

*Diane
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Reflection

PAN BOOKS

This was Helen's favorite part of the sonata, the slow, measured rise and fall of the notes, the yearning, pleading sound flowing from her piano. Her eyes were closed in concentration when she heard the low growl of thunder in the distance. She lifted her hands from the keys and looked through the window. Her eyes were still sharp enough to see that the wind was spinning crazily through the trees, baring the pale undersides of the leaves and bending the stand of volunteer bamboo nearly to the ground. It was only five o'clock on a summer afternoon—the Fourth of July, to be exact—but it was already dark, the sort of darkness that made the woods look at once foreboding and inviting.

The sky above the trees suddenly pulsed with light, and thunder rumbled once more in the distance.

Helen loved a good storm, and she skipped the entire second movement of the sonata to begin the roaring, thundering third. It wasn't until the rain began in earnest that she remembered the tools in the garden. She'd planned to work out there again this afternoon, but the piano had seduced her on one of her trips through the house.

She rose slowly from the bench and walked into the kitchen and out the back door. She didn't bother with an umbrella, and the rain felt fresh and cool on her face as she crossed the yard to the garden.

The scuffle hoe lay on the ground near the thigh-high shoots of corn. She picked up the hoe, then turned in a circle, hunting for the shovel and trowel, shaking her head when she spotted them in a tangle of weeds. Had those weeds been there a few hours earlier? They were popping up as fast as she could pull them these days. They raised their healthy green faces to the rain as she bent over for the trowel.

She walked to the edge of the bamboo where Rocky was buried, and pulled a few weeds from around the boulder she'd managed to roll on top of the fresh grave. She'd nearly wrenched her back moving the stone, but she hadn't cared. The vet had come out to her house to put the terrier to sleep only the week before, and she was not quite over it yet. She missed the wiry body leaping on her bed in the morning for a cuddle. She missed the way he would lie at her feet, no matter where she went in the house. She'd wept and wept watching the vet dig the grave, as though all the losses she'd endured in her eighty-three years had been encapsulated in the death of the little dog. Rocky had been her family since Peter's death ten years earlier, becoming the object of her nurturing and the source of her affection. The loneliness in the house the past week had been a palpable force.

The trees whipped around her shoulders as she stood up from Rocky's grave, and thunder roared in her ears like a menacing animal lurking just out of sight. Something made her turn to look back at her house—that little miracle of wood and glass she and Peter had created more than sixty years ago—and suddenly the world turned white. Ice white. So cold it burned.

Pain, everywhere. Above her, pink and blue dahlias bloomed in the dark sky before dropping their petals in a shower of sparks. She lay still for several minutes, waiting for the petals to fall on her, wondering why she didn't feel them on her skin, until she realized it was fireworks she was seeing in the sky above her. Fireworks. The Fourth of July. The gardening tools. Weeds and rain.

She couldn't swallow. Couldn't hear. Shouldn't there be sound with fireworks? She tried to lift her head to see exactly where she was, but

the muscles in her neck were frozen. Maybe she'd had a stroke. *Oh, the pain in her chest! Her head!* Maybe she'd fallen and given herself a concussion.

She squinted as tiny gold fish wriggled across the sky, disappearing in a pale orange mist. She tried to remember. There'd been a storm. Thunder. The white light, sudden and blinding. She knew then what had happened, and she felt a keen sense of disappointment that the lightning had not simply killed her. It would have been a splendid way, a splendid time, to die. Her family was gone; the last of her good friends had passed away a few months earlier. She'd had a fine life. There'd been sorrow, to be sure, but she'd known deep and enduring love. Selfless love. She had known passion. And she had touched many lives.

Perhaps she would die after all. She couldn't get to the house, and it might be days before anyone came up here and found her. *All right, then.* She closed her eyes to the soundless spectacle of light above her and tried to will herself back into unconsciousness.

Too many clues in the attic.

The thought darted into her brain, and her eyes sprang open. The boxes in the attic. Why hadn't she taken care of them? She'd meant to clean them out long before now. She couldn't die yet, not until she'd gotten rid of them. She tried to lift her head again, wincing with the effort, finally giving up. Was the house behind her? To her right? Left? A dozen dahlias flashed in the air above her, and she stared at them numbly. Who would care enough to weed through those boxes? Even if someone did, would they ever be able to put the pieces of the puzzle together? Surely this was needless worry.

Closing her eyes against the exploding dahlias, she put herself in the hands of fate.

"Mrs. Huber?"

Helen opened her eyes to see a young woman at her bedside, and once again she had to struggle to remember where she was. Spader Hospital. She'd been here . . . , how long? Days. She knew that much. The white light.

She squinted at her visitor, trying to remember why the visage of this woman struck fear in her heart. Oh, yes. The social worker. The one who wanted to put her in some sort of home.

“You’re awake.” The social worker smiled at her.

“I can take care of myself,” she said, before the woman had a chance to start talking about the home again.

“I know.” The social worker nodded, patronizing her. “I’m sure in time you’ll be able to, but as we talked about yesterday, you’re going to need some help for a while. You have a badly sprained ankle and wrist as well as a concussion. And your blood pressure and heart rate are very unstable. You know what happens when you try to get out of bed.”

Helen couldn’t even sit on the side of the bed without the room spinning and fading to black. “You’d be surprised what I’ll be able to do once I’m home,” she said.

The social worker nodded pleasantly. “But at first you’re going to need some help,” she said. “Not for long. Not forever.”

Helen stared at her, afraid. The woman had rosy cheeks, a too bright smile, brown hair shaped like a bubble. She was somewhere in her mid-thirties, too young to understand that once you allowed someone to take over, you would never have control of your life again. She knew the social worker saw her as a stubborn old lady, set in her ways, making life difficult for those who thought they knew what was best for her. Worse, she had overheard the woman—or maybe it had been one of the nurses—talking about her in the hallway, saying something about her being “just an old woman who happened to be married to an important man.”

They called her “demanding,” too. Every afternoon there was a thunderstorm, and she found she couldn’t bear the noise, the light. She’d never been a fearful sort of person, but now the thick, swirling clouds of an approaching storm made her tremble. She’d insisted that the nurses move her bed away from the window and pull the shades.

“There’s a wonderful home not far from where you live.” The social worker spoke carefully. “It’s expensive, but you can afford it, I’m sure.” Obviously the woman knew that the royalties from Peter’s

music had left her more than comfortable financially, although no one would ever know it from the simple way she lived.

"I told you, no nursing home," Helen said firmly.

"All right." The social worker tried unsuccessfully to hide a sigh. "Let's look at some other options, then. Do you have any relatives who might be able to help out?"

Helen shook her head. "My only living relatives are a granddaughter I haven't seen in nearly thirty years and a great-grandson I've never even met. They live way out in San Antonio. I wouldn't think of imposing on them."

"I understand. But let me just give your granddaughter a call. I'm sure she'd like to know your situation, and maybe the three of us can put our heads together and come up with an idea."

Helen started to shake her head again but changed her mind. She was curious about her granddaughter. She'd been cut off from Rachel since the girl was fifteen. There had been a few Christmas cards in recent years—enough to tell Helen about the great-grandson, Chris, and that Rachel was a high school teacher—but no other contact. Rachel would be in her early forties by now.

"Rachel Huber," Helen said. "My address book is at home, but you can try Information, I suppose. She's on some street that begins with an S, I think. Some Spanish name, in San Antonio. But don't you dare ask her to come here. I will not impose on that girl." She wondered if she should say more, if she should tell the woman the real reason Rachel should not come to Reflection, but decided against it as the social worker rose to leave the room, looking a little smug.

She was back within an hour, her pink cheeks aglow.

"Well," she said as she took her seat again next to Helen's bed. "You are in for a very pleasant surprise."

"What?" Helen eyed her with suspicion.

"I spoke with your granddaughter. I didn't ask her to come," she added quickly. "I promised you that. She suggested it on her own. She's a teacher, but she's taking this coming year off. Isn't that one of those meant-to-be coincidences? She said it would be wonderful to see you and Reflection again. I guess she grew up here?"

Helen stared at the woman, then held out her hand. "Give me her number. I'm going to call her and tell her not to come."

"She *wants* to come, Mrs. Huber. She was very sincere. Actually, she sounded enthusiastic, as if she'd been waiting for someone to suggest a way for her to spend the summer. When I told her you'd still be here for a few days, that we need to track down the cause of your vertigo and all, she said she would drive out instead of fly. She sounds like the adventurous type."

"But she has a little boy to take care of," Helen argued.

The social worker smiled. "That little boy is twenty years old and in college," she said.

Helen was speechless. Her great-grandson was already in college?

The social worker patted her hand. "I know it must be hard for someone who's been so independent to accept help, but—"

"That's not it," Helen interrupted her. "Just give me the number."

The woman reluctantly handed over a small piece of paper and, with a few words of advice on letting Rachel come, left the room.

Helen spent the evening trying to read, but it was hard to concentrate on her book with that scrap of paper resting on her bed table. Should she call Rachel, tell her it would be a mistake for her to come back to Reflection? But oh, how she wanted to see her granddaughter! What kind of person had Rachel grown up to be?

She picked up the piece of paper, studied it for a moment, then crumpled it in her hand. It might be selfish of her, but she would let her granddaughter come. She would let her think she needed her help. It would probably be a while before Rachel realized it was the other way around.

Rachel sat up in the strange bed, eyes wide, heart knocking against her ribs. The footsteps were still there, that rapid-fire click, click, click of someone in a hurry, but they were fading into the distance outside her motel-room door.

She lay down again on the damp sheets. She was in West Virginia, she remembered. Somewhere near Charleston. She'd arrived late the night before and barely noticed the nondescript motel room before falling into bed. For three days she'd lost herself in audio books played on the car's tape player. For three days she'd kept herself from wondering whether she was making the right decision in going to Reflection. She had avoided thinking about her reasons for leaving that little town, but she knew those thoughts were scratching to be let in. The hurried footsteps had brought them back to her far too easily.

It had happened on a Monday, that much she could remember. She knew she'd spoken to the police afterward only because her parents told her she had. She'd had to whisper, her father said, because she'd screamed for so long and so hard after it happened that she had no voice left. The police couldn't understand some of her breathless answers, and they made her write them down on small sheets of paper.

She remembered those pieces of paper. They were square, pink.

Odd how her mind chose to save one memory and discard another. For the most part, the memories didn't disturb her. She knew that they should, though. She had known that for a long time.

A town this small can't lose ten of its children in one fell swoop and go on unchanged.

Who had said those words? Over the past two decades they had played in her mind, coming to her at weird moments. She might be leaning over a desk helping one of her students with math, or folding the laundry, or making love to Phil. She didn't know if the voice belonged to a man or a woman. Perhaps it had been one of the policemen or someone else whose path had crossed hers during those few terrible days. Or perhaps, her therapist had suggested, it was her own voice she was hearing.

She remembered the rapid clicking of her shoes on Spring Willow Elementary School's polished hall flooring as she raced toward her classroom. Sometimes even now, if she were rushing somewhere and heard that staccato rapping of her shoes, panic rose in her throat and she would have to slow down, change her pace, make the sound go away. When it was someone else's footsteps, though, she had no choice but to wait them out.

She didn't recall making the decision to go to her cousin Gail's in San Antonio after it happened. She knew from what her parents had told her that she herself had made the decision once Gail offered to take her in, but she had no idea what pros and cons she had weighed. Her mind had been numb, full of holes and blurry, dreamlike images that made no sense and carried no emotional weight. Was it fear that had driven her away from Reflection? She couldn't say. She had simply followed the advice of others blindly. It was all she'd had the strength to do.

Gail, who was seven years her senior, had insisted she be in therapy. Rachel couldn't remember the therapist's name or what she looked like, but she did remember some of the things the woman had said. For the first few sessions Rachel did nothing but cry. That was good, the therapist said. Let it all out. Rachel was ashamed to tell her that her tears were not for the children or even for her husband,

Luke. Her tears were over Michael, the man she loved and would never be able to have.

“Ah,” said the therapist. “You’re transferring your pain over Luke and the children to a smaller loss in order to make it more tolerable.” But the therapist was wrong.

Rachel didn’t intentionally evade the therapist’s many attempts to get her to talk about the children. She simply couldn’t remember them. The students were a blur to her, and she knew she had to keep them that way. She couldn’t bring herself to take too close a look at them, to remember details like a smile, or blue eyes, or scattered freckles across an upturned nose.

She wondered whether the therapist had been disgusted by her unwillingness to examine what had happened, or if she had understood then what Rachel was only coming to understand now, twenty-one years after the fact. She had tucked her memories of the children and Luke into a neat little box in her mind, to be opened only when she was ready to deal with what she might find inside.

And she was ready now, or she would have to be. The call from the social worker had shocked her at first. Go back to Reflection to take care of an old woman who was essentially a stranger to her? But the timing of the call was serendipitous. Phil was gone. Chris was home for the summer but thoroughly involved with his friends. She’d taken time off, intending to get herself back in shape, physically and emotionally, after this difficult year. She could do that as easily in Reflection as she could in San Antonio. And so she’d said, “Sure, I’ll come,” responding with the same detached calm that always accompanied her thoughts of her hometown. It was as if she’d been expecting that phone call, waiting for someone to tell her it was time to go home.

She’d looked forward to the drive. It had been a while since she’d traveled on her own, and she found herself altering her route, intentionally getting lost, exploring places not on her itinerary. She’d brought her bicycle with her, and she took it off the bike rack a few times to ride through an intriguing town or speed along a path by the side of a river. She liked having time to think. Yesterday she’d come up with a way she could give something back to her hometown. She

would contact the schools to see if she might be able to tutor students who needed extra help, on a strictly voluntary basis. The thought pleased her enormously, easing something inside her that had long needed easing.

It was quiet outside her motel room, and she got out of bed. This would be her last day on the road. She took a shower and dressed, then bought a newspaper in the motel's sundry shop before walking across the street to a restaurant. She ordered cereal and bananas, spreading the paper out on the table while she ate. She grimaced at the picture on the front page. Rwanda, again. The devastation in the refugee camps. Adults with empty eyes. Sick, starving children.

She had lived in Rwanda once, teaching in the Peace Corps in the early seventies. Even then the country had been in turmoil. She stared at the blank faces of the children. They could be the sons and daughters of children she had taught back then.

The cereal suddenly felt like rocks in her stomach, and she put away the front section of the paper in favor of the comics.

It was one o'clock when she pulled her car off the road at the crest of Winter Hill, and for the first time she felt certain she'd made the right decision in coming. She was not the superstitious type, but when she'd reached the Pennsylvania border a few hours earlier, the classical station she was listening to played Peter Huber's *Patchwork*. It was her favorite of her grandfather's compositions, and it felt almost as if he were talking to her, winking at her the way he used to do when she was small, saying, "Welcome to your home state, Rachel."

Everyone knew the story behind that particular piece of music. The idea had come to Grandpa one day when he was walking on Winter Hill and saw the patchwork of green-and-gold farmland spread out in front of him, as she was seeing it now, with the scrubbed little village of Reflection mirrored in the glassy waters of the pond.

Rachel doubted this view had been much different then. The barns and silos and farmhouses had been repaired and painted or in some cases replaced. But the three sky-touching churches had stood near the pond for a hundred years. The gray flagstone, the largest

of the three, was the Lutheran church she had attended as a child. Across the street stood the Mennonite church, its white clapboard image perfectly re-created in the pond's mirror. She couldn't recall the denomination of the third church, the diminutive brick chapel, but from this distance at least it was as charming as the others. Reflection had been an old and crumbling little town even when Rachel was small, but from up here it was lovely, the sight of it comforting.

She'd been right to come. This would be a good summer. A healing summer.

In the distance, several miles west of town, the boxy shape of Spader Hospital rose out of the trees. Rachel looked at her watch. She had an hour before she was supposed to pick up her grandmother. She got back into her car and drove slowly down the hill toward the town where she'd grown up.

Passing a farmyard, she noticed that the laundry line stretching between the house and barn was hung with blue shirts and black pants. An Amish family had lived in that house for as long as she could remember. Still no electrical cables or telephone wires in sight. What had she expected? The Amish had endured in this area for two centuries, their way of life virtually unchanged. Had she thought they would succumb to modern times in the two decades she'd been gone?

She began her tour on Water Street, the blue-collar neighborhood in the southern part of town. The street seemed narrower than Rachel remembered it, almost claustrophobic, yet she felt buoyed by the sight of it. The houses hugged the curb, and the steps of their wooden porches sagged, but for the most part they were well kept and freshly painted. Flowers and shrubs grew in every tiny exposed patch of earth between the buildings and the street. Many of the houses were duplexes. But there was one lone triplex, she knew, a few blocks closer to the center of town.

She almost missed it. Someone had painted it robin's-egg blue, and she found she couldn't quite remember what color it had been when it was her home. Something neutral—beige or white or gray. The blue was outrageous, but she liked it. She parked her car across the street and studied the building. The two doors on the left were close together; the third was set apart. Fitting. She'd never thought

of that before. The first door had belonged to her family, the second to Luke's. Her parents had moved into the building within days of Luke's parents, and pregnant Inge Huber and pregnant Charlotte Pierce had become fast friends. When their children were born—a girl to Inge, a boy to Charlotte—their mothers kidded that they would marry one day. Rachel and Luke's future was set at their birth.

What a beautiful boy he'd been. Dark-haired, blue-eyed. Rachel couldn't remember a moment in her childhood that Luke had not been a part of, that she had not felt his nearness. They would bounce out their front doors and be pulled together as if they were magnetized. Even at ten, eleven, twelve, when most boys were avoiding girls as if they would suck the life from them if given the chance, Luke and Rachel had been inseparable.

Rachel hugged herself, grimacing against the nostalgia. After graduating from college, she and Luke had followed their mothers' plans and married. And Michael Stoltz had been their best man.

The Stoltz family had moved into the third apartment of the triplex when Luke and Rachel were seven years old. Michael had just gotten his first pair of glasses, and that about summed him up. He was a slender, gawky child, shorter than most of his classmates, annoyingly bright and adored by his teachers but not well accepted by his peers. Perhaps it was because Luke and Rachel lived so close to him that they saw something in him the other children missed. He was a valuable friend, and by the time Rachel was eight or nine years old, she and Luke could no longer imagine going off together without inviting Michael to come along. Still, although they were a threesome throughout elementary school, in high school no one ever doubted that the bond between Luke and Rachel was based on more than friendship. She and Luke would fix Michael up with a date from time to time, but nothing ever worked out for long. He was not bad-looking, but he was still skinny, and that combined with his bookishness made him invisible to the eyes of adolescent girls.

Where was Michael now? When she'd left Reflection, he'd still been in Rwanda with plans to teach in Philadelphia once he was out of the Peace Corps. And he was married to Katy Esterhaus, the one girl from their high school who could match him for brains.

With a shake of her head, Rachel turned the key in the ignition and started slowly up Water Street toward the center of town. She didn't dare think too long about Michael.

Ahead of her, the small, circular park that stood in the center of town came into view. The streets of the town fell away from the wooded circle like curved, misshapen spokes of a wheel. The park looked denser and greener than she remembered, and Rachel found herself averting her eyes from it as she drove past. Somewhere in that lovely little circle, scattered among the oaks and maples, stood ten weeping cherry trees, planted shortly after she'd left. Her parents had told her about the trees in a letter. She'd been living in Gail's apartment in San Antonio for a couple of months by that time, and she'd locked herself in the bathroom with the water running in the tub so that her cousin would not be able to hear her sobs. Her parents had also told her about the stone memorial erected in the park to make certain that no one, not her generation or the generations to come, would ever forget what had happened to their children.

Rachel drove through the center of town, past the old Starr and Lieber Bank building with its beautiful curved stone facade, past the huge Victorian house that served as the library. She came to the pond and immediately broke into a smile. Stopping the car close to the curb, she glanced at her watch again. It was too late. She would have loved to get out and walk around the narrow path circling the water. Huber Pond. Named after her grandfather, Reflection's major claim to fame.

The forest surrounding the eastern half of the pond had once been her playground, and it was as thick and dark as she'd ever seen it. She and Luke and Michael had loved those woods. They'd play for hours in them, building forts or pretending to be pioneers. Whatever game they played, it held an element of fear, because they knew that deep in the woods lurked the "bat woman," the odd, spooky woman who lived in a rundown, overgrown old cottage there. She was like the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*, they thought, eager to shove little children into her gaping black oven. They dared one another to visit her, jumped out at one another from the woods yelling, "Bat woman!" They threatened one another with being dragged to see her. But none of

them ever ventured into that part of the woods, and sitting in her car, Rachel wondered if the woman had been a figment of their collective imaginations.

Even though it was getting close to the time she was to pick up her grandmother, Rachel felt compelled to get out of her car to look at the statue of her grandfather, set close to the edge of the pond. She had forgotten what he looked like. His heavy brows and round, wire-rimmed glasses gave his face a serious look. His beard and mustache were neatly trimmed. She was moved by the handsome bronze image of him. *Peter Huber, 1902–1984*. He had died eleven years after she'd left home, but she had not seen him since she was fifteen, in 1965, when her parents had forbidden her to have any contact with either of her grandparents. She'd bump into them from time to time in the little town, occasionally exchanging furtive hugs or pained greetings, but that had been the extent of her contact with them. She remembered her grandfather as a kind man, quiet and gentle. Even as a child, she'd imagined his quietness was due to the fact that his brain was always working, always creating. When he'd sit down at the piano, his house would fill with the rich, smooth sound of his music. She wished she could have known him from an adult's perspective.

She doubted she would have the chance to get to know her grandmother in that way, either. The social worker at the hospital had described her as quite frail and very depressed. Rachel's role this summer would be to care for a woman who was fading away.

As Rachel walked back to her car, she suddenly turned and did a double take. The sign next to the pond, which had read HUBER POND all the years she'd lived in Reflection, now read SPRING WILLOW POND. She stared at the sign for a long time. It made no sense. Why would they change it? It would always be Huber Pond to her.

Decker Avenue was the most logical street for her to take to the hospital, but it was home to Spring Willow Elementary School, where she had taught for all of six days before fleeing town, and she opted to take Farmhouse Road instead. She drove for several miles through farmland, the hospital poking its head up in the distance occasionally as she rounded curves and slipped over hillsides.

The attendant in the hospital parking lot told Rachel to leave her car at the curb in the circular driveway, since she was only picking someone up. She parked carefully behind a horse and buggy, a little awestruck. She'd grown up thinking that those buggies were a natural part of the landscape, but now the sight of one touched her. There were still people in the world staunchly committed to their principles.

Her grandmother's room was on the second floor, and she found the older woman sitting up in a chair, dressed in a mid-calf-length blue denim skirt, a white blouse, and blue canvas shoes. She knew by the ready smile that her grandmother had been watching the door for her arrival.

"Rachel." Her grandmother lifted one arm toward her, and Rachel bent down to kiss the soft, cool cheek. The older woman gripped her hand as though she might never let go. There were tears in her eyes.

"Hello, Gram," Rachel said. She would not have recognized her grandmother. Helen Huber was still a pretty woman, with expressive blue eyes and high cheekbones, but her dark hair was now white and short. It was smoothed back from her face, which was terribly thin. She needed to eat. Good. Rachel had been in a cooking mood ever since school let out for the year, feeding herself entirely too well.

Gram turned her head, and Rachel noticed the delicate, fernlike pattern tattooed onto her cheek, slipping beneath the collar of her blouse. A burn. The lightning. She shuddered.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

Her grandmother smiled. "My hearing's quite keen," she answered, and Rachel realized she had asked the question loudly. "And to be honest, I'm feeling achy and old and ready to go home. But I'm so, so happy to see you." Her lower lip trembled, moving Rachel to bend low for another embrace.

A nurse brought a wheelchair, and Gram shifted slowly into it. It was obvious that she was in a good deal of pain, and Rachel was immediately reminded of Phil's last few months.

"This is my little granddaughter," Gram said as the nurse pushed her through the hall to the elevator. Rachel walked at her grandmother's side, holding her hand.

"Nice to meet you." The nurse smiled.

Once down at the curb, Gram gingerly transferred herself from the chair to the passenger seat of Rachel's car. The nurse handed Rachel a couple of prescriptions and a list of instructions.

"You were so good to come," Gram said as they pulled out of the hospital driveway. "Though it wasn't necessary."

"I'm pleased I had the time off." She glanced over at her grandmother, at the feathery lines on her cheek. "Is the burn very painful?" she asked.

"What? Oh, this?" Gram touched her cheek. "No, not at all. They call it 'aborescent erythema.' It's not a real burn. It's from where the lightning followed the pattern of rain on my skin. They say it will fade away soon." She sighed. "The worst part is the dizziness. I've fainted a few times."

She talked a bit about what had happened—the work in the garden, the white light—and then she fell quiet. Talking seemed like an effort for her, and Rachel felt the strain of silence in the car. Chattering to fill the void, she told her grandmother about her earlier tour through town, past her old house, and the older woman listened, nodding her head occasionally.

"What is your husband doing this summer?" Gram asked finally.

"Phil died last October." Rachel kept her eyes on the road. "He had leukemia. He'd been sick for a while." She knew she hadn't mentioned Phil's death in her Christmas card. She hadn't seen the point.

"Oh, I'm very sorry," Gram said. She touched Rachel's arm. "How terrible for you."

Rachel acknowledged the sympathy with a nod. She missed Phil's strength and support. Their marriage had never been one of passion, but its foundation of friendship, caring, and tenderness could have sustained her forever. Eleven years her senior, Phil had been the principal in the school where she first taught after moving to San Antonio. She'd poured it all out to him during her interview, trying to keep a cool head, a professional demeanor, as she described what had happened in her classroom in Reflection. He checked her references, talked to professors she'd had in college, her supervisor in the Peace Corps. He believed in her, he said when he called to offer her the job, and she'd had a hard time not bursting into tears. She'd worked

hard to prove him right in his assessment of her. She'd taken classes at night to get a master's degree in special education, and she had become a teacher other teachers turned to for guidance. For the last ten years she'd taught emotionally disturbed students and French on the high school level, and she'd won four awards in addition to being named teacher of the year in her school district two years ago. She owed Phil her self-confidence, her pride, and her ability to lay the past to rest and embrace the future.

A full three minutes passed before Gram spoke again. "I've been there, you know."

What was she talking about? "Do you mean San Antonio?"

Her grandmother actually laughed. "No, although I was in San Antonio once when Peter had to go there. Interesting city. But no. I meant I've gone through what you have. Taking care of a sick husband. Losing him."

"Oh, that's right. How did Grandpa die?"

"Kidney disease. It was slow, which gave us a long time to say good-bye but prolonged the suffering, too."

"Yes." Rachel had done most of her grieving for Phil while he was still alive, anticipating his loss. She had not cried once after his death, but felt his loss deeply, felt the unjustness of it. He'd had so many plans for the rest of his life. She'd withdrawn from her friends for several months, taking solace in food, parking herself night after night in front of the television. She was more than ready to change that pattern.

"Tell me about my great-grandson," Gram said.

"Well, his name is Chris, and he's twenty years old and a very talented, wonderful kid. He'll be a junior—a music major—at West Texas State this fall." She felt the little pocket of worry in her chest begin to mushroom again. Chris *was* a talented, wonderful kid, but this summer he'd hooked up with a group of neighborhood kids to form a rock band. He seemed obsessed with the band, his classical training forgotten. "Music is his first love," she said. "He's played piano and violin since he was small." Now, of course, he was playing keyboard, singing in a voice that scratched its way through songs possessing no discernible melody.

“You should have brought him with you,” Gram said.

She had considered asking him, pulling him away from those new friends, but he never would have agreed to come. Besides, she would have been nervous about having him here. He knew very little about her past.

“Maybe he can visit for a few days later in the summer,” she said.

“He’s twenty, you say?” Gram asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“He was Luke’s boy, then, was he?”

Rachel jerked as though her grandmother had touched her with a live wire, and she could respond with little more than a nod. Yes, Chris was Luke’s son, and he knew it, although he’d always called Phil “Dad.” Still, it shocked her to hear Gram say Luke’s name out loud, as if it were not a dirty word.

She’d told Chris that Luke had died in Vietnam. During his junior year of high school, though, Chris took a trip with the San Antonio Youth Orchestra to Washington, D.C., and he’d called her from the hotel one night, nearly in tears.

“They don’t have Dad’s name on the Vietnam Memorial,” he said.

It was the first time she had heard him refer to Luke as “Dad.” It was jarring, but it touched her all the same, and she thought she was being given a little window into Chris’s soul.

Rachel explained that Luke had actually died shortly after his return from Vietnam from injuries he had received there. In many ways, that was the truth. She was not the type of mother to protect her child from pain, yet she couldn’t see what purpose would be served by spelling it all out to him. He never had to know. For a few weeks, though, he’d talked about campaigning to have his father’s name added to the memorial, and Rachel was relieved when the idea died a natural death.

“Shall we go through town?” Rachel asked. “We have to get your prescriptions filled.”

“There’s a pharmacy and a grocery store right off Farmhouse,” Gram replied. “We’ll need some food. There won’t be anything to eat at my house.”

Rachel turned onto the road her grandmother indicated and

pulled into the parking lot of a small supermarket, new since she'd left home.

"What would you like?" she asked her grandmother.

"Doesn't matter," Gram said. "But I don't eat meat."

Rachel had forgotten. No meat had been allowed in her grandparents' house. And they'd always worn canvas shoes, eschewing leather. They had been passionate about animal rights long before it was fashionable.,

Rachel dropped the prescriptions off at the pharmacy and picked up a few bags of groceries, leaving Helen to rest in the car, all the windows open to catch the breeze.

After returning to the car, she put her purchases on the backseat next to one of her suitcases. "I stopped up on Winter Hill this morning to admire the view," she said as she pulled onto the road. "It's exactly as I remember it."

"Not for long," Gram said.

"What do you mean?"

"It's a big brouhaha," she said. "The owner has plans to develop it. They're going to put two big office buildings on this side of the pond, and more than a hundred tract houses will be built where the woods stand now."

"No!" Rachel felt the loss almost as if she'd never left town. "You won't be able to see the reflection of the church in the water, or—"

"Oh, that's not half of it," Gram said with disgust. "Imagine what sort of traffic a development like that will generate. And those roads are used by the Amish with their buggies. The Amish and Old Order Mennonites will move out of the area—they're talking seriously about it. They're being run out. Their cemetery butts right up to the woods. The houses will practically be in their burial ground. And then we'll have the golden arches and the colonel and his chicken, all of which Ursula Torwig, our new mayor, thinks will be wonderful. She's all for growth. People are fighting it. I've got my fingers crossed somehow it'll all work out."

"Who owns the property?"

"Do you remember the little cottage back in those woods behind Huber Pond?"

“Yes! I’m not sure I ever saw it firsthand, but the bat woman lived in it, right?”

“Bat woman?” Gram chuckled. “Marielle Hostetter, I suppose you mean. She owns it.”

Marielle Hostetter. Rachel had not heard the name since her childhood. She pictured a child-eating old hag. “She’s still living?”

Gram laughed again. “She’s twenty-some years younger than I am. Only around sixty. But she was never *well*, exactly. Never quite right in the head.”

“But she’s shrewd enough to develop the land?”

“Well, I’m not so sure she is. She has two nephews, though, who seem to be running things. She’s in a nursing home now, and the boys are handling her affairs for her. And *they’re* shrewd all right.” Gram let out a long sigh. It seemed to Rachel that she was about to say more, but then she leaned her head against the seat back, closing her eyes as though she planned to sleep, and Rachel decided to let the subject die.

She was eager to see her grandparents’ house again. The triplex she’d lived in was close to the heart of Reflection, while the wood-and-glass house her grandparents had built for themselves was nestled in a patch of forest two miles outside of town. Rachel had loved riding her bike out there a couple of times a week to visit them, and nearly every Sunday she would go with her parents to Gram and Grandpa’s for dinner. That was before the forced estrangement. Suddenly, her parents announced that Rachel could no longer see them. Her grandparents were involved in “illegal activities,” they said, which couldn’t be condoned. Nor could they put themselves and Rachel at risk by being associated with them. Rachel had felt very young and naive. Obviously, the whole situation was over her head. She couldn’t imagine her smart and loving grandparents involved in anything criminal, nor could she understand her parents cutting ties with them so abruptly, regardless of what they’d done.

Twice Rachel had ridden her bike out to her grandparents’ house after being told to avoid them. She’d hidden in the heavy woods and watched as young men drove in and out of the yard in their beat-up old cars or on motorcycles. Some of the men looked scruffy and scary,

others were clean-cut, but none of them were more than three or four years older than she was. It saddened her—angered her really—that these guys had access to her grandparents when she didn't. And what was going on inside the house? She hedged away from that thought, unwilling to accept the most obvious explanation—her grandparents had somehow gotten themselves involved with drugs. Her parents refused to discuss the matter with her.

“The less you know, the better off you'll be,” they'd said.

Gram didn't speak again until Rachel turned onto the winding, forested road leading to her house.

“Listen, Rachel,” she said softly. “When your parents died, cartons of their belongings were delivered to my house. No one had an address for you at the time, or I would have made certain they were sent on to you. There were many boxes of things that I just didn't have time to deal with. It was ten years ago, when Peter was very ill. I had someone carry them up to the attic. They've been there ever since. You're welcome to go through them.”

Rachel was intrigued by the thought. “What's in them?”

“I really don't know. They're on the north side of the house, the side that faces the vegetable garden. There are dozens of boxes up there, but the ones from your family all have your father's name marked on the side.”

Rachel squinted at the driveway that cut through the trees. “Is this it?”

“That's right. Good memory you have.”

Rachel turned the car into the driveway and drove up to the familiar contemporary-style house. A newspaper lay in a plastic bag on the front step, and Rachel smiled. “Do you still get the *New York Times* delivered on Sundays?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” Gram replied.

Rachel's eyes were drawn to the bird feeders hanging from the eaves above the porch. More of them hung from the trees standing in the yard. “You still have all the bird feeders!” she said.

“I try to keep the birds out front here and away from the garden,” Gram said. She pointed to the rear of the house. “You can just pull

around back,” she said. “If you like, you can keep your bicycle in the shed.”

Rachel drove around to the rear of the house and came to a stop by the back porch.

“Oh, look at that mess,” Gram said.

Rachel followed her gaze to the large square vegetable garden, overgrown with weeds.

Gram shook her head. “I’ll have to give up on it for this year. I got everything in and growing, but when Rocky—my dog—got put down, I lost some of my steam, and now with this . . .” She waved her bandaged hand toward her well-wrapped ankle.

Rachel could see the tomato plants in cages, the row of lettuce nearly buried under a tangle of green. It had been years since she’d taken the time to plant a garden, and here was one already planted for her. “It looks salvageable,” she said. “I’d enjoy working in it.”

Rachel helped her grandmother out of the car. Gram had to lean against the car door, waiting out a moment of dizziness before she could tackle the steps leading up to the house.

Inside, nothing had changed. The two pianos, still nested together, reigned supreme in the living room, the huge window behind them filled with the green of summer. The old couch—could it really be the same couch covered in the same ivy-print fabric that she’d sat on as a teenager?—was plush and inviting. Floor-to-ceiling windows brought the outdoors inside, and those patches of wall not made of glass were lined with books. Rachel had forgotten that about her grandparents’ house. Bookshelves adorned every room, even the kitchen and bathroom. And there was a library with a fireplace. She peered around the corner to try to see into that room, but the angle wasn’t right.

Rachel stroked her hand across the ebony lid of one of the pianos. Nothing had changed, and yet something seemed wrong, out of place. She couldn’t put her finger on it.

“Let me make up your bed fresh for you,” she offered.

Her grandmother looked at her. “I don’t like people doing things for me,” she said. “I’m not used to it. Makes me feel old and useless.”

“It’s temporary,” Rachel said, although Gram did seem very old

to her. And she knew that once the elderly started having physical problems, they could go downhill fast.

The linen closet was filled with white sheets, stacks of them, neatly folded, and Rachel enjoyed making up her grandmother's bed with them. The bedroom was only vaguely familiar to her; she had not been in it often. It was large and square, the furniture made of solid, unadorned pine. Two comfortable-looking chairs rested in front of a picture window, and a huge cedar chest sat on the floor at the foot of the bed.

Rachel helped her grandmother change into a nightgown and watched as the older woman carefully negotiated her way beneath the covers.

"Do you need a pain pill?" Rachel asked.

"No. I'm so tired I could sleep with an elephant lying on my head right now." She clutched Rachel's hand. "I feel like I'm dreaming that you're here," she said. Tears glistened in her eyes again, and Rachel leaned over to kiss her forehead.

"I'm really here," she said with a smile.

After leaving the room, Rachel made up the full-sized bed in one of the other two bedrooms, the one nearest Gram's so she would be able to hear her in the middle of the night. This room was filled with antique oak furniture, an anachronism in the contemporary house. Rachel put away her clothes, then found herself drawn to the aging books on the bedroom's wall of bookshelves. They must have been her grandfather's collection. Hundreds of books about composers, musical instruments, politics, and puzzles. She'd forgotten Grandpa's addiction to puzzles. Crosswords, cryptoquotes. You couldn't get him away from his puzzle books long enough for Sunday dinner sometimes.

She wandered into the living room again. She remembered the beautiful painting above the fireplace—Reflection wrapped in a winter snow, the view from Winter Hill. She shook her head at the thought of that view disappearing under a developer's bulldozer.

Turning to the piano, she swept her fingers lightly across the keys. She had tried to learn to play as a child. With Peter Huber for a grandfather, it seemed terrible not to be able to play his compositions.

But whatever talent Grandpa had possessed had skipped her generation and landed in the genes of her son.

That's what was missing, she thought. Music. She didn't think she had ever been in this house when music was not playing, either on the piano or on a record.

She hunted for a stereo and was surprised when she opened an old armoire and found a compact disc player and a large collection of compact discs inside. Somehow she had not expected Gram to be quite so modern. But here they were, at least two hundred discs in their plastic jewel cases.

She pulled a few of them out. Lots of classical, lots of old folk—Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Bob Gibson. There was a whole section devoted to various pianists and symphony orchestras playing Huber pieces, and Rachel wondered which were the best, which Gram would put on if she were awake. She rifled through them until she found *Patchwork* performed by the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and she slipped the disc into the player and stood back to listen as the first few teasing, eerie notes filled the room. She smiled to herself. This was right. This was the way her grandparents' house should feel.

She went into the large, open kitchen and set an eggplant on the cutting board and began cutting it into slices. They'd have eggplant Parmesan for dinner. She had a garden to weed, a grandma to pamper, and beautiful music all around her. She was very, very glad she had come.