two willow trunks. At first I thought it was flotsam caught by the branches during a flood. But when I touched it, I felt something inside. I then noticed that the bag looked like it had been deliberately placed where it was. I assumed the bag contained drugs left for a pickup. I dislodged the bag and opened it.

Inside was a leather pouch, and inside of the pouch were books. My surprise was even greater when I saw which books they were: *Forgotten Landscapes* and *Changes in the Land: An Ecological History of the Midwest*. I opened one of the books to see if there was any water damage. No, the books had been carefully placed where they were.

I slapped the book shut and rose to my feet when I realized that these books must have been placed there by the young woman at the C-store. She had told me that she read books down by the river, hiding from Earl. She had to hide them as if they were contraband, rather than keeping them at home which was, I assumed, the little white house near the gas pumps.

But how likely was it that I had, so quickly and without searching, found the woman's secret reading spot? Then I realized it was not quite as miraculous as it seemed to me. The trail led right to this spot from what had to be her house. My head was reeling. Within twenty minutes, I had had more adventure than ever before in my uneventful life. I had encountered more danger than ever before; I had met the worst of men and the best of women, and even kissed her, all within ten minutes. Then within five minutes, I had lost her irretrievably; for how

could I visit her, when her stepfather hated me? And within five minutes of losing her, I found her again.

As I examined the books, a folded paper fell out. I retrieved the loose notebook sheet thickly covered with small, careful script. They were notes—thoughtful, careful summaries and reflections upon the books.

I heard the cracking of a bough at a little distance. Still shell-shocked, I crouched and hid. I slipped the paper back into the book. I saw a man walking through the driftwood in the shade of a big silver maple. His back was turned, and it was difficult to see his features in the shade. Something in the way he moved and the general shape told me that it had to be Earl. When he walked through a fleck of sunlight, I recognized him.

Why was he here? Why wasn't he in the back of an ambulance? Or back at the store, putting out the fire? I supposed the fire had not been serious, perhaps just the surface flash on the cement, at most causing some damage to the pump handle. But why did he run after me? He had probably seen me running toward, and perhaps behind, his house. He had threatened to kill me. Was he serious? Suppose he had a gun! I saw now that he did.

At the same moment that I was seized with terror, I was also overwhelmed by love for the woman. I knew that, Earl or no Earl, I could not give up the chance to see her again. To liberate her from her tyrant stepfather, who refused her college and even books, to save her even at the risk of my life, instantly became my life's purpose. I was immobilized. The best thing for me to do was to remain where I was. By my indecision, I ended up doing the right thing.

After a few moments of silence, I relaxed. I looked again at the woman's book, now smudged with sweat from my hands. I held the book with reverence.

I then realized how I could make contact with her again. I could leave a note in her book! All I needed was a pencil, but did not have one.

Again I heard the breaking of driftwood branches.

I removed my Yosemite keychain from my pocket and slipped off the keys one by one. I put the keychain in one of the books, replaced the book in the leather pouch, the pouch into the bag, and slid it back into its hiding place. I fled downriver when I heard the report of a gunshot. After hiking a ways, I clambered uphill through brambles, avoiding poison ivy. I sat on the end of a guardrail near the exit, where Conway and Thurman found me.

Chapter 3

The next morning was a Monday, and my classes resumed. It was the last week of the semester. As I carried my papers and overhead transparencies to my first class, I found Conway and Thurman in the hall engaged in what appeared to be, but could not have been, deep discussion. Their topic was about why a good and benevolent God would allow someone as disgusting as Earl to exist.

"Did you get gas in the car yesterday? Before the fire?" I asked.

"No," said Conway. "We were running on fumes when we got home."

"Too bad. I paid ten bucks inside for it. At the cash register, I met the most beautiful woman in the world," I boasted.

"She the woman who ran out after Earl?" asked Thurman.

"And whom Earl slapped so hard you could've heard it in Rolla," added Conway.

"Yes, her," I responded. "Earl's stepdaughter."

"How could you know that?"

"She told me. I talked to her inside the store."

"Maybe we should report it to the police," said Thurman.

"Not such a good idea," said Conway. "If the police get involved, Earl could find out who you are and where you live and work. And what if she refuses to press charges? Earl would still be able to track you down."

"Why would she deny that he struck her?" I asked.

"You don't know much about abusive relationships, do you?" Thurman asked me. "Earl acted like the textbook abusive stepfather. I assume the C-store is a family business, and Earl probably antagonizes anyone who might want to work there, other than his family. She's trapped."

"She told you all about her personal situation in, what, a minute or two? Marten, I didn't know you had it in you. Forming a close bond with a woman in a couple of minutes." Conway looked at me almost with admiration.

"I guess that means I won't be contacting the grad student in Rolla," I said.

"And why not? Don't tell me you're going to try to start a cozy friendship with the woman at the C-store," said Conway.

"She really, really needs a friend right now," I said.

"It's not worth it," said Thurman. "Going back to that C-store. Unless she gave you her phone number."

"In the first minute I knew her?" There was no way I was going to say that I had already kissed her.

"Even if she did, you call that number, and Earl Butts is going to answer." This was back when people still remembered Nixon's Secretary of Agriculture, Earl Butz. "*Good day, Mr. Butts. Could I talk with your daughter? She is as nice and beautiful as you are a butt-face. I'm going to ask her on a date, maybe out to see some poison ivy. He answers, Oh, sure, Mr. Ill-annoy. I'll get her right away,*" Conway said.

Thurman said, "Usually butt-face is just an insult, but in Earl's case, his face really does look like a butt."

"Maybe he could call the store number," said Conway.

I was grateful that Conway figured out a way for me to contact the woman, even though I had another, and far better way, of communicating with her, something about which I was even less likely to tell them than about the kiss.

"Butt-face might answer that phone, too," said Thurman.

"In which case I would just hang up," I said.

"I'm being serious for the first and last time in my life," said Conway. "You don't go near that place. He threatened murder, and I think he could do it. Don't, repeat, don't get involved with redneck family strife. It's a bottomless pit, even worse than one of those Hawking black hole funnels. I know the girl at the cash register was probably beautiful and all…"

"There's no describing her," I said.

"But she might as well be in Shanghai for all the difference it is going to make to you. Let it go, Marty. That grad student in Rolla is probably expecting a call from you. No way you can assume that she isn't thinking about *you*, too. You can even call from the office, make it a professional call. Free." Thurman was convincing himself that I should do this. "You could offer to help her in her field work. And when you are out in the weeds, there might be a secluded spot where only the ragweeds and poison ivy would see whatever happens next."

*

I could not get the young woman at the C-store out of my mind. I realized that I didn't really remember what she looked like except in the most general terms. I noticed her eyes. Her nose? If she had a big nose, I would have remembered it. Her lips? Big and juicy, or little and trim? All I know is she wore no lipstick. Her body? Just a glimpse.

She was my constant mental companion during the next two days. When I taught my classes, full of students lounging in the back of the room, I imagined her sitting in the front row taking quick but neat notes, like the ones I saw in her book, listening attentively but always ready to challenge what I said. I have always found strong, smart women attractive. The students noticed my distraction and asked me what was going on. I had not prepared an answer. Then one guy said, "It must be girl problems. Hey, Professor, we've all been there. You need some time off from teaching. Why not call off that final project for next week?" There was a chorus of approval.

"I'll think about it," I answered, no longer the academic zealot I had been just the previous week. "Meanwhile, back to the course material." The topic, wouldn't you know it, was sexual reproduction. A great topic with which to end the semester.

When I attended the faculty meeting, I imagined the woman as my colleague, exchanging knowing glances with her, smiling whenever the Academic Dean used long, convoluted, and meaningless sentences to keep from offending anybody. When I opened my huge piles of unsolicited mail, I imagined her helping me to make paper airplanes out of the advertisements for equipment that our little college could not afford.

Actually, there was one piece of expensive equipment that we had gotten our hands on, me and the Chemistry Department (his name was Bob). A high-pressure liquid chromatography (HPLC) device, which can separate molecules out from a mixture and measure how much of each one of them was in the sample. Since I knew the chemical signature of urushiol, the active ingredient of poison ivy sap, I could use this machine to measure the amount of urushiol that a leaf produces. The University up in Rolla was getting a new one, and let us buy their old one for cheap.

I was impatient to go back to the tree stump by the river and see if the young woman had responded to discovering my key chain. It was too late for me to go on Monday, since my lab session lasted until five. That evening, alone in my apartment, I hesitated for an hour before beginning to grade the pile of student assignments. I was fantasizing about her: eating with her, listening to music with her, lying in her embrace. I created a mental world in which she was the ideal companion and lover. I began to have second thoughts about returning to the spot along the river, but I had left my keychain in her book, an unmistakable signal that I would return. The thought of going back was not just a terrifying pleasure but a holy obligation.

*

The next afternoon, I drove up the interstate to the exit near Marshfield. I did not approach the store, but drove my small car down a dirt road behind the store. Earl would not recognize my car. I parked in a secluded spot and found the footpath toward the river. My heart beat powerfully. For the first time that I could remember, I paid no attention to the spring wildflowers.

I found the books, and in place of my keychain, I found a note, flagged with a scarlet ribbon. She had written on simple, lined paper, the kind they must sell in the store. Her writing was small and very neat. It leaned backwards, which might have told me something about her personality, but I did not know what it might mean. She used a simple black ball-point pen.

I know it cannot be possible. I must be hallucinating that you have actually visited this spot. But your keychain was here. Or maybe you left it in the store and I picked it up and slipped it into my book without thinking? That's how scatter-brained I am right now. I assumed we would never be able to meet again. Here I am, scarcely a day after having found and then lost you,

writing you a note. Am I crazy? God knows. Things this good simply cannot happen in this world. I write this note to you, even though you will almost certainly never see it. I write this note to a person I profoundly desire to meet again. It is pathetic, but I place a kiss upon the paper. This note has as much chance of reaching you as a note in a bottle would have of crossing the Pacific Ocean to a precise destination.

My name is Rea Smith. My Cherokee mother, Rhonda, married Earl after the passing of my Cherokee father soon after I was born. Earl was not actually such a bad man when he married my mother. He worked for an oil company, and they came onto tribal land in Oklahoma, where my mother and I lived. His pay was pretty good, and my mother (as she told me later) knew a lot of men who were worse. He had an argument with his supervisor, and quit the oil company. He bought the C-store, and here we are.

But Earl kept getting worse. When he was on his meds, his anger was under some control, but now his political views have convinced him that the meds are a kind of mind control.

And he has an alcohol problem. What a surprise. When I was a girl, he would sometimes sleep all day on the floor. I did not know what the sickly sweet odor was that hung about him. I did not understand why, when he snored loudly, Mother would leave his bed and come to mine. Once he urinated all over the bathroom floor before going to bed. Mother never knew about it, because I cleaned it up. I now understand everything. Some people are happy drunks, but Earl is an angry drunk. He goes for weeks, or maybe just a week, without drinking, but when we see the bottle on the table we know trouble is on the way. Sometimes it is something as seemingly minor as seeing a black man come in the store. My first lover was black, and this was how I learned how to hide my personal life from Earl.

I never realized how terrible Earl was until I saw a laceration on my mother's face. I asked her what had happened. She answered only, "Never get Earl mad at you." Besides the fact that this is the only place I can live for free, I have to stay here to protect Mother from Earl.

Regarding which. When he slapped me yesterday, it was extremely but only briefly painful, and left no damage that I can see. It feels a little bruised, is all.

About the time I reached puberty, Earl started touching me. Not much, but just enough to let me know that he was ready, someday, to have me. That was ten years ago. I am still waiting for the right combination of events to unleash his lusts and am still waiting to figure out what I will do when that happens. Mother knows about it also, and is keeping a close eye on him. To keep trouble away, I am careful to always lock doors when I am in the bathroom or my bedroom, and pull down shades.

Earl insists that Mother and I stay home and work in his store. Partly this is necessity. He doesn't think he has to pay us. He won't let me go to college, even if I pay for it myself, which I cannot; and he wasn't even going to let me graduate from high school, but Mother insisted on it.

I learned as much as I could when I was still in school, and have continued reading and writing ever since. Even a vocabulary list, for Christ's sake. That is why I can write so well. Other girls from my graduating class sometimes come around asking me if they can get a job at

the store. They have hardly even enough command of language to fill in the application form. Not that Earl ever looks at the applications anyway.

You cannot know, but can probably guess, how badly I need to get out of here. Naturally, when I met you, I imagined you to be my savior. Your Yosemite keychain is like a talisman, or an ikon, hidden deep in the sanctuary of my life. It would be so easy for me to cling to you and ask you to give me a place to live, away from Earl, and even to send me to college. But that would make me a parasite, which I refuse to be. I just want you to know that I am a strong woman and I am not desperate. I trust you to treat me honorably and not take advantage of my vulnerability. In turn, I will make myself worthy of you, rather than just using you as a way of escape. And that is why it is perhaps best that we begin our relationship by exchanging notes.

Her note went on for a couple more pages, the last as neat as the first. But my heart was pounding and I could not read the rest. I looked at the last line, before she signed her first name: "I await your response, even if it takes forever."

I put her note away, to read more slowly later. I had brought a pen and college letterhead paper. I knew I had to leave her an immediate response, which I began to write.

Thank God I have found you!
~~I believed I could never meet someone like you~~
~~When I found your notebook, it was like a vision from heaven~~
What can I say that is not stupid, maudlin, or self-apparent! I am falling all over myself just trying to decide what to say to you. Nothing I say at this time can be enough. We can try to meet, but it may not be possible. Please keep writing notes to me and leaving them here, and once my mind clears I will write to you also.
~~My heart aches for you I feel such empathy All I can think about~~ I'm sorry to hear about your situation with Earl. Maybe I can help. Oh, by the way, don't worry about Earl getting pissed at my friends Conway and Thurman. They were just asking for it, don't you think?
I was filled with fear, anger, and worry that you may have been harmed when Earl slapped you in the face. I am glad that you have not been injured.
Your beloved, Marten Reich

I thought about "beloved," because at least in the part of the note that I read she did not actually mention love. The sentiment was unmistakable, but I didn't want her to think I was a charging steed who was coming after her, or a horny bull pawing the ground. Even though, in fact, I was. I promised myself that I would not press my physical desires on her if we met. If she opened herself to them, that is a different story. But I would let her make that decision, without any pressure. She needs respect even more than love right now, and respect is what I am going to give her, I told myself. Nevertheless, I left "beloved" in my note. I folded the paper, placed it

next to a green ribbon I had just bought, and slipped it into the book, which I replaced in the tree. I started to leave, then went back, extracted the note, and kissed it.

*

When I got home, I decided to prepare myself for an evening of re-reading the first part of Rea's note, and reading the rest of it, both with fresh eyes. A shower, a little glass of wine. Alcohol is supposed to be a depressant but it just made my heart beat harder. I looked at the long note, and was glad that fate or whatever had prevented us from exchanging notes the first day, Monday, since she probably spent all Monday evening writing it.

For ten years I have come to this hallowed spot, an enclave of peace in the midst of my hellish life. Here I come to let the golden morning sunlight disperse the vapors of the beastly human night. Here I come to watch the smooth shimmering water reflect Heaven, perfectly pellucid…

I thought about her vocab list.

…in complete contrast with the face of humankind, which reflects Hell. If man is in the image of God, then why does he bear the image of Hell?

No one but you knows I come here. Even Mother does not know. She knows about my books but not about the place along the river. My hiding place? Am I hiding from the world, trying to avoid the reality of human society? No. The world of bacteria and earthworms and dew-bejeweled spiderwebs and chlorophyll and thunderclouds and feldspar crystals and fledgling birds IS the real world. It is mankind's world of hammered iron and hollow plastic and air conditioning and tumescent flesh that is artificial. I am not hiding from the real world. The real world is out here! To hell with them, those bastards who talk about "the real world" of contracts and carburetors and carnage. Here I come to let the soughing branches…

I kept expecting her to use the word susurrus, but she probably hadn't learned that one yet.

…and the flitting birds tell me that the peacefulness of Nature has persisted millions of years before Cave-Man first slew his brother.

And my coming here has been blessed. At first it was a sanctuary of prayer. Can you believe it? I used to pray, and I even wrote twenty psalms, all with numbered verses. As my childhood naïveté was supplanted by the hormonal pace of adolescence, I stopped believing in a God to whom or to which I could talk, but I worshiped the Intense Power of Natural Harmony. Can you believe it? I actually called it that. Later I abandoned even this belief, but I kept coming

here because I knew that, somehow, and for whatever reason, I had to periodically escape from the neurotoxin of civilization. This riverside spot has welcomed me. I was always worthy to come here, whether my frame of mind was pious or irreverent.

At no time was I ever able to share this sanctuary of sylvan holiness…

I collapsed into laughter. Rea, I love you, I love you, I love you, but vocabulary lists exist to give you options, not to require that all the words actually be used. But I wanted to spend my life with a woman who writes things like this, however silly they may be.

…with anyone else. I shared affection with Mother, friendship with other girls, my body with boys, but never here. Whether or not you know it, you have slipped into my most private crevice. I prayed, I knew not to what or whom, that some other person would come to share this experience with me. In particular, a man. One night I prayed so intensely that I nearly fainted. The moon reflected on the waters and mists rose under the branches, so peaceful, and yet my heart was raging against the cruelty I had seen in my own family. Not to mention in the world. I cannot bring myself to follow the news.

I await your response, even if it takes forever.

Her handwriting was not bubbly and obese like that of a dreamer, but had compact loops as slim as her legs, the script of a careful thinker. Here I was brushing right up next to a woman I loved desperately. But it also seemed to me that this relationship is one that is important to cultivate for the good of humankind. It is something bigger than me, bigger than the two of us, something of which the world cannot have too much.

*

I prepared a note for her, but this time thinking carefully about what I wrote. I was in my office the night after I left my previous note, using my dot-matrix word processor on college stationery. The ribbon was wearing out.

I am writing this before having read any response you might have to my message to you. Until we meet—and may this blessed time arrive soon—there will be delays in our dialogue.

I sit in my darkened laboratory at the college, surrounded by plastic skulls and dried plants, the dust of death. I tremble at the amazement of having discovered life, by discovering you. And where have I found you? Out in the beauty of nature. The atmosphere is heavy with nectar in the springtime, billows of coolness flow from shady bowers in the summer, sunlight glistens from golden leaves in the autumn and glints from burning ice in winter. Sleepy mankind, incompletely aroused by a second cup of coffee, shuffles off to work, not hearing choruses of angels filling the sky with harmony. Mankind is bored with little riverside parks because they are

as nothing compared to the ten thousand universes he can destroy during a single computer game.

Teaching! My students are just as bored and dazed as the rest of mankind, as if I should expect them to be any different. I plead with them to see that the science of biology concerns issues of life and death importance. I was getting weary of this. But, hey, it's a job. Just today, though, I imagined you in my class, with interest in your eyes just as you have when you read about John Muir. When I was setting up the apparatus for the final laboratory of the semester, I fantasized that I was explaining it to you, and that you were making constructive comments. In response to this imagined dialogue, I made improvements in my laboratory setup. Even imagining your active presence has given me new passion in my work.

Luciferase flashes in the firefly: I found you. It is extinguished in a second: I lost you. Have I found you again? I brushed against the reality of you for just a moment.

Do you believe in God? Is it not He, or It, who has guided us to this spot. Nature watches breathlessly as its two chosen children encounter one another.

I printed it out and took it home with me. After I ate my sloppy bachelor supper, I looked again at the note and realized how stupid it sounded. But maybe not stupid to her? Still, I was not satisfied. It sounded like we were two spirits communing. Which we were. She was the one who wrote about pellucid skies, soughing branches, and sylvan holiness. But I realized that I had to be honest about what else was happening besides our spiritual intimacy. This was the woman whose kiss had sent a thrill through me that was more intense than any number of cool billows, shady bowers, golden leaves, and glints of burning ice. I jotted down some notes on scratch paper before I took up a green pen and began to write as neatly as my trembling fingers could manage.

Rea, all the above is true. I sincerely care about your love of the natural world and spiritual peace. But it would be dishonest for me to not mention the erotic thrill I felt from kissing you. I do not know what I want to ask you to do. I do not want to do anything with which you are not comfortable. I want only your full permission for and invitation to whatever we do next. I am aware that the man always has the power, real or implied, over the woman. And in our case, the white man and the Native woman. Your ancestors have suffered rape and pillage from white men who believed they could take whatever they wanted. I swear by all that is or may be holy that this is not what I am feeling about you. I utterly respect you and will control my cravings for intimacy as much and for however long you wish, even if it is forever. Please meet me Thursday at five in the afternoon, here at what is becoming our holy and secret spot. If you cannot, please leave me a note. I await guidance from you about whether and what kind of physical relationship we might have. A tiny ember in a huge dark world. I tremble when I think that I have found you—see, I can hardly write—and I beg you to meet me again.

Your love-sotted

Marten

I drove early the next morning to leave the message for Rea. I knew that there would be no note from her, since there was nothing from me to which she could respond, until right now. I kept out of sight of the store, not only because of Earl, but in order to not frighten away Rea.

All day, through my classes, I moved in a trance, then got in my car about three in the afternoon on Thursday. An old folded blanket was in the back seat, a flashlight in my backpack, and a condom in my pocket.

Chapter 4

Soon after 4:30 I was sitting, in eager anticipation, on the stump by the James River. My note to Rea was gone, and none had been left in its place. I took this as a sign that Rea was coming in person to meet me. I looked around, to make sure everything was perfectly organized, though there was nothing except the blanket on the ground in a little thicket nearby. The uneven ground made the blanket lumpy, but there were no stones, nor was the ground soggy, so the blanket was soft and dry. I had no idea if we would sit on it and talk, or recline upon it, innocently or not. I looked around, and could see no chance of human intrusion except by someone deliberately coming down the trail which led nowhere else. Bushes hid the blanket itself.

I tried to calm myself by looking at the scenery. The river itself was about a hundred feet wide, shallow, and had clear water. The water moved slowly and steadily southward past a narrow margin of small, smooth rocks. I tried to divert my mind by identifying the trees that I saw, but this did not hold my interest very long. Down by the river, a flood had torn away a pawpaw tree, which was resprouting with big ruddy leaves. Maybe, if Rea just wanted to talk, I could tell her about pawpaws, which are very rare but have delicious fruits. I could keep her interested a full fifteen seconds by telling her everything I knew about pawpaws. I saw a patch of poison ivy nearby. Now, that topic, I could go on and on. I imagined her nodding her head as I spoke.

Spring rains had recently swelled the river and left behind pools in which slimy green cyanobacteria had already begun to grow, from which the first mosquitoes of the season had emerged. These were the big mosquitoes; those later in the summer were more numerous but smaller. In addition, the infamous tiger mosquito had invaded the United States from Asia and reached Missouri. They loved to breed in the water that accumulated in old tires, such as those that were piled up behind Earl's store. Stinging mosquitoes kept me awake, but not for long.

I began to relax. A sudden release of nervous tension that had built up over the last two days and nights, plus the gentle murmur of freeway traffic nearby but unseen, made me sleepy, which was exactly what I did not want to be. I had prepared for every contingency—I even brought little snacks for us—except drowsiness. I found a rock face to prop myself against. I must have fallen asleep right at 5:00, but when I suddenly awoke, at 6:30, and looked around, I was still alone, and there was no note in the leather folder. I felt like the young man in the Hawthorne story who fell asleep by the roadside. A young woman approached him, and thought about making his acquaintance, but she did not want to disturb him, and left. I did not want Rea to see me asleep and leave. Determined to stay awake, I went back to my seat and fell asleep again.

I stirred awake as I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was almost sunset, which meant that I had slept until almost 8:00. I tried to focus my eyes as I looked into Rea's face. We kissed one another again. I kissed around on her face, filling in an oval that approximated where Earl's slap had struck her. The ghost of a smile lifted her cheeks. When I started to speak, she placed a gentle finger on my lips. She slipped out of her shoes and socks, and looked down at my feet. I did as she had done. She took my hand in hers and placed it on her chest for a few long seconds. She moved away, turned around, and pulled off her T-shirt, leaving her long dark hair swirling around her head. She unclasped her brassiere and turned back toward me. I was astonished with the perfection of her dark-nippled breasts. I reached to touch her, but she gave my T-shirt a little tug. I quickly slipped my shirt off. It fell to the ground on top of hers. She unbuckled her belt and unbuttoned her jeans and slipped out of them. Once I was out of my jeans, and my drawers, she could see that I was ready for her. But she did not remove her underwear. I reached again to touch her, but she moved back, not smiling, until I reached into the pocket of my pants on the ground and removed the condom package. Then she smiled grandly and stepped out of her briefs. She stood before me, perfect. I clumsily tore into the package and applied the condom to my member so long unused to it. She took my hand and led me to the blanket, which she had moved just slightly and smoothed out.

I was on her before she sat down. I went first for her ears, kissing behind them and breathing deeply into her hair. I kissed her eyes, which looked up at me in tenderness. I kissed her full lips and cheeks, and my tongue felt against her perfect white teeth. Soon I was clasping her shoulders and kissing her chest, then her abdomen. Very soon she was on her back, and I was on top of her, penetrating into a thick forest of dark hair. It happened the way it does in books, but never, I assumed, in real life. I was surprised not only at my power but at my ability to hold it off as wave after wave of her love came upon me. Our muscles tensed powerfully at the same time. She drew the life out of me. At least, that is how I remember it. I became lethargic as I lay on her bosom and touched her breasts. She was fingering my hair. I looked up into her smile. I started again to speak, and she again pressed my lips shut with her finger.

Then she sat up. I lurched into a clumsy sitting position. "You were so gentle," she said.

"Of course," I said. "That's what love is."

"I didn't know it could be this way," she said.

"I didn't either," I responded. "So, it's not your first time?"

She almost shrieked in laughter. "Of course not," she said. "With a face and body like mine, I've had a lot of guys after me."

"I can imagine," I said. "I would most certainly have been one of those guys."

"I've lost count of the number of times I have been up against a wall, or in the back seat of a car, with a guy. Not an uncountable number, it's just that I have lost count. But it was never like this. It was never relaxation. I always felt I had to meet some need in my partner, and after that need was met, it was over. I wanted to be loved, but that is not what I got. Especially after I started insisting on condoms, the demand for my services decreased.

"But how about you?" she asked me. "You must be experienced, too. You've had enough time. High school, college, graduate school, before getting your teaching job. That's a long time. And you're not a bad-looking guy. So what's up?"

"I was not in demand as much as you were, and I got told 'no' a lot. But a lot of times I wasn't. In every case, though, the girl would change her mind in a few days or weeks and find someone more satisfying."

I looked into her eyes, and saw that the pleasure had left them.

"What's that?" she whispered. She touched a small spot, black in the fading light, on her leg.

"It's a tick," I whispered back.

"I hate them," she hissed.

I picked the tick off and threw it away. "If you catch them soon enough," I spoke quietly, "before they insert the proboscis into your skin, they are easy to get rid of." I started to tell her what would happen if they did get the proboscis into the skin, about how their heads would detach and stay in the skin even when the body is brushed or scraped away, but stopped myself from spoiling the magic of the moment that had just passed. Instead, I said, "There are a lot of them around here. They could be anywhere."

"Anywhere?"

"Almost," I said. I was half-joking when I said, "You should always get a tick-check after you have been in the woods. You know, somebody to check you over. Somebody like me." I spoke before I had thought, only afterwards realizing it was the perfect thing to say.

"Anywhere, as in anywhere around here, or as in anywhere on my body?" She was speaking softly now, but without alarm.

"There's a difference?" I asked, smiling into her face. "To a little tick, your body is a world." I whispered into her ear. "Lots of places to hide."

She knew what I meant. She let me check around in places ticks might have hidden. I needed my flashlight for this. Under her arms, and the crease of skin under her breasts. She lay on her back as I checked her abdomen. "Lots of places to hide in these hairs," I said. I could hardly concentrate, as I was thrilled by the sight of each hair, especially on the mound. Then I touched some of the surfaces between which a tick could, theoretically, hide. She tensed her muscles and tried to not laugh. "I'm ticklish," she said.

"Then you should be the one to open up the places they might hide," I responded. "With your fingers." Which I kissed one by one. "You can't tickle yourself."

We reclined. I inspected the grottos into which a parasite could retreat. I found no ticks. Then she turned over and I inspected between her thighs. Colors swam before my eyes.

"I must smell pretty bad down there," she said. "I haven't showered since yesterday."

"I don't think it is possible for you to have any offensive smells."

"Everyone does," she said. "Although, it is well known that there are certain body odors that whites produce but Asians and Native Americans do not.

"And now," she said, "I have to check you for ticks."

"Please do," I said. "They hate me, I've never had one, I must produce some anti-tick smell, but there is always a first time."

Her hair tickled me as she inspected my upper and lower body at close range. She looked all over my phallus, which kept growing. With one little stroke she caused a second eruption.

When she sat up again she grabbed her shirt and slipped it on like a hospital gown. I crammed my used condom back in its envelope and slipped it back into the pocket of my jeans tangled on the ground. I put my boxers back on.

"Marten…can I call you Marty?...a marten is a mammal that is kind of like an otter, right?" Rea said.

"Or a ferret, which can get itself into crevices you didn't know were there," I whispered into her ear.

"Well, I guess you did that, all right. Looking for ticks. Right."

"Well," I whispered into Rea's ear. "This was so much more than I had any right to expect from you, or out of life. Your beauty is astonishing…"

"Marty. Save the fancy talk for later. There will be, I suspect, plenty of time for it, through our letters, maybe in person, but for right now, we had to grab this opportunity while it was briefly available, in case it never comes again. I just don't trust life to let us have even one, much less more than one, chance for full happiness."

"I really meant all that stuff I wrote about, you know, the beauty of nature," I said.

"Of course, you did," said Rea. "I had almost decided that you were just trying to get me, like all the other men, truck drivers and such, and the bikers, don't get me started on *them*! They made it sound like I was a beauty queen marked on all the Route 66 maps. *I rode all the way from Carbondale just to get a look at you,* and so on. But I knew after talking with you for less than a minute in the store that you were different. You might be, you know, the one I've been dreaming about, to use a cliché. I had second thoughts. I almost didn't come today."

"You almost didn't."

"Sorry, Marty, I just got off work. But all that stuff you wrote, which was almost as silly as the stuff I wrote, convinced me we were both helpless dreamers."

"Rea, you need to get out of your situation," I said. "Come, live with me."

"It's not quite that easy, Marty."

"Why not? I have room for you, and I can probably afford the extra food and all…"

"And how about Mother?"

I admitted that would be a bit crowded for my apartment if she joined us.

"And then Earl would find us," Rea said.

"How?"

"Missing person report."

"Unless you and your mother got a restraining order. Physical abuse…"

"Marty, you can guess just how much Earl would respect a restraining order, especially since some law enforcement people are his fishing buddies."

"How about if you were a college student? Enrolled and all. Independent. I can get you into college."

"I can't afford the tuition."

"Tuition could be free for you, if…"

"If what?"

"We can talk about it later."

"Earl wouldn't let my being a college student stop him, either."

"Maybe someone else could protect you from him."

"And who might that be? Not you. You cannot legally protect me."

"Unless…"

"Unless what?"

"Unless we got married."

"What!" Now Rea was no longer quiet. "Marty, it can't be that easy. Besides, it's too good to be true."

"Doesn't sound difficult to me," I ran on. "Webster County courthouse right here in Marshfield. Just make sure you have a birth certificate."

"And Mother?"

"Send her back to Oklahoma, out of Missouri jurisdiction."

"Let's not think that far ahead," said Rea. "Right now, I could use a different job. One that actually pays more than just living and eating in Earl's house. I went to a job interview once."

"Where?"

"You know Tiny's?"

"The strip club up the interstate a ways?"

"Yeah, the one the men keep telling me I should work at. It's hard to say no to the kind of money I would get. The management lets the girls keep seventy percent. At least, that is what they say."

"I can imagine Earl wouldn't much like that."

"Actually, he said it would be a good idea. Only he would want a cut of my profits."

"Bastard," I said.

"I had a private session with the manager at Tiny's."

"A what?"

"He had me take my clothes off. Then he raved on and on for minutes on end about how beautiful I am."

"He's right."

"He walked around and looked at me from every angle, from across the room and at close range. He told me how good I smelled. The men would not be allowed to touch me, but they could get their faces pretty close.

"Then he told me I had to shave. I thought about it a moment, and I said that I wasn't going to change my body just so that men could see it better. He told me it was the law. Health

rules and such. I don't know whether to believe him, but it doesn't matter. He told me if I ever changed my mind, just come on back. But I won't. I'd have to act like I appreciated the men who look in there and I'd have to take them seriously instead of calling them losers, and…you get the point."

"If you married me, you wouldn't have to work at Tiny's."

"Wouldn't have to, or wouldn't get to?"

"I'd let you. I think. I couldn't stop you. But you don't sound like you would want to. Not only that," I added, "but I could get you free tuition. A waiver for family members."

She spoke slowly and evenly. "You're trying to tell me that we should get married so I can afford to go to college."

"Yes, I am. Among other things."

"You know how to grab a woman by the part of her body that matters most—her brain." We started putting our clothes back on. "But meanwhile, maybe we can just keep meeting here, until we figure out something better to do. Say, Marty, I have to go. Earl is going to get suspicious about where I am."

*

Our next meeting was three days later. I had to finish grading the final exams. I skipped the college graduation to be with Rea. She was late for our meeting, but I knew she would come.

This gave me a little time to look around. I found two branches of a side-channel of the James River. Each of these creeks was about ten feet wide. They enclosed a little island, which was clogged with clumps of willow. The island was accessible through the shallow water, or on a willow trunk, still alive, that bridged the water. Only a clumsy person could not cross over to the little island on the horizontal trunk.

And I made an amazing discovery. It was a door, probably one that had fallen down from the construction materials warehouse uphill. It had wedged itself among willow trunks, probably during a flood. I inspected it more closely. It was solid wood, nearly immobile among the branches, and almost perfectly horizontal. It had not been flooded in a long time, perhaps a few years. It was so strong that, as the willow trunks had swollen and spilled their wood over its edges, the door had not warped. It was a little larger than the average door. It was just the right size for a twin bed. I quickly swept away some silt and a few rocks. I placed the large thin cushion that I had brought over it, then I put the blanket on it. I lay down on it. I did not resist falling asleep, listening to the gentle burbling of the creek. I knew that Rea would awaken me in some fashion about which I could barely fantasize when she arrived.

Rea woke me by caressing my shoulders. She wore a button-down blouse which she had opened so that her breasts hung over me. She let me kiss them over and over, before kissing her face. She lay down on the door-cum-bed with me, and agreed it would be the perfect bed for us.

"I really did not enjoy being on the ground," she said, sitting beside me. "Little prickles kept poking through the blanket. The ground would usually be muddy. And swarming with ticks.

Although, I guess it wouldn't hurt to check for them whenever we use this new dry above-ground bed. With a mattress. Thoughtful. We could try it out, like maybe now?"

"Last time, it was nightfall, and nobody could see us," I said. "We're a little more visible here. You okay with that?"

"The bush is hiding us pretty well," she said. "And lots of brambles and poison ivy. Look in every direction, and all you see is branches. So long as we don't make much noise and attract attention, we should be fine. This land is a latifundium…"

"A what? Even I don't know that word."

"I learned it from *National Geographic*. I probably used the word wrong. It's a big piece of land owned by an absentee who never comes here. That's why you don't see people here. It's not public land…"

"Fishermen would come here anyway."

"Earl does, though not right here. This isn't actually on the river where the fish are. Not many visitors, but people dump their trash here. This door probably tumbled down from the warehouse on top of the hill, next to the store. And stay away from the other side of the trail. The pipes from Earl's house dumps the wastewater there."

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Who's going to stop him? His police fishing-buddy friends?"

"Like, Rea, how does he even *have* any friends?"

"He brings the beer."

"Oh."

"He alienates the local clientele, but most of our store business comes from interstate travelers who have no idea who he is, nor do they care. We just going to sit here and talk about *National Geographic?*" she asked, kissing my lips as she smiled.

We undressed one another. I kissed her all over, even the places where the ticks might hide, and she did the same for me. My head was swimming as I slipped on the condom. She was on top this time as I kneaded her rear and her breasts grazed my face.

We sat together after we reassembled ourselves, our legs hanging over the edge of the solid door.

"I'll bring a pillow next time," I said.

"That would be thoughtful of you," she said.

I smiled. "Well, now we can talk about *National Geographic* if you want."

"What? Oh, that." She ran her fingers through her hair. "Well, *National Geographic* was an important part of my life, and still is, when I get to glance at it at the library. When I was in elementary school I would stop at Mady's house when walking home from school. Madeleine was an old lady who liked literature and chocolate. She did not live to see me enter high school. She always let me read her *National Geographics*. I remember one article: "Nevada's Mountain of Invisible Gold." The whole mountain was dirt with little flecks of gold too small to see without a microscope, or even *with* one. I mean, that image stuck with me. Isn't gold supposed to be gleaming? Something to show off? And here was a fortune of gold that nobody could see.

During all the gold rushes—in Cherokee country in Georgia in the 1830s, in California Native country in the 1860s, in the Lakota country of the Black Hills in the 1870s—it was all gold that men could see and get by panning or sluicing. There are a lot of good things like that in the world, things you cannot see unless you know how to look for them.

"Boys who got close to me couldn't believe I wanted to talk to them about science. They started spreading rumors about me, saying that I was frigid. I tried to prove them wrong by getting on my back in the back seat of a car whenever I could, but even then I was stuck with the reputation.

"I struck up a friendship with the geography teacher, thinking maybe he could teach me more. But it turns out he just wanted to have sex too."

"Didn't you have any good experiences when you were growing up?" I asked.

"Actually, I did. I was a thespian. School plays. I didn't use that word with my friends, because with the reputation I already had for frigidity, it would not have helped. We did one of the Oedipus plays, and I was Antigone. We constructed a stage out of crates with plywood on them, and put it in the middle of the auditorium floor. The audience sat on three sides in folding chairs. We changed scenes by turning out the lights and carrying the props up and down ramps in darkness. Of course we dropped things off the side a lot.

"Drama created a parallel reality in which I was happy. This parallel world was manageable, not chaotic like the real world in which I lived. The dramatic world was like planets in orderly revolution, while in the real world I had to dodge meteorites. I wanted the fantasy world, the mountain of invisible gold, gold dust on the dirt of reality. I certainly did not expect the real world to give me anything good.

"That is, until you." She breathed in and sat up straight. "Okay, your turn."

My mind was confused as I thought about everything. Then I realized that *everything* was my topic. "All through school, I was interested in everything. Even from birth, my parents wanted me to develop a love of nature; that's why they named me Marten instead of Martin—I am named after a cute, soft, but very mean and hungry animal. I studied microbes, optics, the history of the English language, Spanish. I studied salt crystals with my microscope. I made star maps with my telescope. I discovered for myself that the constellations in the sky before sunrise in the summer, Orion and Sirius and all that, were the same as those in the sky after sunset in winter."

Rea jumped up. "I didn't know that!" She sat back down.

I continued. "I had to do the diagrams on paper to figure out that it *had* to be that way, since the Earth was on the other side of the sun in summer from winter. I dreamed of growing up and owning a gigantic building in which all of the knowledge in the world could be deposited in immense filing cabinets. I would complete the task when I was ninety-nine years old, then spend the rest of my life, with thick glasses, reviewing all the information, then dying happy at one hundred and three.

"One day in sixth grade I ran across a copy of *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* by Jules Verne. I imagined traveling through unexplored oceans and into the beauty of classical

literature. Verne did not omit the scientific name of a single snail or seaweed; from him I learned each species has enough intrinsic importance to deserve its own name, not just the generic term *creeping things* found in the Bible. Like you, I had a vocabulary list, which I started from Jules Verne: *lucubration, prodigious, capricious, phlegmatic, festoon*. I did this with *National Geographic,* too, just like you. I read an article about Norway, where the winter air was like "an icy blade that probed the lungs." Not exactly Shakespeare, but not ordinary kid talk either.

"On Saturday mornings I would sit at a typewriter and wait for inspiration. When it came, it was like planets slipping into conjunction, and I would write convoluted sentences about inane plots and use every big word I could find in the thesaurus. It was not until I got to graduate school and wrote my thesis that I learned that a writer needs to be simple and clear, and that self-discipline can substitute for inspiration.

"I would put my knowledge together into absurd new combinations. For instance, I tried writing botanical music, trigonometric music, and drawing simple line-and-curve landscapes on graph paper that could be expressed as mathematical equations.

"I was one of those quiet boys you would never have seen at a dance but who would have seen you in a school play. I would have gone home to write a novel about you but never have dared to give you a phone call or dance with you. If you had dated me, you would have earned ridicule.

"And things were little better in college, or in grad school. My research kept failing, until right at the end when everything fell into place and I got my degree. Yes, I have a Ph.D. Do you love me anyway?"

Her answer was to take my lips in hers and insert her tongue into my mouth. Our lips separated with a slurp. "Please, take me with you."

"Take you?" I asked. "Take you where?"

"On an adventure of scientific discovery. I mean, you are a scientist. You must do, you know, *science*. Let me do it with you. Aren't you doing some kind of research project this summer? Or do I have to keep you entertained all summer?"

"You might be astonished at how boring it is to actually *do* science," I said. "You might leap for joy when you find the answer you are searching for, but before then, it can be pretty dull.

"But, yes, I have a research project planned. I study poison ivy."

"I'm interested already."

"Poison ivy isn't poisonous. It has a chemical called urushiol which provokes an allergic response in most people. And pretty much just in people. Not in horses, for example. You can ride a horse through the forest, and it will browse on poison ivy, which has juicy, tender leaves. The urushiol will come out in the horse's sweat and, if you are wearing shorts, the sweat will make your thighs break out in a rash. Urushiol has no effect on deer, which eat the leaves, or on squirrels, which eat the berries, but just people, and then not everyone.

"The power of urushiol is like the power of love," I continued, thinking briefly back to the love music that was playing outside of the C-store before I met Rea. "Like the power of love, or of rage. In itself, it is of little consequence—a slight nuance, a fleeting facial expression, a

little molecule not much different from any other molecule in the leaf. Its power lies not in itself but in the reaction that it evokes. When urushiol touches the skin, it unleashes a massive allergic response. The immune system attacks it as if it were the most virulent disease. This takes about three days. The white blood cells freak out, the skin swells up, blisters form…All this is the work of the body, not the poor, unsuspecting urushiol molecule.

'It is like a kiss. The mucous membrane of the man's lips meets only the tiniest area of contact with the mucous membrane of the woman's lips, the exchange of material—French kisses excluded—is minimal. But the thrill passes throughout their bodies, their organs warm in tumescence. When your kiss overwhelms me, it is not the kiss itself, but my reaction to it.

"It is like a little word that poisons the love in one's heart, propagating itself like a little flame. As the Apostle James said, I learned back in Sunday school, How a mighty forest can be set on fire by the tiniest spark. He was talking about the power of words. Urushiol is just like that.

"The question I am investigating in my research is whether poison ivy plants that grow in the sun have more urushiol in their leaves than plants that grow in the shade."

Rea looked puzzled. "Why would they do that?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just thought it might be interesting to find out."

"Why do they produce the ooroo-whatever at all? It does not protect the leaves from being eaten by animals. Not even humans, who never eat them anyway. By the time the human might find out that poison ivy is dangerous to eat, it would be too late. In order to protect the plant, the poisons in leaves need to either taste bad or have an immediate effect."

"Good thinking, Rea. You really should be a scientist. I'm not just saying that."

"You're just saying that. But why do they produce the ooroo stuff at all?"

"I don't know that, either."

"So you're just playing around with science, then."

"Pretty much. I might get a paper out of it."

"Okay," said Rea. "You've convinced me that it will be boring. But not as boring as what I spend my time doing in the store. So, what would I do if I helped you out? Assuming I could get away from my work."

"You could help me weigh the leaves and measure their area, and then write the numbers down in lab notebooks."

"Boring enough," said Rea. "And then?"

"And then we extract the urushiol."

"How do you extract it?"

"I soak the leaves in alcohol. The urushiol diffuses out into the alcohol. From these alcohol extracts, I can measure the amount of urushiol that was in each leaf."

"How do you know *all* of the oroo-shyol diffuses out into the alcohol?"

"It doesn't. But I can assume that the same relative amount diffuses out of every leaf, allowing a comparison to be made."

"You assume. That's science? Well, I guess there is nothing to be done about it."

"We have to be very careful," I continued, "because any trace of the alcohol with urushiol in it could leave residues on glassware, equipment, etc., which can be dangerous to touch," I said.

"Dangerous. Now this is starting to get interesting," said Rea. "When do we start?"

Chapter 5

I drove to my usual parking space, and went to meet Rea at our stump at eight the next morning. I had not planned to begin my research quite this soon in the summer, so I had to stay up late in my lab getting my field notebook, plastic sacks, plastic insulated cooler, and clippers together and put them in my car. The last thing I had to do in the morning, besides putting on clothes appropriate for possibly brushing up against poison ivy, was to drive past my lab to get crushed ice from the machine down the hall from my lab, to keep the plant specimens fresh. Since her mother was working the morning shift at the store, Rea was bright and ready for our work, dressed in jeans and a light long-sleeved shirt.

"I get to be a real scientist!" Rea exclaimed with a big smile underneath her floppy hat. "Missouri Route 66" said the hat, which she probably stole from the store. Who was to know, since it was she and her mother who kept the inventory?

"Let's see if you still feel this enthusiastic a few hours from now," I grinned.

The plants I had chosen for the research project grew in the Natural Area, which was a vacant lot that somebody had donated to the college for a tax write-off. Some of the poison ivy plants grew in the deep shade of cottonwoods by a creek, others in bright light around sumac bushes out in the open. Since I wanted to find a clear distinction between sunny and shady conditions, I avoided the ivy that was in the half-shade of honey locust trees.

We finished all our field work in the morning, because I had numbered and labeled all the plastic bags the night before. I knew how many ivy plants, and how many leaves from each plant, to sample. And it didn't matter which plant was which, so long as we didn't mix them up. The work, however, was very delicate. Each leaf has three leaflets, and we used only the middle leaflet of each sample. I clipped off each leaflet, holding it in the clipper by its stalk, and slipped each one into its own plastic bag. One reason the work went fast was that Rea was helping me. I had to slip each leaflet into its bag absolutely flat and without crumpling it, which required someone to hold each bag wide open.

"These bags look like the collapsible bags inside of baby bottles," Rea said.

"They are," I said. "No fancy scientific equipment here. The clippers are just garden equipment. I just need to make sure none of the plant tissue touches the outside of the bag. Otherwise you will get blisters just by touching the bag." We put each bag on the ice in the dark box.

After each ivy plant, we grabbed and ate some greenbrier shoots, only the fresh ruddy tendrils that were just now emerging. "They taste like asparagus," I said, "to which they are closely related." Over the course of the morning, we ate a lot of greenbrier shoots.

"I usually just eat junk food from the store, after it expires," said Rea. "I've not eaten this much salad in my whole life." We were sitting on a mud bank near a little river, beside a small forest.

"Don't be surprised if your body reacts to so much fiber," I said, as we ate little peanut butter and honey sandwiches I had brought. We also ate the first redbud flowers that opened. They tasted like pink flowers. It was already warm enough that we were sweating and needed our water bottles. "I imagine that your Native ancestors ate a lot of greenbrier shoots and other wild plants. Whatever they could find. Not a bad life."

Rea sighed, closed her eyes, and put her sandwich down in her lap. "Where do I even begin with that," she said. Her question was not a question. "There were some tribes that just gathered wild fruits, nuts, what have you, but most of the tribes, like the Cherokees, lived off of agriculture."

"I've heard about little gardens of corn and beans," I said.

"I mean, whole fields of corn, beans, and squash," Rea continued. "I'm talking agriculture here, extensive enough to feed thousands of people. Our villages got pretty big. And a thousand years ago, we had whole cities."

"Why have I never heard of this?" I asked.

"Ever been to Cahokia? Not far from here, in southern Illinois. It was, about seven hundred years ago, the biggest city in the world. Bigger than London. Cornfields all around it. Big mounds for burial and religious services."

"So, I repeat, why have I never heard of this?"

"The Cahokia civilization collapsed. And then white people destroyed the mounds. You can still see the mounds at Cahokia, but they just look like little hills. Another big city was Spiro, down in Oklahoma. White people dug up and even dynamited those mounds. They wanted to erase all trace of North American Native civilization. And it worked. This vast Native civilization is hardly mentioned in the history books used in schools. The fact that you have never heard of it confirms what I just said." She had a little sadness in her beautiful eyes as she looked at me. "My ancestors were not naked savages running through the forest hunting deer. We lived in houses. We used fire to manage the forests by burning out the little trees. We would save the big trees and burn out the sticks and bushes. In contrast, whites would cut all the trees down, even the big ones, and then let a forest of sticks grow back in its place. You could walk through our forests, plant cornfields under the big trees. But the forests that grew back after whites cut them down? You could hardly walk through them. We Natives even had orchards. That pawpaw tree you showed me by the river? They grow wild, but my ancestors also planted some of them."

"How do you know all this?" I asked. My implied question was, *Surely I would have learned about this while getting my Ph.D. in botany.*

"Some of it was passed down in the family, but not much. You can go and read the signage at historical sites such as Cahokia."

"If you even know to go there and look at it," I said.

"And there is a book called *Forgotten Landscapes*. One of the few books I actually own."

"I saw it in your bag," I said.

"We had agriculture, about which few white people know. But they have heard about our use of medicinal plants. Mostly hallucinogens. That part's true, too. My sixth-great grandmother was a famous Cherokee woman, Nanyehi, later known as Nancy Ward. She was the last Cherokee Warrior Woman. When the men gathered to go to battle, they drank the Black Drink, which was mostly salt and caffeine from the yaupon holly. The warrior women, such as Nanyehi, mixed up the blank drink for the ceremony on the eve of battle.

"White settlers came along and disrupted a thriving way of life here in the continent that Columbus thought was India," continued Rea. "They brought smallpox and other diseases that killed ninety percent of us Natives.

"But," sighed Rea, "I guess there's nothing to be done about it now. Everybody thinks us redskins are dirt-colored drunks lying in the ditch on the rez in flyover country. Or lying on our backs in a strip club." When I started to speak, Rea said, "I know that's not what you think. And it's not what you thought before you met me, either. Most white people simply don't know the truth about Native America before Columbus, or Native America today. The racist whites have written the history, and the other whites learned it in school."

"What can I do?" I asked.

"Just keep teaching," she answered. "And while teaching about the environment, put in a word for us Natives."

"Sort of makes it sound like measuring urushiol in poison ivy leaves is kind of insignificant in comparison," I said.

"Not for me," said Rea. "I'm actually enjoying this. So far. So long as I don't get infested with ticks."

"I'm here to help you not do that," I said. Her eyes smiled. "We can't check each other here, I mean we could, we did, I mean, let's go back to my place where there aren't too many ticks to start with."

"Let's just relax a little," said Rea. It was only then that I noticed the beautiful breeze.

After we sat a few minutes, Rea said, "See that sycamore tree?"

"Where?"

"Well, it used to be a sycamore tree."

"Oh, that broken trunk."

"That one. When I let my eyes relax a little, it looks like a person."

"It does, doesn't it?"

"I know it is my mind playing tricks on me, but it looks like a Native woman in a shawl."

"I see. Some grapevines are hanging down, like a shawl."

"It reminded me of my great-great-great-grandmother, Elizabeth Hilderbrand Pettit," said Rea. "She walked on the Trail of Tears from what was then the Cherokee Nation and is now Tennessee, all the way to Oklahoma."

"Long walk," I said.

"We were escorted by the United States Army."

"At bayonet point and in chains, I'll bet."

"No. From what I've read, the soldiers were nice to us. But they had their orders from President Andrew Jackson and his successor, Martin Van Buren. And we had to obey them, which we did quietly. They offered us horses and wagons and boats, but most of us walked."

"Why?"

Rea looked into my eyes. "Because we were stubborn. We still are." Then she looked at the tree trunk and continued. "Most Cherokees walked south of here, but Elizabeth was in a contingent that was diverted because of a forest fire, and went north, through what is now Missouri. Right along what eventually became Route 66 and Interstate 44."

"Right here!"

"That's right. Elizabeth might have sat at this very spot. That's why I started to imagine that the tree trunk was her ghost with white skin."

"White skin?"

"She was only one-eighth Cherokee, seven-eighths white. But that one-eighth taint was enough to make her Cherokee and to give the American government the excuse to take her land."

I shivered in the warm sun.

"And I could hear her talking to me," Rea continued. "Mind, I don't believe in ghosts. I know this was all in my head. But she was looking straight into my eyes and was not proud of what she saw. It is as if she could tell by looking at me that I am being abused by a white stepfather. Well, Elizabeth knew a thing or two about being abused by a white man. She had married a white man, James Pettit, who controlled her. I don't know if he ever struck her as Earl struck me. But he had a white wife at the same time outside of Cherokee territory."

"That was legal?"

"What part of *legal* do you not understand? Cherokees had no rights, by white American law. But the Cherokee Nation had a supreme court, in which Cherokees *did* have rights. This is where Elizabeth sued James for bigamy, and won. It made no difference, she lost everything anyway, but at least she stood up to him."

"He was your great-great-great grandfather."

"A little girl, my great-great grandmother Minerva, was on the trail with her."

"Wait," I said. "Elizabeth was only one-eighth—and Minerva only one-sixteenth Cherokee. But you look a lot darker than that."

"Minerva's descendants intermarried with fullbloods after that. So I am—I don't know how to calculate my Cherokee blood quantum. Maybe those comedian mathematician friends of yours could, but I can't.

"And, just for a moment while we were sitting in the breeze, I fancied that I heard Elizabeth speaking to me.

"She was telling me that I have to stand up to Earl. To stop him. To overcome him, in some way that I cannot now imagine, but the opportunity for which I should watch. I think," said Rea, "that Elizabeth must be a little disappointed in me for not being a warrior woman like her own ancestor, Nanyehi."

*

Back at my apartment, we cleansed each other in the shower, then relaxed on my bed. Then, since most of the afternoon remained, we decided it was time to go to the lab and put the poison ivy leaves into test tubes of alcohol. The longer we waited, the more of the urushiol might get degraded by enzymes in the leaves themselves. But the alcohol would stop all enzyme reactions. After letting them soak overnight, we could measure their urushiol levels the next day.

We needed to get the leaf area for each of the specimens. We did this by leaving the specimens, flat, inside the bags, on a table. We placed an acetate sheet, on which I had drawn parallel lines exactly five millimeters apart. We could then use a ruler to measure the total length of lines that crossed over each leaf specimen, add up the lengths, and multiply by five. Easy enough, however tedious, to get the total number of square millimeters of each leaf.

Rea was really impressed by the gleaming glassware in my lab, even though it was just cheap Pyrex flasks and screw-top test tubes held vertically in plastic racks. Since it was a summer day, the building was deserted except for us.

I used a mechanical pipette to draw up a few milliliters of solvent and place it in each test tube. I had already labeled the test tubes with colored tape and pencil. I did not use ink, which would have dissolved if we spilled any of the alcohol.

Rea looked at the big plastic bottle, labeled with incomprehensible scientific jargon, toxic chemical information, and disposal instructions. “What is the solvent?”

“Ethanol,” I said.

“As in, two-hundred-proof alcohol? The kind you can drink?”

“Yes,” I said.

“If you put the contents of this bottle into little glass flasks, you could sell it for a lot of money in our store,” she said.

“Usually, you can’t do that,” I said. “The chemical manufacturer mixes toxic alcohol, such as methanol—wood alcohol—in with the ethanol, so that it is poisonous even in small amounts. It’s then called *denatured*. But this,” I said, “is pure ethanol.”

“That’s what you needed for your research,” she said.

“The HPLC machine looks for the chemical signature of urushiol, no matter what kind of alcohol it is dissolved in, so I could have used the denatured—and cheaper—solvent. But I just felt like ordering this.”

“In case you wanted to drink some,” said Rea. “Just a little, that is.”

“I guess I could,” I said. “Nobody would know.”

“So,” said Rea, quietly, “if you wanted to murder someone, you could just slip some methanol into their ethanol.”

“It would show up right away in the autopsy,” I said.

“But, back in pioneer days, when whites would get Indians drunk before taking their land and their women, they could have killed Indians with methanol?”

"Back then, you could get away with it. But, as consumers of alcohol, the Natives were worth more to the traders alive than dead.

"And now comes the dangerous part," I continued. "Taking the leaf specimens out of the bags. We have to be careful to not touch them, or let them touch anything. We use forceps—that is, tweezers. Then, we cram each leaf down into its test tube, immersing it in the alcohol. The alcohol soaks out most of the chemicals. Even chlorophyll. You notice the solvent is already starting to turn green. But the HPLC will be able to pick out just the urushiol."

Rea wrote everything neatly in my lab notebook: every leaf area, every test tube number. I looked at the notebook. "You'd make a good scientist," I said.

"Maybe a good technician," she said. "A lab assistant."

"Rea, I hope you have a chance to be a student here. No telling what you might be capable of doing in scientific research. Only one way to find out and that's by giving it a try. You'd make a great scientist. That's my story and I'm sticking to it."

*

I took Rea to a sandwich shop around the corner from the college, where we got the kinds of healthy sandwiches Earl would never sell. She drank unsweetened iced tea.

"Unsweetened?" I asked.

"Diabetes," she said. "Natives have a lot of diabetes. Not as much heart disease as whites, but our diabetes is through the roof. That's why so many of our older people walk around on stubs. I don't have it. Yet."

Just as we were about to leave, we saw Conway and Thurman come in. Both of them had astonishment written all over their faces when they saw us.

Introductions all around. Then Conway said, "You found her."

"I found him," said Rea. My two friends were even more astonished.

"You won't believe how it happened," I said.

"We already don't," said Thurman.

"Are you the two comedians who got my stepfather angry at you?" Rea flashed them a smile.

"Quite a show, eh?" asked Conway. "But there will be no repeat performance."

"Rea is my assistant now," I said. "She helped out with my field work today, and tomorrow, with the HPLC measures."

"That was fast," said Thurman. "From C-store to science lab in less than a week?"

"That HPLC machine doesn't sound like it will be much harder to use than the beverage dispensers I have to run at the store," said Rea.

"Well, when it comes time for the statistical analyses," said Conway, "that's where we come in. Come by and see us then."

"I think we will probably do that," said Rea. "I intend to ride this pony all the way home. I want to know all about…" She looked at me. "Urushiol. And ethanol."

"How did you get away from that old bastard long enough to crawl around in the weeds with this guy?" asked Thurman.

"I have to go back very soon," said Rea. "I have to sell some cigarettes and drinks and lottery tickets."

"Don't get a statistician started on lottery tickets!" said Conway. But he started talking anyway. "It's even more stupid than those sweepstakes ads you get in the mail. You know, the kind that say, *Mr. Misspelled Name, you are just one step away from winning a million dollars!*" Now, you may wonder, how can they say something like that in a letter unless it is true."

"How can they say something like that on a letter less'n it is true," I mumbled.

"Well, there are three steps to winning a lottery," Conway continued. "First, and arguably the most important, the universe has to exist. And that is true. Second, also an important step, is that YOU have to exist. And there you are, with the sweepstakes letter in your hand, so you obviously exist. Only one step remains. They have to choose your name out of a big pile of names, maybe a million. So you could say the odds are a million to one against you. But you could also say that of the three steps necessary to win, you have already taken two of them, so you are two-thirds of the way toward winning. Wow, I guess I'll send my letter in, you say."

"Who would be stupid enough to believe that?" asked Rea.

"Not you, apparently," Thurman took up where Conway had left off. They were individually comedic, but when together, they stimulate each other like lumps of plutonium bombarding one another with neutrons. "There's investment schemes like that all the time. The company will send out letters, telling people how to invest their money. Only they give one kind of advice in half the letters, and the opposite advice in the other half of the letters. For the people who get the bad advice, the company does not send them another letter. But the half of the people that get what turned out, by chance, to be good advice, they send another set of letters, half of them with one kind of advice, half with the opposite. Half of these letters—one-fourth of the original sample—will have gotten good advice both times. Then they do it again, having given good advice to one-eighth of the recipients. You follow me? Do it again, and they have given good advice to one-sixteenth of the people.

"If they start with sixteen hundred people on their mailing list, they now have a hundred people who have received good advice from them four times in a row, which seems unlikely to have occurred by chance, even though it did. At this point, they can truthfully write to those hundred people that their advice has been correct four times in a row, and they can be trusted. Some of those hundred people will become their customers and trust them with their investment money."

"So, why don't you do that?" asked Rea. "You'd get rich."

"Sixteen hundred letters, even at bulk rate, is still expensive," said Conway. "Now, mark my words, the time is coming soon when you won't need paper letters for this. People will not have terminals, but personal computers—a few computer geeks already do—connected by some kind of spiderweb where they can send messages to one another. Or companies can send advertisements to them. For free."

"That's never going to happen," I said. "For free? How can anybody make money off of it?"

"The people subscribe to the service, for unlimited electronic messages," Thurman said. "Companies would do it too. Goodbye junk mail on paper, hello junk mail on your computer."

"Excuse me, I have to take a break for a moment." Rea stood up and walked away toward the facilities. Conway and Thurman watched her motionlessly as she swayed.

"God, you're right," said Thurman, or maybe it was Conway. "She must be the most beautiful woman in the world."

"You should see her without her clothes," I said.

My friends slowly turned their heads to face me.

"Now, what did I tell you?" asked Conway. "I told you to not get involved with that C-store cashier. But you went and did it. She'll drag you into her family drama, what with that stepfather of hers…You did say he was her stepfather? You're probably already in it too deep to know what you're doing…"

"I am," I said.

"I can see that," said Conway, or maybe it was Thurman.

Chapter 6

Rea had to work at the store all day, but we met late the next afternoon at our rendezvous spot and I drove her to the laboratory, in a shared science space, where the HPLC machine was the dominant fixture. Rea lined up the racks of test tubes in perfect order and stood with the notebook ready.

We ran the samples through the HPLC, after calibrating it against standard chemicals. Each sample was thick with lots of different molecules, but these molecules separated as they went through the equipment. The only portion that we measured was the one that contained the urushiol, which was actually just a small volume of the total extract. After reading the absorbance for the urushiol, the tiny sample dribbled into a waste cup, which I emptied into a beaker. Sixty samples later, there was scarcely sixty milliliters, way less than a cup, of ethanol containing urushiol.

"Just eyeballing it," I said, as I looked over the results, "it looks like the leaves out in the sun had more urushiol in them. So far, so good." We shared just a tiny bit of pure ethanol to celebrate. It did not taste very good. It tasted very hot. We agreed we would not drink pure ethanol again.

"What are you going to do with the leftovers?" Rea asked, pointing to the beaker of waste urushiol solution.

"Well, I can't just pour them down the drain," I said. The rest of the organic waste, the liquid without the urushiol in it, was in an empty bottle that I would later have the waste haulers pick up. "That's some potent urushiol there. I can probably dispose of it after massive dilution."

"May I keep it?" she asked.

I was surprised. "Why?"

"A souvenir," she said. "My first science project."

I poured the solution into a screw-top flask. "Keep that lid on, and don't break the flask, especially not where you can come in contact with it."

"What if somebody drinks it?" she asked.

"I wish I could say nobody has ever asked that before," I said. "But, given the incredible weirdness of the human species, there is actually an answer to that question. Apparently it can be digested, but on the way down it can cause a lot of problems. Whatever happens on your skin could happen in the GI tract, too. At the kind of high concentration that is in that flask, it might even be deadly. There is a Korean dish called, in translation, Rhus chicken, which is chicken roasted in a coating that contains urushiol, extracted from an Asian species of poison vine. It causes gastrointestinal distress, which is supposedly a kind of natural therapy. Why do you ask?"

"I heard, through tribal lore, that my ancestors could make themselves resistant to poison ivy by eating it. It had to be bound up inside a little packet of other leaves, so that the poison ivy was exposed to stomach juices but not to any tissues before then. How could that work?"

"Well, I suppose that some of the urushiol might break down but still have enough potency to stimulate an immune response," I said. "But it still sounds like a really bad idea. If you think that you are going to get into natural plant therapy research, I'd suggest something less dangerous to start with."

"Would you be able to detect urushiol in an autopsy?" Rea asked, not looking at me.

I was so astonished I could barely speak. "Yes, probably, but only if they had a really good reason to look for it."

*

Early the next evening, we met down at the river at the door that was jammed horizontally into the willow tree. We put our thin mattress on the door, removed one another's clothes, and slipped under a sheet. We lay silently.

And the Lord brought out the animals of the forest.

First, a red-winged blackbird perched overhead and squawked at us. He (a male, with big red and gold epaulettes) must have thought we were challenging his territory. I told Rea what kind of bird it was. It reminded me, I said, of the many hours of my childhood in which I had watched and sketched birds, and started my life list, since abandoned, of species of birds I had seen.

Second, a dragonfly hovered above us. Rea said it reminded her of the summer morning, when she was eight years old, when a dragonfly patrolled back and forth, back and forth, along her driveway, between signposts that only it could see. It was defending what it thought was its territory, though there was nothing that was worth defending in the driveway. How many things do we do, Rea wondered, that are as instinctual and mindless as what that dragonfly was doing?

Third, after a long, slow coupling, we lay motionless under the sheet, and heard the plop of a fish. I told her of how my Dad had tried to make a fisherman out of me. I had to sit for long minutes, watching a red and white lure floating in the water. When a fish bit the hook, you could see the lure move. The fish always struck when I was looking at something else, a bird or a tree or anything except that stupid lure.

Fourth, during a quiet massage as the sun was setting, we heard the slightest flapping of what must have been the wings of a bat. Rea recalled the time in childhood when she would go to read in a limestone cave, one of many in Missouri, one that is probably on no map. Many bats hung above her. One evening she waited a little longer to leave, and the bats began to stir. The first sign of activity was a gentle rain of disgusting feces. Right at sunset, thousands of bats flew out of the mouth of the cave all at the same time. She was too amazed to feel any fear.

Finally, just at sunset, we heard the distant tolling of a church bell.

"I wonder what the bell is for," I said.

"Maybe to call people to an evening church service?" Rea speculated.

"People don't go to church this late," I said. "It must be at the end of something, rather than to call people to something."

"A funeral?" she asked.

"Let's be more cheerful. Maybe a wedding?"

We lay still and silent.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" she asked.

"Like, will we ever have a church wedding?"

"Sorry I asked," she said. "That's kind of far-fetched."

"Maybe someday," I said. "Only, I'm not sure I want to wait that long."

As soon as I spoke those words, she settled more deeply into my embrace and said, "When were you thinking of us getting married?"

The bell continued to toll. "Maybe, right now? We can pretend we are at the church where the bell is sounding."

"I, Rea Smith, take you, Marten Reich, to be my husband. How does that sound?"

"It sounds like I, Marten Reich, take you, Rea Smith, to be my wife."

"To have and to hold."

"To have and to hold. In sickness and in health…"

"In sickness and in health."

"For richer, or for poorer."

"Well, Marten, we can't be much poorer than we are now. For better or for worse…"

"For better or for worse, although that is pretty vague. I would say, in times of blessing and in times of testing."

"In times of blessing and times of testing. From this day forward…"

"From this day forward, Rea. Till death do us part."

I felt Rea shudder. "Those aren't just words, you know."

"I know," I said, thinking about Earl's gun.

"Till death do us part," said Rea, as the church bell stopped tolling.

Chapter 7

Rea and I went to the science building the next morning to start entering numbers from our measurements on the computer terminal for statistical analysis. This was back before we had personal, stand-alone computers. We had to dial up a modem and place the phone handset into a special assembly. The main frame computer, in the next building, prompted us for one data number at a time to just do a rudimentary test to compare urushiol levels, which I had computed by hand, for sun leaves and for shade leaves. Of course, the two sets of numbers would be different, but the difference might just be due to chance. Hell, you could take any two sets of numbers, average them, and get a difference. But was it statistically significant? The answer, upon which the entire meaning of the research depended, was contained within a decimal number, a little variable called *p*.

We heard sounds out in the hall. It was Conway and Thurman. They were on their way to a convention of high school math teachers, at which they were the main attraction. The teachers needed something other than professional credit and a small stipend to get them to give up a day of summer to go to a meeting. Conway and Thurman would not disappoint them.

Conway wore a wig of long, curly hair, and a hat with flowers on it. His dress was heavy with lace, behind a pinafore. Something from the nineteenth century, cheap from a costume shop. Thurman also wore a wig, only it was a seventeenth-century male wig, and he wore tight pants and ruffles. Rea saw them first and did not recognize them until I told her who they were.

Thurman said, "May I introduce myself to the most beautiful and eligible woman in the world. My name is Blaise Pascal and I am the most famous mathematician in history."

"Leave it to men to always want to be on top," said Conway, with a falsetto voice. "My name is Ada Lovelace, and *I* am the most famous mathematician in history."

"I see that you are here to use the computing machine to do statistical analysis," Thurman told me. "Statistics is based on probability, a science that I, Blaise Pascal, invented."

"Bosh," said Conway, still with his falsetto voice. "A whole bunch of steps separate your work on probability from the science of statistics, as formulated by Galton, and Fisher, and…"

Thurman sighed loudly. "They would have gone nowhere had it not been for the binomial expansion that I, Blaise Pascal, worked out."

"And the science of statistics would have gone nowhere without the first computers, the difference engines, invented by Charles Babbage and myself, Ada Lovelace. Without computers, one can hardly do any statistical analyses. Have you ever tried one?" Conway stuck his tongue out at Thurman.

"Yes, I have," Thurman answered. "It took me a whole day to do calculations that a computer can now do in a second. But that was a twentieth-century computer, not one of your nineteenth-century clanking difference engines."

"Well, they were much better than anything *you* had in the seventeenth century," retorted Conway.

"Maybe, and maybe not," huffed Thurman. "I do my calculations with pen and paper. And while it takes a long time, I can carry pen and paper anywhere. In contrast, how much does Babbage's difference engine weigh?"

"Um, about four tons. That's not much, considering that it has twenty-five thousand parts," said Conway.

"And it can probably only handle a few digits, I'll aver."

"Actually, it can handle twenty." Conway stared at Thurman.

Thurman muttered, "That's a lot of digits. Still, four tons! How many of these difference engines have you manufactured?"

Conway looked down. "Just one."

Thurman sniffed in disdain.

"Every innovation in the world begins with a single prototype," Conway added.

"And if you want to do bigger calculations, you will need a bigger engine. Exponentially bigger. That is, to have twice the computational power, you will need an engine four times as big. How do you power your engine?"

"It has a hand crank."

"Well, if you make a bigger one, it will probably need a steam engine, or have the crank pulled by a mule. Also, I'm having trouble thinking of what you might want to use your difference engine *for*."

"The government could use it to add up some of their big numbers. You know, taxes, expenditures, censuses, and such like. For little calculations like the ones *you* do, Mr. Pascal, pen and paper are just fine, but…"

"Calculating probabilities is something that no pile of cogs and gears can do, my dear Ada."

"Probabilities? Probabilities of what?"

"Well, anything. Consider, for example, our two love-besotted friends here. They are probably lumbering along under the illusion that there is such a thing as True Love." Thurman looked at me, expecting me to say something.

I did. "I remember you recently making a fairly withering criticism of True Love."

"Shall we calculate the probability of True Love?" Thurman was back to his normal voice.

"This I'd like to hear," said Conway, also in his normal voice.

"Well, I, Blaise Pascal, the greatest mathematician who ever lived, invented the binomial expansion. It goes like this, for you non-mathematicians." He looked at me and Rea. "Consider something for which there is either a yes or a no answer. There is a probability associated with each: a variable we call p for yes, and q for no. Or the other way round; it doesn't matter. These variables p and q always add up to 1.

"Let's say the probability that any two people might be in total accord with one another—a prerequisite of True Love—is ten percent. That is, there is a ninety-percent chance that any two people will *not* agree with one another about something."

"Something, such as what?" I asked.

Thurman continued. "Well, you like the same kinds of food, you agree on the optimal size of a nose, whatever. Anyway, if there is only a ten percent chance that two random people would agree about something, then p would be 0.1 and q would be 0.9.

"Now let us suppose further that there are ten traits for which the two people would have to be in accord with one another in order for them to be in love. My binomial expansion would have ten terms, for every possible combination of yes and no, and a coefficient for each term."

Conway interrupted. "Yes, yes, but we don't need to do all those calculations. Probability is quite simple, actually. In order for the two people to be in accord in all ten traits, with a probability of 0.1 for each, there would be a probability of 0.1 to the tenth power. That is…"

"One out of ten billion," said Thurman. "Which means that two people being perfectly in accord in ten ways is pretty much impossible, since there are only about four billion people in the world." That was the world population back at the time.

"But it happened!" I said. "Rea and I are, in fact, in love with one another. Maybe the mathematics makes it look impossible, but it happened!"

"We should put this matter on trial," said Conway. "Eternal Love is on trial. I'll be the prosecuting attorney. Marten, you're the defense. Thurman, you're the judge."

"Objection," I said. "The judge is biased."

"Objection overruled," said Thurman.

"And Rea, you're the bailiff. So, I'll begin. Your Honor, I have established beyond the slightest doubt that True Love is mathematically impossible. I rest my case."

Thurman turned to me. "Does the defense wish to present a case?"

"I do, Your Honor." I pretended to be serious. "Let me try a different approach. Instead of probability, let us consider that love is like an enzyme and the molecule it works on. That's biology, my specialty. Okay. The enzyme and the molecule have to fit precisely together. The chances of that happening are incredibly small. Yet it happens all the time. It happens billions of times a second in each cell. When the molecule finds its enzyme and snuggles into it, or an enzyme finds its molecule and embraces it, they are drawn together before they know what's happened to them. That, my friends, is what happened to us. I walked into that C-store, and there she was, and we were drawn together like molecule and enzyme."

Thurman raised his voice. "Would the bailiff please refrain from fondling counsel for the defense?"

"Sorry, Your Honor," I said. "I call as my first witness Rea Smith."

"That's the way it happened," said Rea. "Your Honor."

"Objection!" said Conway. "Incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial."

"You've been watching too many Perry Mason reruns," I said.

"Overruled," said Thurman.

"And the defense is leading the witness," added Conway.

"Would the defense counsel quit fondling the witness?" said Thurman. Then he asked, "Does the defense have any other witnesses?"

"I have testimony, but not witnesses," I said.

"Please proceed." Thurman forced a serious look onto his face.

"True Love is found in the most ancient literature," I said. "True Love was what made Adam exclaim 'Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh' when he saw Eve.

"And it was this love that kept Abraham faithful to Sarah, even when her barrenness might have quite reasonably made him seek a concubine. Which he eventually did, but only when Sarah told him to. But even then he was reluctant, because of his True Love for Sarah.

"It was True Love that made Jacob labor for seven years to get Rachel. Could some other woman have substituted for Rachel? Rachel's father Laban pulled a trick on Jacob, promising him Rachel but giving him her sister Leah instead. Leah was probably fairly good looking, and buxom in bed enough that Jacob did not notice she was not Rachel until he awoke, and, as the Bible says, 'Behold, it was Leah.' She had one drawback: She was not Rachel. So Jacob labored another seven years to get Rachel.

"It was True Love that made the author of Song of Songs say, 'I am sick with love.'"

"Objection," said Conway, less loudly than before.

"Shut up," said Thurman. "I want to hear this."

I continued. "It was True Love that made Odysseus pine away on Calypso's island. He was receiving the full sexual attention of that most erotic Greek demigoddess. He could have had eternal life and unending copulatory pleasure with Calypso, but he wanted to go back and die with his wife Penelope. Who was getting old.

"And there were the words of the Irish bard O'Daly, who sang about his love for Eileen Kavanagh, or Beloved Eileen, Eileen Aroon. He sang the song to her on the eve of her wedding to another, and she was so captivated by it that she eloped with him. One of the verses went like this." I started to sing it, but my voice, never good, started to break, so I just whispered it.

Were she no longer true, Eileen Aroon,
What would her lover do? Eileen Aroon.
Fly with a broken chain,
Far o'er the sounding main,
Never to love again,
Eileen Aroon.

"The defense rests," I said. "He is tired and wants to go to bed. *Now*."

"I don't think we are going to win this argument," said Conway, or maybe it was Thurman. "The probability of us winning this argument is one in…"

"And you are wrong about one other thing," I said. "Rea is not eligible."

"Explain," said both Conway and Thurman.

"Rea and I are engaged," I said. "She's not eligible anymore."

"When did this happen?" asked Thurman.

"Last night, when we were down by the river," said Rea.

"At a place that we will show you soon," I said. "Our love nest."

"Which is why we have a request to make of you. Are you free Monday morning?" Rea asked them.

"For what?" asked Thurman, or maybe it was Conway.

"We need you as witnesses for our wedding," I said.

"At the courthouse," added Rea.

"Let me get this straight," said Conway. "You two are going to commit yourselves to each other for life? That's sort of the idea behind marriage."

"We are," both Rea and I said.

"I'm highly skeptical about marriages," said Thurman. "Permanent ones, that is. Now, maybe there could be annual renewal stickers for them, just to make sure the couple wants to stay married. Tattoos on the heinie. Even years on the left buttock, odd years on the right buttock. Then, instead of getting a divorce, you just don't renew the marriage. That way, new partners could see a complete record of previous marriages as soon as the underwear comes off."

"We have an appointment with the judge at 9:00," I said.

"Glad you can come," said Rea. "Just don't wear those costumes."

Chapter 8

That afternoon, Earl was sleeping off his encounter with the bottle, and Rea's mother Rhonda worked in the store so Rea could walk in the forest. She told me later what happened.

Tom Pettigrew, the zoology half of our department, was watching birds down in the forest near the river. He didn't just watch them; he counted them, and counted the number of times each one performed a certain behavior. From these observations, he produced a scientific database. That is the difference between science and birdwatching.

Elated with her upcoming marriage to me, Rea swung her arms and swayed girlishly, with a foolish grin, as she walked. She reached up and swatted branches. I find this hard to believe, but that's what she said. It makes sense, however, that she would shed her inhibitions as she contemplated the new life ahead of her.

Rea saw Tom hiding behind cattails and looking through binoculars, not at her but at birds. Specifically, at red-winged blackbirds that were nesting and singing all around. Rea gasped a moment when she saw Tom's rugged features and fine blond hair and moustache. His strong muscles were taut and motionless. When he stopped looking through the binoculars and wrote in a notebook, Rea decided to approach him. He turned to see her. His pleasure was evident, and Rea returned his smile.

He then pretended to write in his notebook, reciting as he went, "Solitary…magnificent…specimen…of Homo…sapiens…female…walking through…riparian woods…" He stood and shook her hand, holding it a little longer than necessary.

I had not cultivated a close friendship with Tom. He did not seem to seek out friends. Females had no trouble finding him. His severe handsomeness assured him of a waiting list. He must have assumed that Rea was another typical local woman he could charm into his bedroom.

"Watching the blackbirds?" she asked him.

"I find their mating behavior very interesting," he answered.

Rea did not take the bait. She started to ask "How do you study their reproduction?" but changed it to "What sorts of observations do you make on the blackbirds?"

"Their mating behavior," he said. "And their territoriality. I had to locate all the nests and count the number of eggs and fledglings every day to determine their reproductive success."

"It must be wonderful to study nature!" said Rea to Tom, as she had once said to me. As they walked along, she started talking about her love of nature, morning sunlight and gentle wind in the branches and the acrid scent of the cottonwoods and the sensuousness of a cool breeze on warm damp arms while sitting in the shade of a gentle roseate sunset's lambent glow. (*You did not say that, I told her. Oh, yes, I did, she said. I wanted to see how he would react.*) She told of the arcadian beneficence of nature in which all the creatures cooperate for the common good and the face of God smiles benignly on all of creation.

"You need a beer," said Tom. "I have a cooler in my car." Which was parked nearby. "Here," he said when they reached the car, "have a sandwich too."

Rea loved to build up her pleasure slowly, whether in conversation, in intercourse, or during meals. She nibbled the crust first then was working her way into the thickly mayonnaised center when Tom made his move. He sat beside her and put his arm around her.

"Come on, baby, let's have some fun."

Rea realized she had played with Tom a little too long and had to extract herself. "I'm already…committed to someone."

Tom got serious but even more friendly. "Hey, baby, I'm not trying to steal you away from anyone. I know you want to share your life with a man, and I wouldn't interfere with that. Let's have a little fun, then you can go back to your man. You probably want to build a nest with your man, right?"

"Something like that," said Rea.

"So you probably think that those birds out there form faithful pair-bonds that persist until death do them part, amen, right? Honorable, moral, upright little Missouri Ozark Fundamentalist birds, right?

"I keep phone numbers in this notebook, baby. But that's not the most fiercely erotic part of this notebook. It's these tally marks, right here. Data, not dates. For one male blackbird, number M55, there are fifteen tally marks. This is the number of copulations he did *in two hours*. And with fifteen different, shall I call them, chicks. That male blackbird makes Hugh Hefner look like Mary Poppins. Other days, I saw this same male copulating, twelve, fourteen, sixteen times in two hours. I counted eighteen females in his harem."

Being in a harem sounded like the worst possible fate to Rea. So she asked, "How do the female blackbirds feel about it?" Which was silly, because blackbirds do not feel anything.

"They love it," said Tom. "The dominant male has the best territory—not just the largest but the richest in food and other resources. Any females that accept his invitation and nest under his roof receive good food and protection. And their offspring have his genes, that is, the genes of a winner. His genes, and therefore hers, will spread more in future generations than the genes of the other, loser males who hang around and squawk lugubriously." (*Did he really say that? Yes, Marten, he did. He probably has a vocab list too.*) "The losers get enough food to survive, but can do nothing but wait until a hawk swoops from the sky and snatches them away."

"Or snatches the dominant male," said Rea. "He's the one making a big show of himself which the hawk would notice."

"Hey, looks like you're really smart." This time Tom did not call her *Baby*. "Then one of the losers might move into the top spot and become the new dominant male.

"What is true of these blackbirds is true of nearly all bird, and nearly all animal, species. They are overwhelmingly polygamous.

"You need to stick with one man if you plan to raise a family and build a financial future. Fine. I suppose I'll get around to sticking with one woman myself someday. But for sex?

"Let me tell you something now about the female blackbirds, in the dominant male's harem," continued Tom. "They pretend to just sit in the nests and wait for him to bring them food. But that's not what they do. I have these observations on a different page of the notebook. The females sneak off into the bushes and have a quick coupling with one of the other males, then they come back to the nest. So those other males are not quite as much losers as they might at first have appeared.

"Tell me, honestly," Tom continued. "If Mother Nature, consort of Father Darwin, intended for a man to have just one sexual partner, why can a man produce in a single ejaculation a billion times as many sperm as a woman produces eggs? It's competition, that's what it is. If the woman has several sexual partners, the one who ends up fathering her offspring might just be the one that produces more sperm than the others. Does a man's anatomy appear designed for monogamy?

"So, if you ever get tired of lying around with just one man, give me a call. Meanwhile, keep that man. Don't expect me to pay for a house and kids." He handed her a card—not his university card, but a privately printed one, with just his name and phone number.

She declined Tom's offer for a ride home.

*

When Rea told me about the encounter, I said, "Tom is a handsome man. You turned him down for me?"

"Well, *yeah*," she said. "I mean, that's a no-brainer. A quick screw vs. a wonderful life."

"Suppose you had sex with him and got pregnant," I told her. "And I didn't know, and assumed the child was mine. I would marry you and take care of you and the child too. That way you'd get the best of both—his genes for handsome sons and pretty daughters, any my support and devotion. You could have a quick screw *and* a wonderful life."

"I guess I didn't think about that," Rea said.

"And, technically, there would have been nothing wrong. We aren't actually married yet."

"I guess I didn't think about that either."

"Of course not," I said. "You are an honest woman and you love me. I thought I could trust you and it turns out I was right.

"Now," I continued, "we have time for a celebration. What do you say that we act like the married couple we will be in a couple of days?"

We were in my apartment. Rea said, "Here, or out on our wilderness bed?"

"Why don't we just stay here?"

"Yes. This time, Marten, you don't need to use a condom."

*

Rea had to work most of the weekend at the store. Weekends are busy times on the interstate. Meanwhile I was busy too, getting the tractor-feed paper printouts of the statistical analysis of our results.

I met Rea just before sunset at our hallowed spot Sunday evening and showed her the printout.

"See that little *p* right there?"

"Only because you are pointing to it."

"Right. It says, *p* is less than 0.0001. That means that there is less than one chance in ten thousand that the pattern was due to chance."

"What pattern?"

"That the poison ivy plants out in the open produce more urushiol than the ones in the shade."

She just looked at me and I said what we were both thinking. "Why am I not happy? These are the best, clearest results a scientist could hope for. But somehow it doesn't matter. The high-light plants produce more urushiol. So freaking what? Who cares?

"But at least," I continued, "we can get a paper out of it. It will look good on my résumé."

"We?"

"You can be my co-author. Not even in college yet, and your name on a scientific paper."

"That's very kind of you, Marty."

"No, not kind. You helped so much on this project that it would be unethical for me to *not* include your name."

"In that case, you should wait before writing it, so that my name will be Rea Reich."

Chapter 9

Conway and Thurman were right on time at the courthouse Monday morning. Rea and I had arrived early. The judge looked like he had a lot else on his mind. And he probably did, what with all the petty, sad crimes that fill the county dockets in the Bible Belt. Rea and I had already filled out the papers the office assistant had given us.

We sat as the judge looked over the papers and bobbed his head. "Birth certificates?"

We had them.

"Witnesses?"

Conway and Thurman stood up and said, "Here, Your Honor."

"You-all vouch for the identity of the prospective marriage partners?"

"We do," said Conway.

"And they appear to both be gainfully employed," said the judge.

"They are," said Thurman.

"Not that it would matter, legally. In that case, Mr. Reich and Mizz Smith can sign the papers in my presence."

As we signed, the judge did not actually look at us. He was examining his papers for the upcoming court session.

"Does anyone object to this marriage? Hearing no objections, I now pronounce you man and wife. May you make the best of it. Remember to tell the tax people about it. Filing jointly saves a heap of money."

Then Rea spoke. "I have a statement I would like to read."

The judge looked up at Rea for the first time, and seemed stunned by her beauty.

"Won't make no difference," he said. "Legally."

"But it is important to me," said Rea.

The judge looked at his watch. "Keep it short," he said.

Rea looked down at some papers she had brought. The prolegomena she had written was a couple of pages long, with literary and scientific allusions, but she skipped them. She came to a set of short paragraphs at the end.

"Every day is a new opportunity for gratitude, for simply being alive without too much suffering. And Marten is the person who can share this gratitude with me.

"I cannot prove this, but I feel that Marten is the one person in the world who could be my perfect partner in whatever path lies ahead."

Rea shot a glance at Conway and Thurman, who rolled their eyes when she said *perfect partner*.

She continued. “Very few of us are called on to do heroic things. But a happy life consists of doing ordinary things in a grateful manner. Marten is the person with whom I pledge to spend my ordinary life.”

Rea saw the impatient look on the judge’s face, and she skipped to the end. “Till death do us part.”

*

Later in the day I spent several hours digging crawdads down near our love nest. It was a messy, muddy business, since crayfish love sopping wet mud. There were hundreds of them, but thousands of places they could be. I looked for their chimneys, which were piles of mud where they had dug into the earth. Then, my hands covered with long rubber gloves, I dug down into the mud until I found a wriggling crayfish. I grabbed it, and it turned to pinch me with its claws. But the pincers could not penetrate the rubber. I threw each crayfish into a bucket of river water, to rinse the mud away. By the time I had about thirty of them, I decided that was enough. They crawled all over each other, but did not fight.

Toward late afternoon, Rea got off of work, and Conway and Thurman met us at the stump by the river.

“So, this is your love nest,” said Conway.

“It is,” said Rea.

“And this bag here,” Thurman indicated the plastic bag with the leather pouch. “That’s where you hide your books?”

“And left our notes,” I added. “That is the place where it all started.”

“I smell something,” said Thurman.

“Your upper lip,” said Conway.

“’sides that,” said Thurman. “Smells like a campfire.”

We walked on the willow trunk over the creek and out to a little muddy pit I had dug near the door we used as a bed.

“That’s right,” I said. “Our campfire. We planned on a crawdad-bake to celebrate our wedding. Now I’m going to grill them over the coals. You usually boil them, but we don’t have a pot big enough.”

“The coals, matches, grill, and lighter fluid were a gift from Earl, though he doesn’t know it,” said Rea. “And the kick-ass Louisiana hot sauce,” she added, reading directly from the bottle.

“Not to mention the pork-and-beans and cornbread,” I said. The beans were from little cans, and the cornbread was little cakes in plastic bags, from the store.

“Gifts from the father of the bride,” said Conway.

“Stepfather,” Rea corrected him.

“My bad,” said Conway.

“It makes a lot of difference,” said Rea.

"She's right," I said. "Genetically. A man is not usually abusive of his biological children. In particular, a father almost never has sex with his daughter. This is one of the few universal moral principles found in every tribe and nation and people. Matter of fact, it's just about the only universal moral principle. That's because…"

"I think I know," said Thurman. "The daughter carries half of his genes, including the defective ones. The ones that would produce a monster if they showed up in a baby. Any tribe that practiced incest would have so many monster babies that natural selection would put a stop to that practice right quick in a hurry. But a stepdaughter is no more genetically related to him than any random girl in the population. So—and all this is subconscious, see—he might have no hesitation having sex with his stepdaughter."

"I know," said Rea.

Thurman was suddenly aghast. "Sorry, I didn't mean to bring up something you might not have wanted to talk about. Do you know from experience?"

"Not yet," said Rea. "But let's just say the sooner I get away from him, the better."

"Then what we need to do," I said, "is what we have just done. I went and married Rea, and within a few days, she will not be under Earl's control any more. Technically, she isn't now, but there are a couple of things we need to do before she just up and leaves Earl's house."

I reached into the bucket of invertebrates and pulled one out with the same forceps Rea and I had used on poison ivy leaves a few days earlier, but which I had thoroughly cleaned. I put the little animal on the grill, and reached for another. But the first had jumped up and began to scamper off of the grill. So I grabbed it with the forceps and held it on the grill until it stopped squirming. "This may take a while," I said.

"Meanwhile, Mart," said Conway, "I'll bet you enjoy watching those little buggers squirm while you roast them over the fires of hell."

"Do not," I said. "I just need to cook them."

"What evil have those crawdads ever done to deserve this?" said Thurman.

"If crawdads had human minds…" began Conway.

"Which they do not," I said.

"…they would be seeing you as a God they had to explain. They would call out to you and ask what they had done to deserve this suffering. And then you might answer them, or might not, but if you did, they would not be able to understand your answer."

"Enough theological discussion," I said.

"I'll bet we have another theological discussion before the evening is over," said Thurman.

"I don't think so," I said. "Today is too perfect. It is warm, clear, green, and still. And it is my wedding day. Nothing can take Rea from me now." I immolated about a dozen of the crayfish, then said, "That's enough to get our dinner started. Have a seat on this piece of wood here."

Conway and Thurman sat on the door. "It's pretty solid," one of them said.

"It's our bed," said Rea. "That is, when we are out here. Which is where we are whenever Marty doesn't have time to take me to his apartment in Springfield."

"And, before dinner, we have some beer." I pulled a six pack of dark beer out of the cool stream. "And we have a bottle of fine Kentucky bourbon. Courtesy, also, of Earl. He didn't notice it was missing, I bet."

"Actually, he did," said Rea. "But he assumed it had been shoplifted by the black man who had just left. He was so mad that he didn't think about looking in my bag."

"We just drink out of the bottle?" asked Thurman.

"No, we have some fine porcelain cups I stole from the store," said Rea. She smiled. "Get real. Of course you drink out of the bottle. You expect plates, knives, and forks for the crawdads?" She picked up a cooked crawdad by its tail and suspended it while it cooled a little. Then she cracked its carapace with her teeth and started eating the tender meat inside. "Tastes fine. You all ready?"

"First, the drinks," I said.

As we took our cans of beer and shared the bottle, Conway said, "This is not just your bed but your bedroom, the whole world of nature, down here in the wetlands."

"That's the idea," I said.

Thurman picked up a piece of half-rotten plywood and pretended to strum it like a guitar. "Time for some music," he said. "To celebrate with." He cleared his throat and began to sing, to the tune of the Italian song Santa Lucia:

God save the wetlands, and all its species…

He looked at Conway, who sang the next line, apparently inventing it on the spot.

From man's pollution, and all his feces.

Thurman again.

Down where the crawdad crawls…

Conway:

Runoff from shopping malls…

They sang together,

God save the wetlands
God save the wetlands.

"There's more verses," said Conway.

God save the wetlands, algae with chlorophyll,
And all the little fish, plankton and krill…

When he did not hear us encouraging him on, Conway said, "Another verse, Thurm?"

Thurman began,

God save the wetlands, bugs and mosquitoes,
And birds that eat them…

As we were all crunching on crawdads, Conway said, "No doubt about it. You two are very married."

Thurman said, "What are you talking about? Very married? Marriage is a binary variable, not a continuous one. You are either married, value of one, or not, value of zero."

"Or," said Conway, "according to some unhappily married people, it can have a value of negative one. But that, of course, will not happen to you two."

Then we heard a distant rumbling and realized that the clear sky had become overcast.

"Storm's supposed to come in," said Conway.

"Not until midnight," said Thurman.

"Someone forgot to tell the storm," said Conway. "The sky looks a little green."

"That's not good," said Thurman. "Look, the creek is rising."

"Must be some powerful rain upstream," said Conway.

Right as we finished our last crawdad, big drops of rain began to pelt us.

"Time to go," I said. "It's a good thing we have this trunk to walk on over the creek."

Conway and Thurman crossed the creek and waited on the other side. Suddenly the green sky was gone and it seemed as dark as night.

Thurman got out a little flashlight. Actually it was just a pinpoint LED, the kind that had just come on the market, but it was, he said, better than nothing. "I'll shine the light on the trunk so Rea can get across," he said.

Rea, her nerves steady despite the whiskey, seemed to have no trouble putting her feet in all the right places on the trunk, illuminated by the little spot of light. But then the spot of light lurched sideways as a puff of strong breeze pushed Thurman sideways. I heard Rea fall into the water, which was now rapidly rushing.

"Rea!" I called out. There was no answer. I tried twice more, each time a little louder.

"It's just a little shallow creek," said Conway. "She'll get out okay."

"It *was* shallow," I said. "A few minutes ago. Not now."

Thurman swung the flashlight around, and there was no sign of Rea.

"How can this happen!" I said. My question was not a question. "Here God or Whatever allowed us to meet, then love, then marry, and opened a door for us to have a wonderful future. But it was all just a trick!"

"Mart, get a hold of yourself," said Conway. "It's not God. It's just a little thunderstorm."

"God is punishing me for…" I called out.

"For what?" said Thurman. "Why would God or Whatever want to punish *you*?"

"For daring to be happy!" I screamed. Then I called out, "Rea, I'm coming. I will fight against the Tides of Hell to find you! And if not, we will die together!" By the time Conway started to tell me what a blamed idiot I was, I had jumped into the water.

I struggled against the water and grabbed willow roots. I grabbed a slick rock, which I assumed had to be the carapace of a snapping turtle. I thought I was swimming up to the surface until I found myself digging my fingernails into mud. After about a minute of this, as my lungs burned, I stuck my hand out of the water. Another hand grasped mine.

Rea pulled me to shore and I lay in my back. I coughed out water, but not quite enough. Rea placed her mouth over mine and started breathing long and hard. When I started coughing again, she turned me on my side so the last of the water could drain from my throat and lungs.

Soon I was sitting in the darkness with my friends. Rea, her hair tangled, said, "Marty, it is just a little creek. I fell in, but in seconds I had grabbed a willow branch and dragged myself ashore. The only one who was in danger was you."

"Thanks for saving me," I told Rea. "You're right. What an idiot. I just jumped in…"

"No, not an idiot," said Rea. "A lover. I did not doubt it before, but it would be totally unreasonable now to doubt that you are willing to give your life for me." She bent over and spoke in my ear. "For your wife."

After a few minutes, by which time the rain was no longer heavy but was steady, Conway said, "Let's get inside into some dry clothes."

"I guess the rest of the food, and the unused coals and lighter fluid, are gone," said Thurman. "Just more litter down in the water. Too bad, though. I was looking forward to those little sugar-dusted doughnuts."

We went to our stump by the river. It was on slightly higher ground and was intact. Even the plastic bag seemed intact. And right there is where we found the bag of doughnuts.

Chapter 10

The next morning, Rea and I met at the stump. We were freshly clean, even our shoes, with which we stepped over little puddles of mud.

"I see our little library is still intact," I said. "I have been thinking about the natural world, Rea."

"You do that a lot," she said quietly.

"I was silly to be upset about the storm."

"You were."

"Storms are a necessary part of nature."

"They are."

"The new tree seedlings get started not in intact soil, covered with dead branches and leaves, but in sand bars, left by flood waters. Nature constantly renews itself by periodic episodes of disaster, or what seems like disaster to us…You've got something on your mind, Rea."

"I do."

"Please, tell me."

"I will, now that you have finished talking about yourself," she said. "Whatever is going to happen at home is going to happen quickly, so be ready."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because…" She breathed deeply. "Because Earl removed the lock from my door." She let the significance of this fact settle into my mind a little, then she continued. "Does he really think an adult woman does not notice things like this? That a stepdaughter does not notice?"

"Maybe he doesn't care if you notice," I said.

Then we heard a crashing and splintering of branches, the sort of thing you would expect in a riverside woodland but which we had not yet heard.

"We'd better hide," I said. "Probably just a fisherman. We can come back when he is gone." We ran and hid behind the bushes that concealed our bed.

And it was, indeed, a fisherman, with a tackle box, rod, and reel. He sat on our stump. The fisherman started casting, then he called out, "Earl! Over here."

Rea and I froze as we watched from our bed. Rea's stepfather, also with fishing gear, came to the stump.

"You got a license to fish?" Earl asked.

"I run the office, so I hereby give myself a license." They both laughed.

"We're going to have to listen to this?" I whispered to Rea.

"You got a better idea?"

"We could find a back way out."

"The only back way is straight up the hill," said Rea. "And it's muddy right now."

"I don't think they can see us here," I said, "but all the same, let's keep really low," I said.

Rea sat down beside me on the embankment downhill from the bed. "Our butts are going to get soaked," I said.

"I really don't like being here," said Rea. "I mean, I hate him. Ever since he took away my lock, I started hating him more than ever, and that's saying a lot."

"Easy, girl." I was the only person who could say this to Rea. She always insisted on *woman*, except maybe with her mother. "We have a plan. All we have to do is to stick to it."

Earl and his companion drank beer and ate sandwiches and cookies, leaving all of the litter on the ground around them.

Rea sighed and slumped, until we heard Earl say, "What's this?"

We looked through the branches. He had found the plastic bag.

"Just some trash from last night's flood," said the other man.

"Something solid inside," said Earl.

"Most bags have something solid inside."

"Looky here. It's a leather pouch."

"Full of cash?"

"Let me see. No."

"Then forget it. Catfish are biting."

"It's books and papers," said Earl. "Who'd leave books and papers in a bag by the river? *Changes in the Land* and *Forgotten Landscapes*. They look like some kind of science or nature books. And the papers."

"Love letters?"

"Don't appear to be. They look like notes, maybe from the books. Now who would come here to…Wait, here's a personal note. In different handwriting."

"Oh, God," Rea whispered.

"Name on it is Marten," said Earl. "Anybody you know?"

"Not that I recall," said the other man.

"Some of this stuff is real poetic. Like this. Ahem. *The atmosphere is heavy with nectar in the springtime, billows of coolness flow from shady bowers in the summer, sunlight glistens from golden leaves in the autumn and glints from burning ice in winter.* And he signed it, *Your love-besotted Marten.*"

"You ain't never felt that way about a woman?" the man asked Earl.

"Maybe, but it was decades and hundreds of whiskies ago. Wait, there's another note." When Earl spoke again, there was anger, not amusement, in his voice. "Says here, same handwriting, *I'm sorry to hear about your situation with Earl. Maybe I can help. Oh, by the way, don't worry about Earl getting pissed at my friends Conway and Thurman. They were just asking for it, don't you think?*

I was filled with fear, anger, and worry that you may have been harmed when Earl slapped you in the face. I am glad that you have not been injured.

Your beloved, Marten Reich."

"You the Earl referred to in the letter?" asked the man. "Couldn't be you. This Earl done slapped a girl enough to maybe injure her."

"It's me, all right. This little pouch belongs to my stepdaughter Rea. She's always reading books at work. She must come down here to read, too. And now, for secret love-meetings with some guy."

The other man said, "You slapped her? Earl, you gotta get a-hold of yourself."

"Keep your nose outen my business," said Earl. "Maybe I did and maybe I didn't."

"You watch out, Earl. I'll forget I ever heard any of this. For now."

Rea watched him. "Earl's getting angry," she whispered to me.

I crouched and looked through the branches just in time to see Earl throw one book, then the other, into the mud, and trample them.

"I got some business to attend to," growled Earl.

"You sure as hell aren't fishin'," said the other man.

We had to wait a long time after Earl was gone for the other man to leave also. Then we slipped back out to the stump, now strewn with litter. I looked at the books. They were crushed and stained with mud. At least the notes were intact inside the bag.

"Now what?" I said.

"He now knows what I do, and about you. You think he's going to let me keep coming here, or meeting you?"

"What can he do about it, Mrs. Reich?"

"When can Mother and I move in with you?" Rea asked.

"Now," I said. "Problem is, he knows my name. But I don't think he could find us. My address and number aren't in the phone book."

"I was thinking, we could move out tonight after work. Earl will probably be gone—to the strip club again, spending the money we need for food—so you can come about eight. Things don't get hopping at Tiny's until about nine. Is there room in your car for Mother and our stuff?"

"We'll make room," I said.

*

When I got to the white house by the store that evening, a middle-aged woman greeted me at the door. This was the first time I met my mother-in-law. She looked a lot like Rea, a similar shape of face, but her skin was soft with hundreds of little wrinkles. When she smiled, her eyes disappeared. For a woman her age, I realized, she was quite beautiful. I was satisfied as I kissed her on the cheek and thought that, if this is what Rea looks like someday, I will be a very satisfied man.

"I am so glad…" I started.

"We can talk later," said Rhonda, smiling.

It really didn't take too long to load most of the two women's belongings into my car, which was parked behind the store with other cars. Maybe that is why Earl did not notice it when he barged in to the house soon after we had begun clearing out the women's stuff.

"Quick," said Rea. "You gotta hide."

"Where?"

"In my closet, I guess. No place else."

I left the closet door open enough so that I could see most of the inside of the house.

"Hide with me," I said to Rea.

"He knows I'm here and will look for me. He doesn't know you are here."

There was no time for further thought. Earl's voice bellowed, "Rea!" He took a moment to say, "Rhonda, get outen my way." Then be yelled again, "Rea! You thought you could get away with this!"

Rea's voice was very soft, but I think she said, *With what?*

"You went and got married," yelled Earl.

Rea said something else softly.

"Why the hell does it matter how I found out? You done it."

Rea said something soft again, but with agony in her voice.

"Oh, I'll let you go, all right. I'll let you go. But there is something I need to do first."

I glanced through the crack beside the closet door jamb. I saw Rhonda approach Earl from behind and hit him. Earl just turned around and shoved her to the floor. "You know what it is that I have to do," he told Rea.

Rea approached him and tried to hit him, but he slapped her again even more loudly than he had done that day weeks ago at the store. She fell to the floor.

I was in a daze. All around me was the intoxicating scent of Rea's clothes. They were so soft, as were the piles of papers and books underneath scarves and sweaters in the back of the closet. A flat black box, upright with a handle, caught my attention. I opened the latch. It was an old chess set. Oh, if only the game of life made even half as much sense as chess moves.

Then it occurred to me that I had not heard very much from Earl and Rea. They had apparently not struggled. But through the gap by the door I could see that Earl's phallus was sticking slightly out of his pants, and Rea was naked. Earl had a glass of whiskey in his hand, and he put it down on a bedside table.

You promise you will let me go after this, she whispered.

Rhonda came back and hit Earl again. He turned back to strike her, but she evaded his fist. His back was turned.

I saw Rea approach her bureau and open the top drawer. I was, once again, astonished at the beauty of her unclothed body, which is why I did not at first notice that she was searching among her underwear for something. She found the little flask of urushiol extract. She quickly unstopped it and, with one graceful fluid movement of perfect flesh, went to the bedside table and emptied the contents into Earl's glass. She put the flask back into the drawer when Earl turned around. I pulled the closet door mostly shut, but I could still see a little.

Rage clouded my vision right at the same time that I saw the baseball bat almost hidden in the corner of the closet.

This time, Rea said steadily, "You said you will let me go after this."

"You really have no choice but to believe me," said Earl. He grabbed his whiskey glass and drank a big gulp.

No, I thought, *but I do.* Just as Earl was reaching for Rea, I emerged from the closet, with the baseball bat, and struck Earl really hard—even harder than the one home run I made in high school physical education class. It seemed to have little effect on Earl at first, but he wavered a little bit. He turned and looked at me.

"You?" he asked quietly as he focused his eyes. "You're the shit-head that was at the store that day…"

When I hit his head a second time, he slumped to the ground.

I inhaled deeply as I raised the bat again and whirled it, ready to deliver a skull-splitting blow to Earl's head. But Rea put her hand on my arm.

"Don't do this," she said. "I know you want to, and I want you to, beat his head in. But we are in enough trouble now. We have to go."

"Quick, before he wakes back up," I said, not thinking that I might have injured or even killed him. I dropped the bat. "Rea, get dressed! We gotta go! Now!" as if it was my idea.

Rea jumped back into her clothes, most of them. She grabbed the last bag in which she had packed essential items. We started to rush out together, where Rhonda was already waiting at the car. But then Rea went back into her room. I followed her. She put down her bag, opened it, found the flask in her bureau, and slipped it, along with Earl's whiskey glass, into her bag.

"Rea, what is going on?"

"Marty, do you love me?" She did not wait for an answer. "Then let's go, now. Don't ask any questions. We can talk about it later."

*

But we didn't talk about it, even though we had lots of time to do so. Rea, her mother, and I stayed in my apartment. Rea was overcome with a headache, and stayed in my room with the blinds drawn. When I tried to talk to her, she touched her finger to my mouth. I talked instead to her mother, and we tried to think of where I might be able to take them where they would be safe. But she didn't know where her Oklahoma family and friends were anymore. I showed up at my office in case anyone wondered where I had gone.

On the second evening, Rea told me that she had left some things behind in her closet that she wanted to keep, things she was going to load in my car at the last minute.

"Old papers and photographs?" I asked. "I saw them when I was hiding in the closet."

"Yes, those," she answered. "Unless Earl has thrown them out."

"We can go and check," I said. "We have to make sure Earl is not there."

Normally, in the early evening, the store would have been open. It was, however, closed. This was not surprising, since the entire staff consisted of Earl, Rhonda, and Rea. Earl had not even thought to turn the "Open" sign around to "Closed."

"Do you have the key to the store?" I asked.

"No," said Rea, and "Yes," said Rhonda.

"Here is our perfect opportunity," I said. "A till full of money, and a store full of food."

"That would be burglary," said Rea. "On top of everything else that we have done…"

"What else have we done?" I asked. "Except that I hit Earl on the head. But it was self-defense. I mean, me defending you. I mean…"

"Let's just get the stuff from my closet and go back," said Rea. We drove to the store. Rea pulled her backpack from the floor of the car.

"I think Marty's idea might be good," said Rhonda.

"But if Earl is around and he sees us…"

"I'll handle it," said Rhonda, who left us in the car.

When we were alone, I said to Rea, "There's something I need to ask you."

"Love is not asking questions," said Rea.

"But…" I started, but got no further, for Rea pressed her lips against mine and started breathing deeply. I began to swoon, as she not only took my breath, but filled my lungs with her carbon dioxide.

When Rhonda returned, she had two plastic bags of food items that were actually not junk food, and a gallon of milk not yet expired, which she put on the floor behind the front seat.

"Don't ask me about money," she said, "otherwise I might have to tell you."

We walked around to the back of the house, keeping our distance. Twilight was advanced, but no lights glowed in the house. Rea immediately took the lead, and unlocked the back door. Or she would have, except it was already unlocked.

"That means he's here," I said.

"Not necessarily," said Rhonda. "I saw his truck parked off to the side, but that doesn't mean he's here either. He might have gone to Tiny's with someone else. Not like him to leave the door unlocked, though."

The two women grabbed the few items that Rea wanted, tiptoeing around the squeaks in the floor with which they were familiar. I found the baseball bat and took it to my car. It had my fingerprints on it, and it would be best for me to discard it in some other dumpster, perhaps at an apartment complex other than my own, certainly not here at the store.

I went back to search the house. I found Earl on the floor of his bedroom, seemingly asleep, holding a half-empty bottle of whiskey. I should have known he was awake. Otherwise he would have let go of the bottle. He was wheezing heavily.

He opened his eyes, and immediately recognized me even in the almost complete darkness. He rose with what seemed to me superhuman strength and agility. I quickly turned and looked for the women. I saw them outside. Rhonda was returning from the car. I yelled that Earl

was coming after us. They turned and went to the car. I started to follow them, but Earl came out of the house, between me and the car. My only choice was to run down the trail toward the river.

Earl pursued me. I heard his breath and imagined I felt it on the back of my neck. Then I turned around to face him. He wasn't there. I slowly retraced my steps, and found him, kneeling at the edge of the water. His face was bloated and blue, at least that is what it looked like in the fading light. He was gasping loudly. He fell face forward, twitched, and made strange sipping noises before his face submerged in the slimy water. Soon the last tremors of movement stopped.

When I returned to the car, in which Rea and her mother waited, I said, "He fell down. I think he is unconscious."

"Should we call an ambulance?" asked Rhonda.

"Aren't we in enough trouble already?" asked Rea.

I had already decided to let nature take its course. "He will probably wake back up and go home," I said, knowing this would not occur.

Before we got to my apartment complex, we found a dumpster outside of a warehouse. This is where I discarded the baseball bat. I was puzzled that Rea picked up her backpack, removed a couple of items, and threw them into the dumpster also.

Back in my apartment, Rea and I cleansed one another in the shower, normally a source of happy noises that Rhonda would have pretended to not hear. But both of us were so depressed by what had just happened, and what we had just done, that we took no pleasure in one another.

Chapter 11

When I checked in at my office the next morning, Tom was just on his way out to take more notes on the chicks. But he looked really troubled, something I have never seen in him.

"Marten," he said. "I have to warn you about something."

"What?" I asked.

"Down in the forest by the river, where I do my field work and, I think, you do also. A man was found dead down there this morning," he said.

"I haven't heard anything about it on the news," I said, though I knew it was Earl.

"You will," Tom answered. "I know about it because I was the one that found him."

"Victim of foul play?" I asked.

"We don't know," answered Tom. "Nothing obvious. But his face looked terrible."

"He was probably just drunk and drowned," I said. "Heart attack or something." A little too eager to end the conversation, I turned to leave.

"I expect you're right, Marten. He didn't look any too healthy. Just, maybe, don't go down there for a little while, at least until the autopsy is finished." Tom sighed. "How many times I've been down there, not realizing that, if I was ever the victim of something or other, nobody would know until, maybe, the next day, unless there was a young woman I was supposed to meet and I didn't show up, but that's only about once a week, besides she would think I just decided I didn't like her or something...I mean, I could be out there dead for hours and nobody would know…"

Later, Conway and Thurman knocked on my apartment door. When they came in, they were surprised to see two women with me. I introduced Rhonda.

"You heard about the body down by the river?" asked Conway.

"Yes," I said. "Tom told me a man…"

"Not just a man," said Thurman. "It was Earl, the vicious man who ran the convenience store we stopped at. The one who…" He looked at Rea, whose face betrayed nothing of her feelings. "The one who slapped this beautiful woman here."

"We identified the body," said Conway.

"Why did you do that?" Rea asked.

"More information is always better than less," said Thurman. "The whole science of statistical inference is to determine not so much truth as the confidence intervals within which truth is ninety-five percent likely to be found. But if you have a direct observation, the confidence limits, for that observation, shrink to zero."

"Supposing it was foul play," said Conway. "We can't have murderers roaming around. That's why we came to tell you about it. We know that you and Mrs. Reich here sometimes go to a certain wooden platform down by a creek to…well, better stop doing that."

"It's covered with silt and driftwood," I said. "After that storm."

"And we like our own bed right here a lot better," said Rea, pulling me toward it by the arm.

*

There was a knock at the door of my apartment the next day. A man in a suit asked for me, then showed me his badge. Detective Franklin Bataille.

"I am investigating the death of a certain Mr. Earl Smith," he said, when I showed him to a seat. "I assume you have heard the news?"

After discarding several possible weak alibis, I simply said, "Yes."

"What can you tell me about this man?" Bataille asked.

"Why should I know anything about him?"

"You are married to his stepdaughter," Bataille answered. "You, and she, and her mother, may have been among the last people to see him alive."

"You have a warrant?"

Inspector Bataille smiled. "You are not under investigation. We do not even know if the death was accidental. That is what I am trying to figure out. No need to be defensive, Mr. Reich."

I relaxed a little. "Well, I can tell you that he was a monster."

"Can you be more specific?"

"He was violent toward Rea. He slapped her when he was angry."

Bataille smiled again. "When the news came out about Mr. Smith's death, several acquaintances contacted us immediately. The account of the abuse of his stepdaughter is already on record." Now I knew why he was smiling, even as he investigated a man's death. The man, he knew, was indeed a monster. "Thank you for confirming what we already knew. Anything else?"

I started to mention the attempted rape, but decided to say nothing.

"I would like to talk with Mrs. Reich myself," said Bataille.

Rea came out of the bedroom, in a disheveled but not indecent nightgown. Her hair looked much more tangled than I had seen it a few minutes earlier.

Inspector Bataille's eyes grew wide. "Mrs. Reich, I presume?"

"Yes," said Rea. "And can't you see I am an emotional wreck here?" She widened her eyes and pulled on her hair a little. "Do you enjoy making women relive harrowing events of their recent past? Is that what gives you a sense of enjoyment in your line of work?"

"Now, whoa, Mrs. Reich. That's not what I am here to do."

"Well, that is what you are doing. And maybe you get a sense of fulfilment by snooping into white men abusing Native women?" She stepped toward Bataille.

"Mrs. Reich, that was totally unnecessary. The more I investigate this matter, the more likely it is that Native women will be *protected* from abuse. Men like your stepfather need to be stopped. For that, I need your cooperation, if there is anything more that you have to tell me."

"Rea, I mean Mrs. Reich, is, as you can see, very perturbed right now. Perhaps some other time would be better…" I said.

"I totally agree, Mr. Reich. That is all for now."

"He probably just got drunk and fell down in the water," I said.

"How did you know he fell into the water?" asked Bataille.

I had to think quickly. "The man who found him, Tom Pettigrew, is my colleague at the college. He told me."

This seemed to satisfy Bataille. "However, there are some facts that do not quite fit. Not that you could have known this, of course. The autopsy revealed that Earl Smith had severe lesions in his upper gastrointestinal tract. Like he was poisoned. These are not symptoms of any common poisons I know about, methanol, polyethylene glycol, battery acid, cyanide, the like."

"If it was cyanide," I said, "his blood would still have been red, even if he was dead a few hours. Cyanide blocks the final step of cellular respiration, so that the blood cannot use the oxygen it contains. That keeps it red for hours."

Bataille smiled. "How did you know that?"

"I'm a biology professor," I said.

"I knew that. Well, the more we know the better to reconstruct what happened. But it is really strange. He looked like he had poison ivy inside rather than outside of his body. Like he ate poison ivy leaves."

*

The next time I saw Inspector Bataille, I was in my office. I greeted him with neither friendliness nor alarm. I just wanted him to be gone.

"It is my job," said Bataille, "to investigate every possibility in the death of Earl Smith. I have considered one really outlandish possibility. And that is that he ingested urushiol. Do you know what that is?"

I could see that he was holding a xerox copy of the program of the Missouri State Academy of Sciences meeting in which I had presented the paper about poison ivy. I knew that he would immediately know if I lied to him.

"Yes, it so happens that I do," I answered.

"I wonder how he might have been exposed to the urushiol on the inside?"

"Which probably did not happen, as you just said," was my response.

"Right. We would first have to analyze his GI tract for urushiol," said Bataille. "Only we don't know what to look for. We don't have any urushiol to compare the tissue samples to. That is why I have come. You have extracted urushiol from plant tissues, is that correct?"

I once again considered lying. But if I said I had not yet extracted urushiol, he would then perhaps impound some of my glassware to look for urushiol, once he knew how to identify it, which he soon would. I said, "Yes."

"Then do you have some urushiol solution that you can give me to take to the lab?"

I felt trapped, until I started thinking. The only urushiol extract I ever had was now gone. Rea had taken the flask with the extract. I almost smiled when I told the truth. “No, as a matter of fact, I do not. It’s not the kind of stuff you just keep sitting around in your laboratory.”

“How did you dispose of it? It must be pretty toxic.” Bataille looked up from his papers.

“Massive dilution,” I said. “It’s not like it’s mercury or something that is persistent. Oxygen, sunlight, decomposers break it down. I poured it down in the river. The river must have millions of times more urushiol in it from natural sources—dead poison ivy—than from what I rinsed away in the river.”

Bataille seemed pleased with my answer. Then he asked, “Could you extract some urushiol for us?”

“That’s not as easy as it sounds,” I said, once again telling the truth. “It’s not something I’m willing to do unless I am required to do so.”

Inspector Bataille smiled weakly and turned to leave. “The urushiol poisoning theory is a really far-fetched possibility anyway. Let’s not worry about it.”

“It takes three days to have an effect,” I said. “I mean, on the skin. Doesn’t sound like a very effective murder weapon.”

Bataille looked back at me. “Who said anything about murder? I just thought maybe he drank some of it accidentally. Pretty stupid, but not as stupid as using urushiol to kill a man.”

*

I had never seen Conway and/or Thurman as serious as they were when they found me in my office the next day.

“There’s something you should know,” said Conway, without any comic lead-in.

“Yes?” I prompted.

“We got a little visit from an Inspector Bataille,” said Thurman. “He was asking about you.”

“And we told him to go ask you himself,” said Conway. “He said he already did.”

“He wanted to know if you’ve been extracting any chemical compounds from poison ivy,” said Thurman. “We didn’t think any harm in it, so we said yes, you’d just done so last week.”

“Then he told us,” said Conway, “that Earl probably died of complications from emphysema, and drowned when he fell in the river. But also that they found traces of urushiol in his GI tract.”

I was stunned. “How could he know it was urushiol?” I asked. “He’d asked me to give him a sample so that he could look for traces in the tissue samples. I didn’t give him any. Since I don’t have any anymore.”

“He sent a specimen off to a lab in K.C.,” said Conway. “They found urushiol in Earl’s tissues.”

"I guess what we're trying to say, Marten," said Thurman as he looked me in the eye. He wasn't wearing his shades today. "…is that you might be in a little trouble here."

"Why would he tell you that they found traces of urushiol in Earl's tissues?"

Thurman breathed deeply and said, "Maybe he thinks you might use this opportunity to run away before he comes after you." I started to speak, but Thurman waved me down. "I know you won't, or you can't, but I think he wanted to give you a head start if you choose to do so. I don't think he wants to do what he might have to do to you."

Chapter 12

When I got home to the apartment, Rea was alone. Her mother had gone out shopping. Rea wore her loose nightgown, and ran up to me, smiling. Her breasts lurched as she jumped. “I got us a wonderful dinner,” she said. “It’s take-out Chinese. Pork, peppers, crunchy chicken, and lots of fried rice with egg. You know I never had a chance to learn to cook. But I’m going to start learning, now that we have a home. I’ll start with simple things, like Cherokee bean bread. Tomorrow! I can’t wait for us to start our life together.” She waved her arms about as she bent low and looked up at me. I had never seen her so animated, not even in bed.

“Rea, I need to talk with you,” I said.

“Not now,” she answered. “It’s our *honeymoon*.” She whispered hoarsely into my face.

“I’m still confused about some things.”

“And you will be for a while.” She raised her eyebrows as she looked severely sideways at me.

“What did you do with the vial of urushiol extract?”

Her response was to take me by the finger and draw me into the bedroom with slow, playful steps.

“Rea, answer me. What did you do…”

“I threw it away,” she said, slipping out of the gown and draping it over the end of the bed. Her back was turned but she looked over her shoulder at me.

I had to keep looking at her, still amazed that I had married this woman. But I finally managed to ask, “Why?”

“There was no point in keeping it,” she said, turning to face me. “I said I wanted the vial for a souvenir. But that was kind of stupid. It was dangerous.”

“But I saw you look in your drawer and take out the urushiol flask before we left the house the night Earl almost raped you.”

Rea turned around, looked stunned, and sat down motionless on the bed, not moving so much as a facial muscle, for what seemed like several minutes. Then she said, “You must have imagined that.”

“My senses were very clear,” I said.

“I did not do either of those things,” she said. “I did not grab the flask. It must still be at the house. Maybe we should go get it.”

“Probably a crime scene now,” I said.

“And I didn’t put anything in Earl’s whiskey glass,” she added.

“Where did that come from? I didn’t say anything about that.”

She stared motionless at me for another long period of seconds or minutes. “But you *did*.”

"Rea, I didn't."

"You aren't thinking clearly right now," she told me. She stood and pirouetted around to display herself to me. "Nor were you that night. How can you be sure of what you saw then or said now?"

I sighed and looked at my hands. "I guess I can't. But how can you be sure that you didn't do those things? You were in more of an emotional trance than I was."

"Well, then," she smiled weakly, stroking my face. "That means that neither of us can be sure."

"But that still doesn't explain…"

She stood, grabbed my head, and rammed my face into her bosom. She massaged my scalp. Her soft skin, fragrant from one of the fake floral scents of lotion from the store, nearly stifled me. "We need to do this a little more, a lot more," she said, "and then our minds will be clear. I'll help you get your clothes off."

"Not while you are still holding a burden that you will not confess to me," I said. I exhaled and looked at the floor. "Rea, I burn with love for you. That's why I want us to join together with no barriers between us."

"Whatever are you talking about?" She drew me to the bed, laid on it, and pulled my face to her abdomen. "No barriers! Not even when we first came together! Check me for ticks! Ha! And I must smell a lot better this time. Scented body wash."

I wrested myself from her and sat with my back toward her. "Rea," I said, "you are lying to me."

I heard silence. Rea was motionless.

"Rea, you said…"

"*Why do you hate me?*" Rea screamed. "What have I done to deserve this? What possible flaw can you find in me?" I knew she stood and was displaying herself in every way, but I did not look. Then she hit my back. Hard. "Look at me, you idiot! Don't you know what a treasure I have given you—myself!"

I turned around, grabbed her face, and spoke directly into it. "Rea, you said you got rid of the vial of extract. But you did not. It was in your drawer in Earl's house. I saw you get it. And I saw you pour the contents into Earl's whiskey glass. I saw him drink it. You threw the vial and the whiskey glass into the dumpster where I threw the baseball bat. Earl's death was partly due to the urushiol. A police investigator has been asking questions and has figured everything out." She slumped, and her face became expressionless, even as I covered it with kisses. "We have to face up to this. But we will do it together. I will not leave your side. Now, let's eat the Chinese food. It may be our last meal together for a while."

We were just finishing the last red bean dumpling when there was a knock on the door. Of course, it was Inspector Bataille. Rea had her clothes back on.

"I think you know why I have come," he said.

"I am prepared to accept the consequences of my actions," I said.

"Which actions are those?" he asked.

I knew better than to volunteer information, but he probably already knew these things anyway. “I was the one who extracted the urushiol that caused the death of Earl Smith.”

“You mean, contributed to his death,” said Bataille. “Besides, there is no law against extracting urushiol from leaves. So long as it isn’t cannabis or opium, you haven’t broken any laws by extracting plant chemicals for your research. Nor do we have any reason to believe you administered urushiol to Earl Smith.

“There were also indications of head trauma from a blunt object,” continued the inspector. “But they were not substantial. Whoever delivered those blows to Mr. Smith’s head was not exactly an athlete.” I could not tell if he was smiling as he spoke.

“Now, before you say anything, Mrs. Reich,” Bataille continued, “let me show you something. We found this in the bottom of a dumpster.” From his briefcase he drew a plastic bag, inside of which was the little flask that had contained the potent extracts.

Rea and I both gasped. “Where did you find that?” I asked.

“In a dumpster that had a video monitor,” the inspector said. “The technology is not very good, but dumpsters are a favorite place for drug dealers to dump incriminating evidence. Especially that one. So we had a camera at that particular location. The pictures are pretty grainy. But what we saw did look like your car, and it looked like the two of you, Mr. and Mrs. Reich, were throwing some things into it. Including what looked like a baseball bat. We investigated.”

I sighed. “In that case…”

“The dumpster had just been emptied,” said Bataille. “No baseball bat. But down in the corner, held in place by sticky organic material, was this vial. We have found numerous fingerprints on it. Save us the trouble of having to identify them.”

“They are mine,” said Rea, “and Marten’s.” She spoke slowly and sadly.

“Thank you for your cooperation. So, a couple of days before the decedent fell into the water near the river, you got him to drink extract from this vial. He was known to be a heavy drinker, and you presumably poured the contents of this vial into whatever he was drinking.”

“Whiskey,” said Rea.

“A couple of days later, his GI tract and respiratory passages began to swell. He had trouble breathing. It became acute when he was apparently exerting himself by running along the river.”

“He was chasing me,” I said.

“He might not have died had he not been exerting himself in this way. Now, Mrs. Reich, why did you pour the extract into your stepfather’s whiskey?”

“He tried to rape me,” she said.

*

"That means," said Hastings the next day at my apartment. Rea and I had spent the night caressing one another, massaging our tears into one another's skins. Hastings was the Cherokee attorney appointed by the tribe to defend Rea. He had driven up from Tahlequah, Oklahoma. "That means that it was self-defense." He wore an old but clean suit. His hair was dark and his features Native, but he was almost white.

Rhonda was with us. Earl's house and business were deeply in debt, and the bank had seized them. The bank did not think that the sale of Earl's property would come anywhere near to settling the debt.

"Should I just have let him rape me?" asked Rea. Rhonda buried her face, placid as always, in her hands, and shook her head.

"Don't talk like that," said Hastings. "I know these guys—Bataille, and the District Attorney—and they are *not* out to get you. You acted in self-defense that night. And you, Mr. Reich, you gave Mrs. Reich something that she could have used, if necessary, and did in fact use, to defend herself from a threat that was nearly inevitable. The prosecution has testimony that you, Mrs. Reich, were in imminent danger from Earl Smith. This is no different from a man giving his wife a gun to protect herself with, even without definite plans to use it. That's not murder. It's not even manslaughter."

"Well," I said, "that settles it?"

"We won't know for sure until the preliminary hearing," said Hastings. "Meanwhile, I would advise against leaving town."

*

We said nothing to anybody, least of all the media. But reporters have ways of finding things out. It was not long before the leading news item was that the body found by the river was that of Earl Smith, recent proprietor and operator of a convenience store, who was reported by unnamed witnesses as abusing his Cherokee wife and stepdaughter. The news reports confirmed that the death was not accidental. When at last the rumor arose that he had been poisoned, and that the principal suspect was the Cherokee stepdaughter—name still withheld—the case became the leading headline for a few days. In case anybody recognized Rea from the store—and dozens of people could have—she remained hidden in my apartment.

It was a time of relaxation for us, except that the preliminary hearing still hung over our heads like a sword of Damocles. (I had to explain that one to Rea who otherwise knew as much classical literature as I did.) She needed me to be with her every moment. It was Rhonda who went out to get groceries. I tried to teach Rea how to make Spanish rice, which involved frying the rice in hot oil before boiling it in water. You have to get the timing just right, or when you add the water it will spatter all over the kitchen. This is, of course, what happened. I found a

store that sold sushi—a rare item back in those days—and Rea treated me to the rare adult Japanese tradition of eating sushi off of her naked body. Her mother was gone at the time.

I was more nervous than Rea, and she could tell.

"Marten, what's bothering you?" Rea asked me, wiping some wasabi out of her navel as she put her clothes back on.

"There's something I didn't tell Bataille, or anyone else," I said. "When I told you that Earl had fallen down, unconscious, and I made the decision that we should not call the ambulance. What I didn't say is that when he fell, his face was under water. I was the one who let him drown."

"Too late to do anything now," said Rhonda, who had just returned. "It might come up at the trial, but until then, let's just relax. Meanwhile, are you going to finish that tempura?"

Chapter 13

The day before the hearing, which had been moved from Webster County directly to the state circuit court in Springfield, I bought Rea a fine green silk dress, and myself a casual tan suit. The dress clung snugly to Rea's thighs, and revealed just enough of her cleavage to make her look like the celebrity she would soon be. Television crews from all over Missouri, and even up from Tulsa, covered our entrance into the courtroom. Rhonda, Conway, and Thurman were with us.

The judge instructed all of us in the packed courtroom that the purpose of the hearing was to determine whether a jury trial would be necessary. Jury trials were always inconvenient and expensive, since a jury pool had to be summoned, membership in which pool was obligatory, and then each member had to be examined by the attorneys and whittled down to twelve. The jury pool, of course, had to be paid. Jury trials, while dramatic in journalism, were best avoided in real jurisprudence.

But no matter how you approached it, Rea was the defendant. The charge was manslaughter.

I noticed that many of the people in the audience had dark complexions, and even the ones that did not had dark hair. These must have been Rea's fellow Cherokees, I realized. The Principal Chief's office had issued a statement of neutrality in the matter of Rea Reich until such time as a judgment should be rendered in a jury trial, should this occur. But nobody, Cherokee or not, in the audience could miss the fact that a white racist man had reportedly tried to rape his Cherokee stepdaughter, who was now on trial.

I sat in the first row of the audience with Rhonda. We were frightened for Rea, but we could feel the power of the audience behind us.

The District Attorney sat at a table with Inspector Bataille. He got up to speak. He first wished to establish that Earl Smith tried to rape his stepdaughter. Before he could present any testimony, Hastings rose and said, "We concede that this claim is true."

Next he wanted to establish that I had extracted urushiol and kept a vial of it, and that Rea had taken the vial into her possession. Before he had a chance to call Conway or Thurman, who were in the audience also, as witnesses—I could not be called to testify against my wife—Hastings conceded that this claim, also, was true.

Finally Rea was on the witness stand. She appeared abnormally calm. She radiated a quiet beauty all around her.

The District Attorney began. "On the night in question…"

"Objection," said Hastings. "The Prosecution should avoid clichés." As the audience mumbled in laughter, the judge sustained the objection.

"On the night when Earl Smith barged into your bedroom," began the DA, "you were certain that he intended to rape you."

"I knew this," said Rea, "because he had told me he would do so. He never said when, until he found out I had married Marten Reich, at which time he announced that he was going to have his way with me." Her face and voice were calm.

"And you had already removed your clothes," said the DA. "Why did you do this?" The audience became disturbed.

Rea lost her placid demeanor. "He told me that he would let me leave if I gave him what he wanted!" she said. She rose partially from her seat, flung her hair, and came closer to having a sneer than I had ever previously seen. Her hands grasped the chair.

"Undressing in front of him would nearly guarantee that he would actually do what he had threatened to do," said the D.A.

"Objection!" thundered Hastings.

"Sustained," said the judge. "Counsel will refrain from unnecessary lines of questioning."

Rea hugged herself, her hands stroking her bare shoulders. What little of her cleavage was revealed by the green satin dress was hidden behind her elbows. She shivered.

"The prosecution concedes that the decedent intended to rape you," the D.A. said when the crowd became louder. Then he continued, "Then you looked for and found the vial of urushiol extract, and put it into Mr. Smith's whiskey."

"I did!" said Rea, her eyes flashing in anger. She bared her teeth. I imagined her growling. Some in the crowd cheered.

The judge rapped his gavel. "Order in the court!" he called out.

Hastings rose and said, "Objection. Your Honor will refrain from clichés."
The judge looked at Hastings angrily for just a moment, then said, "Objection sustained."

"It was self-defense," said Rea, slicing the air with her hands until she held them rigidly at her sides.

"And the decedent did not actually rape you. Is that correct?"

Rea screamed, "He did not. Was I supposed to let him?"

When the audience became loud, the judge rapped his gavel.

"Of course not," said the D.A.

"He had a gun!" Rea screamed even louder.

"Did he have it out?"

"I don't remember," Rea said firmly. "But it was always within reach."

As the audience clamor rose even more, the D.A. said, "The prosecution concedes that the defendant acted in self-defense." Rea sat back down.

"But…" continued the D.A.

The court was silent as it listened to his next words.

"Although you acted in self-defense, your act was premeditated."

Rea looked sick when she heard these words. The audience was stunned and not happy.

Before Hastings could speak, the D.A. continued. “If you had grabbed some weapon that was convenient to hand to harm the aggressor, it would have been a simple act of self-defense. A knife, a baseball bat…” He looked at me. “Or even a whiskey glass. Or even a quickly-acting poison.

“But urushiol is not a poison. It takes about three days to act, at which time it may kill the victim, or not. By which time, either you would have already been Earl Smith’s victim, or else would have gotten to safety, Mrs. Reich. Your action may have been justified, but it was premeditated. It was not in direct *response* to the decedent attempting to rape you.”

The audience began shouting. Hastings pushed his chair back. “I wasn’t expecting this,” he muttered to me.

Swelled by a surge of emotion, I stood up and started speaking loudly. “I was the one who hit Earl Smith on the head with a baseball bat.”

Noises of surprise came from the audience, and the judge was clearly astonished.

“I hit him on the head twice…”

The D.A. said, “Your Honor, we have determined to our satisfaction that the blows to the head did not contribute significantly to the death of Earl Smith.”

“But I *wanted* to kill him!” I continued. “I wanted to beat him to a pulp. It is I, not the defendant, who is the guilty party when it comes to motivation in the death of Earl Smith.”

“Would Mr. Reich please be quiet and sit down!” said the judge. “I instruct you to say nothing unless your testimony is requested.”

“You are not even, for the purposes of this hearing, a witness,” the D.A. told me.

I looked at Rea. She smiled at me just slightly, as if she was not at all surprised by what I had done. As if she understood that my confession was nothing more or less than what a man who loves her would do.

In the silence that followed, the DA turned to the judge. “Your Honor, I request that the defendant be taken into custody. Minimum security is sufficient, since she is not going to kill anyone else. She had one intended victim, and he is now dead. She should be kept in custody until such time as she can have a trial by jury of her peers, primarily to determine whether her action constituted legitimate self-defense. The prosecution rests.”

Then some members of the audience started yelling, things about how Rea Reich was a Cherokee heroine who took action against generations of abuse from white racists. Rea looked at her hands, her face expressionless.

The D.A. then spoke. “Your Honor, it is evident that the defendant has many supporters in this audience, and in local society. I suggest that if she is released, someone will hide her before a jury has the opportunity to exonerate her.”

“Exonerate?” someone yelled. “Is that what you call the Trail of Tears?”

“The Trail of Tears is not on trial here,” said the judge. “I find that the defendant should be held in minimum security and with as much dignity as possible until a jury trial can take place, for the sole purpose of determining whether her premeditated acts were justified as self-defense.”

It was all over in a few minutes. The county sheriff's deputies cleared away the chanting Cherokees, and their white allies. The last to go were the reporters, one of whom was at the right place at the right time to take a picture of me kissing Rea, a picture that you have all seen in the national news broadcasts, newspapers, and news magazines. One of his pictures showed Rea's tears. And mine. Rea and I did not cling to one another, because I knew I would get to see her again soon during a conjugal visit.

"I know a bar we can go to," Hastings told me and Rhonda after an officer had gently ushered Rea away.

We started to leave, when a tall blond man stopped us. To me he said, "Are you the husband?"

"Who is it that wants to know?" I said, a little irritable from exhaustion.

"We are the Native American Freedom Fund," he said.

"You're Native American?" I asked. "You're blond."

"Doesn't matter," he said. "For your information, I'm one-quarter Choctaw. And you have probably figured out that, for many Cherokees, Rea Reich is something of a heroine. She fought against abusive white men. Not all white men, just the abusive ones."

"No, she didn't," I said. "Just one, the one who was abusing *her*."

The man continued. "Rea Reich will be the greatest Cherokee female hero since Nanyehi, a.k.a. Nancy Ward."

"From whom, by the way, Rea is descended," I told him.

He was clearly stunned. "This just keeps getting better and better," he said. "Name's Pinter." It rhymed with sprinter. "We are ready to organize a speaking tour for your wife."

"She's going to be in prison," I told him.

"Custody, but not fully in prison. I'll bet the authorities will authorize an officer to accompany her to her speaking venues. We will pay all the expenses," Pinter continued. "All we need is permission to approach the judge with this request. Technically, we don't need your permission, just hers. But could you tell her about it?" He handed me his card.

Chapter 14

And that is how I ended up driving on the freeway, with Conway, Thurman, and Rhonda, going northeast on Interstate 44, towards the university in Rolla. It was the first of the speaking venues that would eventually take Rea as far as Chicago.

"So, how you taking it?" Thurman asked me.

"Day by day," I said.

"You going to be ready for your classes this fall?"

"No problem," I said. "By the way, I'm still on the active list of candidates for the tenure-track faculty position at the University of Missouri."

"Had your interview yet?"

"It might be in two weeks," I said. "A little late, being summer and all, but they are trying to fill a last-minute resignation in the Department of Biological Sciences. You should be aware, my friends, that you may be on a search committee to fill my position at Drury."

"Knock-em dead, partner. Anything else?"

"Well, we are hoping that, with good behavior, which she always has, Rea will be released early." Her jury trial had imposed a brief prison sentence. "We hope it will be in time for her to start her classes at the university." Rea had applied from prison and been accepted as a Native American Studies major. She had even been offered a scholarship and an assistantship, which, together, was almost as much as my adjunct assistant professor salary at Drury.

"And we are hoping it will be in time for us to take a vacation to Yosemite next summer," I added.

"You just keep dreaming," said Thurman, or maybe it was Conway. "Sometimes dreams come true."

"Let's stop," said Conway. Or maybe it was Thurman.

"Here? At the Marshfield exit?" I asked.

"Looks like Earl's is open." Only it wasn't Earl's. It was now Conoco.

We parked at an open gas pump. Thurman and I went inside. We stopped at the door to listen to the broadcast music. It was the Everly Brothers singing, *Whenever I want you, all I gotta do is dream.* Thurman started to sing along. *Dream, dream, dream…*

When we got inside to pay for the gas, a young man from India was at the register.

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The young woman sitting next to me in the first row of Rea's audience apparently did not know who I was, which was fine with me. She had short red hair and a plenteous figure. She never once stopped grinning, and bouncing in her seat.

"You come from a long ways to hear Rea Reich?" she asked me.

"From Springfield," I said. "Not too far."

"God, I'd travel across the continent to hear this woman. You do know her story, don't you?" she said.

"Enough," I answered.

"God, the tribe needs a heroine like her right now. No one else like Rea. Wilma Mankiller might win the tribal election and be our principal chief, she rocks, but not as much as Rea. She's on fire, I understand. But she's a nice person, too, I've heard. I heard she's married. Her husband must count himself really lucky."

"I suspect he does," I answered.

Before I even saw her, I knew Rea was walking out on stage because I heard murmurs then cheers from the audience. The man who was obviously her prison guard sat on a chair off to the side while Rea walked up to the podium and acknowledged the cheers.

When the audience was silent, Rea did not begin to speak right away. She did not look at me, partly because she knew I would be there. She looked down at her papers. There was a lot of writing. She skipped most of the speech, and came to a few paragraphs at the end. Which she did not read. She spoke from her heart.

"You are probably expecting me to tell you how we Cherokees can maintain our cultural identity. Well, don't expect me or anyone else to tell you how. You all know how. You need to simply take each day as a new opportunity for gratitude. We are alive, now, at this place. We can't do everything. But we can do whatever is before us.

"Very few of us are called on to do heroic things. But a happy life consists of doing ordinary things in a grateful manner."

Rea stopped. Once it was apparent that she had ended her speech, the applause was thunderous. Rea walked from behind the podium and came down toward the audience.

"She's coming this way!" gasped the young woman, who was very surprised when Rea stepped right down to the front row and kissed first her mother and then me.

Author's Notes on *River Weeds*

This novel is one of several I have written that celebrate my Cherokee ancestry. As in my Cherokee trilogy, and in the Judith novel, I assume the viewpoint that, throughout our history, whites have oppressed Cherokees and other Native tribes, and that (in fiction) violent action of Cherokee women against white male oppressors may be justified. It is not, however, my intention to generate resentment against whites, most of whom are not racists and who welcome the light of historical revelation into the oppressions of the past, such as I have revealed in my non-fiction book *Forgotten Landscapes*. Rather, my purpose aligns more closely with the late nineteenth-century black American author Charles Chesnutt, who believed that white racism degraded *white* Americans, who needed to be freed from the mindset of oppression.

The confrontation with a white C-store manager really occurred in 1986.

The stories of Elizabeth Hilderbrand Pettit, and of Nanyehi (Nancy Ward), both of them my ancestors, are true. If you can, see the musical *Nanyehi*, by Becky Hobbs and Nick Sweet.

About the Author

Stan Rice is the internationally celebrated author of six books of popular science. He got his Ph.D. in plant ecology at the University of Illinois in 1987, and held several academic positions until he retired from Southeastern Oklahoma State University as Professor Emeritus of Biological Science. His writings are acclaimed for their insight and humor, especially the Creationist Funhouse series in the magazine Skeptical Inquirer. His science and religion blogs and his YouTube channel (StanEvolve, in which he is Charles Darwin) have collectively had a million and a half views. You can connect to his publications, including novels and stories, at his author website https://stanleyrice.org/.



No part of this book has been produced by or with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence. Everything is based on the author's direct knowledge, insights, and experiences.