

Sara worked the knife and enjoyed watching the tides of chopped herbs growing on the cutting board. The piles of dill, rau ram, basil and mint made an aromatic combo. Pausing when she heard her husband's key in the front door, she laid the knife down, and brushed green flecks from her hands. Odd. He was heading straight for the bathroom before coming to greet her. She shrugged and resumed her dinner preparations.

The fish was nestled in its cushion of herbs and chopped green onions, ready to go into the steamer, when Ian finally came into the kitchen, his hair wet from the shower. He gave Sara a quick kiss.

"Mmm, you smell good," she told him.

"You do too," he responded, laughing. "Very herby. What's this?" he asked, picking up the small paper wrapped bottle.

"Forest mushroom and fish sauce—supposedly even better than the straight stuff."

He poked at the fillet in the steamer basket. "Sea bass?"

"No, tilapia. Fresh water fish is more authentic for this recipe. North Vietnamese."

"So where'd you get the sauce?" Ian shook the bottle and licked a few drops from his finger. "Whoa, this stuff is strong!"

As he rummaged in the fridge, Sara told him about the Asian market on Argyle. "I love places where I don't know what everything is."

Ian pulled his head out of the Sub-Zero, "Don't we have some Bia Saigon?"

"Not unless someone remembered to buy some."

"Oh shit. I'll just have a Suntory then. Need any help here?"

"You could check the rice. I want to shred some cabbage, maybe use rice wine vinegar and a touch of ginger on it."

"Sounds like a nice contrast to the fish there. Let me taste that sauce again."

Pausing for a sip of beer while they were eating, Ian said, "I saw your boyfriend at the club today."

Sara looked up, baffled, fork halfway to her mouth. "My boyfriend?" she asked, a smile on her face. "Who?"

"The General."

"Oh, colonel. The Colonel. Did he challenge you to a game?"

"Yeah, he did, but I really wasn't up to time on the court with him today. He seems like a general to me—winning is the only thing with him."

"That's probably why he's a colonel. No tactics but when you need an unstoppable force he'd be your man..." Sara said.

Ian chuckled in agreement. "He's been a good thing for the firm, though."

"No kidding,"

Ian added, "He said he's going to send two of his nephews to us. They have some breach of contract issues they want to pursue. You might want to give them special attention."

Sara looked at Ian. "I try to make sure we do our best for everyone."

Ian laughed, a laugh with an edge to it. "You always do, don't you? You're like a one trick pony, so committed to doing your best for everyone."

Sara was startled at his tone. Levelly, she responded, "Is there something wrong with 'due diligence?'"

Ian looked at his plate and carefully speared a bite of fish. "No Sara, it's fine. It's great. And speaking of great, this fish is wonderful. Steaming it with the herbs and onion really infused it with flavor. I wonder what herbs would work with a darker, oilier fish?"

Sara, always happy to shy away from confrontation, went along with the shift to culinary conjecture. "Tomatoes, citrus, rosemary, like the mackerel we had in Italy?"

She had felt the dig from Ian, but about what exactly? That she treated all their clients equally well? She felt herself flinch. That old doubt. That she didn't have the combative nature required to be a good lawyer. Therefore, she was the one who did the support work as Ian shone as counselor in the courtroom. After she dropped out of law school she couldn't allow herself to question her decision, especially in the face of her parents' strong negative reaction. But...had it been a safe and convenient out? Maybe she didn't have what it would take to be a good lawyer?

"...was asking why chicken is used as the universal descriptor of generic white meat," Ian was saying. One of his favorite topics was how strictly cultures adhere to specific limits of culinary exploration. If they had company present he would wait for someone to inevitably bring up dog meat and then he would pounce, exalting at the shocked or squeamish expressions as he offered several ways it is prepared around the world— personally sampled by him.

Interesting, Sara thought. For someone like the Colonel, winning the game was the only option, while Ian would settle for something different. If the cost of winning was too high, creating discomfiture, sinking a barb of doubt, would be enough for him. Sometimes, just unbalancing the other person seemed to be his goal—which Ian's comment had done to her— but why would he want to do that?

Knowing how important it was to him to appear to be an outlier of the food world, she smiled at his comments as she started stacking the used dishes. "Load the dishwasher while I finish cleaning up?" she asked.

"Sure, here, let me get those." He answered, picking up the tableware.

Sara had been spending more evenings at home alone lately. Ian had shifted his times at the gym and often went for a workout after dinner. But tonight they were both being potatoes at opposite ends of the couch. Sara unfolded herself from her end, her mom's old cashmere shawl slipping to the floor. She had been listening to a Terry Gross interview of Harold McGee on her Ipod and watching Ian read, the light from the ginger jar lamp gleaming off his dark curls. Unplugging her ear buds, she pushed her foot against Ian's. "Hey Mr. Studious, how about moving toward bed?" Ian looked up at her, blinking those blue eyes that were such a startling contrast to his raven-wing hair. Sara got up and went over to him, bending down to give him a kiss for being so good looking, adding a little nibble to his ear as an invite. He gave her a bit of a smile and then gestured toward his book.

"Bill Buford is pretty interesting here. He's just made it to line cook. Why don't you go ahead, Sara. I'll be there when I get to a good stopping spot." Sara stood looking at him, his legs sprawled on the couch, long fingers holding his place in the book, his head surrounded by a nimbus of light from the lamp...

"Are you feeling okay, my dear Sir Lancelot?" she asked playfully. Sara thought he winced when she used the silly little nickname that had popped up in their early, crazy days.

He shook his head, "I'm fine, just a little tired."

Sara tilted her head and looked closely at his face. The trio of vertical lines above the bridge of his nose *were* deeper than usual, and he didn't look happy. His smile had faded and he looked a little pinched. "Do you have a headache?" she asked.

"Yeah, just a twinge. That's why I want to sit and veg a bit more."

"Oh, okay..." Sara bent down and kissed his cheek again, jokingly adding, "It's just that you've never said 'no' to me before."

"I didn't say 'No.'" Ian retorted quickly.

Sara blinked in surprise. "You are correct, counsel, you did not literally say 'no'. But are you feeling okay?"

"Totally, Sara, I'm fine. I just need a little down time. You go to bed, I'll be along in a few." Ian gave her a wan smile and kissed her on the lips.

As Sara brushed her teeth she thought about Ian's strong reaction to her comment about saying "no". She must have hit some male sensitive spot. Though, actually, he hadn't been as attentive lately. After rinsing her mouth she looked at herself critically in the bathroom mirror. Same old, same old, as far as she could tell— brown eyes, brown hair, smooth skin, nice smile. Her dad had always said she had a beautiful smile, but then he was prejudiced. And a nice smile is miles from sexy. Ian always said he loved her, loved what she looked like, that should be enough. She was overreacting to nothing. He was probably fighting off some flu bug. If he still looked odd in the morning she'd feed him some extra vitamin C and a cup of ginger tea.

In the morning, Ian's flu bug or whatever was a non- issue. He was gone before Sara woke, leaving a short note on the granite counter top saying he'd be in the office by 1:00.

CHAPTER 2

A quick, light tap on the door and Jeremy, the other paralegal in the firm, walked into Sara's office.

"Hey, Sara, when is Ian coming in?"

"He said by 1:00...do you need something?"

"Do you know the final distribution figures for the Dickerson split?"

"He didn't send them to you?"

"He might not have known I needed them."

"...and you looked in the file?"

"Yep...and I couldn't find Thursday's meeting in there."

"Well, all I know is that he finally got them to agree to something."

"So, he's at the gym?"

"Excuse me?" Sara asked sharply, thinking, what a weird question...

"Just wondering..." Jeremy murmured, then adding, "There's a Farm Administration form that needs to go in."

"Tax stuff?"

"Percentage of Income declaration. It's just one of the loose ends waiting on whatever they came up with on Thursday."

"Hmmm...After I get done with this I'll look and see what I can find. Ian will be here right after lunch. Can't it wait till then?"

"Sure, but yesterday would be better."

"Oooh, like the laid back attitude...I'll see what I can do."

Sara punched "2" for Ian's cell...straight to message. Well, he *could* be at the gym, or meeting with someone. Funny, he hadn't said where he'd be this morning... "Hi honey. Jeremy can't seem to find the final distribution percentages for Henley, Dickerson, etc. If you can, give me a call...kisses."

Sara went back to writing the trust instrument. She loved the name, it sounded so surgical and clean, and the framework was basic, just cut and paste and fill in the blanks.

After a few minutes her phone rang.

"Sara, you called?"

"Hey ... Yeah. Jeremy needs the..."

"I don't remember off the top of my head. I've got it in my notes. Tell him to wait until I get in. I'll be there by one."

"Do you remember just the...?"

"Sara, I'm real busy, I've got a lot on my mind, gotta go." And he hung up.

Sara looked at her phone. Gee, he sounded curt. Wonder what's up with that...?

She finished the trust document, hit save, and scanned her inbox to make sure Jen hadn't canceled on their lunchtime walk. Yay! All good to go. She pulled her Adidas and socks from the bottom file drawer and got ready for one of her favorite parts of the day. Sara and her best friend had become addicted to their daily walks, and resented the weather if it was too hot or cold for them to go out.

When she got back at 1:30 Ian wasn't in yet and Jeremy popped into her office with a question mark expression on his face. "Give me a minute, Jeremy. Work and sneakers don't mix. I'll get back to you in a sec."

Sara punched "2"... Weird... straight to message again. "Hey Darling, it's me. Jeremy is getting restive about the percentages. I guess there's a Farm Administration deadline. Love ya."

She opened Ian's file directory and started looking for 'Dickerson', assuming that he would have it under the name they had all used when referring to the partnership dissolve. When she found it there were only the copies of the original incorporation papers, a few tax documents, emails confirming appointments and the letters of intent from the involved parties. She searched for the date of the meeting, tried 'Henley', looked up the other names on the original papers... nothing came up. Scrolling down she saw a "locked" file. Using her administrator's password to override the privacy setting she opened the file.

There was a fair amount of correspondence, starting about a year ago, between Ian and another lawyer, K.A. Rockfort J.D.... Rockfort, Rockfort... doesn't sound familiar, who is he? Copy, paste into the bar directory... interesting. "Karen Rockfort, attorney at law. Civil, estate and personal liability."

There was a lot in the file. Meetings scheduled, confirmed, concerning the Fairmont case? Fairmont? Fairmont hotel? They didn't have any cases involving them. Westin hotels was the Fairmont's parent corporation and Sara was pretty sure they worked with Lehman Brothers. She

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couldn't think of any litigation they would have involving them. She opened the office data base and typed in Fairmont, and then Westin. Nothing. Interesting that Ian would be working on something without telling her. She wasn't sure if he would even be able to file a brief on his own, she had always done most of the writing and docket work. And who would Eastshore Limited LLC be? There were two other LLCs in the files and a lot of deed transfer documents.

Sara sat, just staring at the computer screen, her intellect, her ability to see both sides, which has always been her mainstay, failing her.

She was still staring at the screen when Ian returned her call at 2:00...

"What's up?" he asked.

Sara tried to collect her thoughts...What was up? She tried to remember why she had called him...Jeremy...percentages... "umm, I can't find the figures Jeremy needs."

"Because I haven't written up my notes."

"Jeremy says there's a deadline..."

"Tell him to leave the paperwork on my desk. I'll deal with it."

"But..."

"Sara, let it rest. I've got a lot going on right now."

"Ian...what is in the files that say 'Fairmont'?"

"Where are they?"

"On your computer...I was looking for the distribution figures for Jeremy..."

"What were you doing going through my files?" Ian said sharply.

"Yours...? Like I said, looking for..."

"Sara, we need to talk."

"We are...about these files!"

"Forget them, they're nothing. No, about us. I'm in the middle of something right now. I'll be home about 6:00...or do you want to meet at Shambala for dinner?"

"Home." Sara said, feeling the sand shift away from under her feet, washing away in a giant tidal surge.

"Gotta go, see you then." And Ian hung up. For the second time today she looked at the phone and wondered.

Jeremy popped around the corner like a marionette. Sara had the distinct impression he had been standing just out of sight, listening to her side of the phone call with Ian...but that seemed like a very goofy, paranoid thing to think.

He walked into her office with a handful of files. She groaned. Only tax sale acquisitions still seemed to arrive as piles of chaotic paperwork. "What have we here?" she asked, trying for at least a rueful grin.

"Sorry, I let them pile up a bit. We've gotten quite a few this week."

"Oh boy, just what we need, another derelict shopping center or ramshackle apartment building. I have a hard time remembering why we signed on for some of these in the first place."

"Look at it as potential assets looking for a good owner." Jeremy offered as he gently closed her office door. She opened the first one...California. The next was also from California, then a little variety—Arizona, Florida, and then a couple more from California. For such nice sunny places they sure were not doing well financially. Two of the ones from California were the result of criminal litigation...Humboldt County, marijuana cultivation, the other in Sonoma County. Hmm, a 14,000 square foot greenhouse. Gee, that made their own 12x15 sunroom seem like a closet. Why can't any of these be from the same locale? She was going to have to find different agents to use for each one. Sonoma County...Sara paused, lifted her eyes from the pile and stared out her office window. That was a fun trip she and Ian made a couple of years ago. They stayed in a renovated old farmhouse that had been turned into a bed and breakfast. Their days had been filled with sunshine, cooking classes, goat cheese, wine, and amazingly good bread. Almost without thinking Sara slid the file off of the pile and put it into her drawer for a closer look later.

CHAPTER 3

Sara stood in front of the courthouse restroom mirror, pulling her fingers through her hair, tugging on the strands, trying to bring blood to her scalp, her brain. She couldn't shake the feeling of being inside a thick cloud. All the voices in the hearing room this morning had been muffled, almost unintelligible. She was finding it impossible to focus on what she knew was important, desperately important. It was the demise of her life, her marriage. The deposition of her future was at stake and all she could do was numbly follow the sparring as Brandt, an old classmate who she had asked to represent her, futilely tried to thwart cronyism at its most entrenched. Ian and Judge Pickett went back forever, and it didn't help matters that the Judge was loaded with vestigial attitudes about women and men having ordained roles, not in a religious sense, but he held his secular misogynistic views religiously.

Sara had known justice was not going to be served to her on a platter today, but it frightened her that she couldn't rouse herself to fight back. It was happening too soon, although she had agreed to move forward, and had wanted to have things resolved quickly. Her hope was that getting the practicalities of her and Ian's separation out of the way would let her concentrate on parts of herself that seemed to have suddenly gone missing ...but Sara had not understood at first that it wasn't just her emotional life that was being ripped to shreds. Ian was also intending to strip her of the business that they had built together and all the investments that they had accrued together. Originally he even targeted the apartment, their home.

Brandt had assured her, even though Illinois was not a community property state, she was going to end up with at least half interest in the apartment, half of shared personal possessions and half of whatever was in their checking and saving account. Which basically meant nothing. Her state of frozen incomprehension that was so frustrating her right now began the moment that she pulled up their account on line and discovered that Ian had only the day before taken out all but the minimum required deposit. She had known, at that moment, before she had even tried, that her access to their business account would be denied. Sara didn't know much about divorce. All their friends were still together and the firm had only handled one contentious divorce and a few amicable separations over the years. This felt like something out of a soap opera or a crime movie and she couldn't escape from the paralysis of shock and hurt to try to fight back.

A knock on the restroom door and Nick was saying, "Sara, it's time to go back in. Are you okay?" Sara opened the door into the hallway and was comforted by the sight of her best friend's husband. Jen already had a family conference scheduled when they set the date for her and Ian's settlement hearing. Nick, incredible hero that he was, had offered to accompany her. She told him, "Not really, I can't seem to get focused. But at least I'm not crying..." She smiled wanly. "If you

could wait just a minute I'll splash water on my face and get my hair brushed...that's the best I can do."

As they walked down the hall back toward the hearing room she could see Brandt waving to them with a handful of files. Nick leaned toward Sara and offered, "Sara, you know we could ask for a delay for the hearing? A reassignment to another judge? This really doesn't have to be done so quickly...as you said, you're not focused. You're in no shape for a fight, which this should be."

"Oh Nick, I know you're right. I could, I guess. It should be a fight—but it's so far from who I am, where I want to go. And I can't go on until I know where I stand."

Brandt looked at them questioningly as they finished the conversation by the door. "Sara, do you want me to ask for a delay? This is not going well for you. I need to advise you that we could possibly obtain a larger share of the assets for you with more time."

"How's that? What is with this 'possibly?'" asked Nick.

Brandt looked pained as he responded, looking worriedly at Sara. "It looks like Ian and his lady friend have been at this for a while. He has carefully maneuvered any property or assets that weren't already held by the business into sheltered positions, mainly LLCs. We could go after him on grounds of fraud...there was some serious misrepresentation going on. It would require filling suit, though, going to trial...but at least on some of the property transfers it appears we could do pretty well."

Sara felt like she was looking at her two supporters from the end of a long tunnel. Brandt was offering something to hope for, fight for, but Sara knew she would not be able to sustain herself through any protracted struggle. It was doubtful she would make it through today. No, she would make it, but what she had said to Nick was true. She would not be able to walk forward until she knew where she stood.

CHAPTER 4

Jen and Sara sat close together on the sofa, hands curled around warm cups of tea. "Sara," Jen offered tentatively, "Nick thinks that you aren't exploring all your legal options. He said that you should hang in there and fight until justice prevails."

"In Chicago?! He's kidding, right?" She looked at her friend, but when Jen didn't say anything, she looked at her tea and continued, "I know, I probably could nail Ian and Karen on some things. I could prove intention to defraud, and I bet there are title transfer protocols they didn't follow—but Jen, really, I would just end up bitter and evil like them before it was over."

Jen put her arm around Sara. "Never, not you." she declared.

"Besides, it kinda feels good taking the high road and walking away from all their petty machinations."

"Petty?!"

"...and the firm's reputation is going to suffer from this."

"It definitely will, if I can do anything about it...."

"Hey good buddy, you are so sweet...but I think Ian has done himself a good bit of damage on his own. I've gotten several calls from clients saying they are looking for other representation. Ian, Bob and Andrew were the original reason people came to us, but over the years I was the person clients dealt with most of the time."

"What about your General?"

"Colonel. He was one of the first to call. It wasn't Ian leaving me for another woman that disturbed him...I guess he considers that a man's prerogative, the chauvinistic creep! ...It was the asset diversion. And this from a man who has had us set up blind trust funds for two different illegitimate children...so he's not above hiding things himself."

"How would he have learned the gruesome details of what happened, Sara? You didn't tell him, did you?"

"No, and he doesn't really have the full picture, but close enough. It was Jeremy. I'm thinking he's going to have to look for a new job pretty damn quick."

"Why in the world is Jeremy breaking confidence and telling people?"

"I don't know, Jen. It seems like an incredibly stupid thing to do...He would actually have been the one to take over my position at the firm."

"He's probably smart...trying to fill your shoes would be way too much for him, or any one guy. I think just the lack of you is going to so negatively impact the business. You really did keep everything together, Sara, along with doing the work on Ian's cases." She paused, then gently asked, "What *are* you going to do? Do you have a sense if you want to keep working as a paralegal, or an office manager, or something like that? Nick could put the word out and find you a position right away, if you wanted. You are so good at what you do!"

"Oh Jen, it's way too early to know what I'm going to end up doing. I'm thinking I need to get away from Chicago, go somewhere else, and do something different. I feel like an amputee. Whole parts of me have gone missing..."

"Oh Sara, no! You can't move! How about a trip, a vacation...a chance to heal, to get some perspective?"

"Jen, I've got to go somewhere. I only have possession of the apartment for three months...and I can't stand the idea of being there alone anyway."

"Why don't you put your big things in storage, Sara? You could stay with us for awhile. We could be 'roommates' again. It would give you a chance to figure out what you want to do. Please...I think it would be good for you, and then I wouldn't have to worry about you."

"Oh Jen, you are my best friend ever. Thank you for even thinking about it. I don't know. I don't want to impose, and I feel like I'm lousy company right now."

"Like you just said, Sara, I *am* your best friend. And that's what friends are for, silly. Nick and I already talked about it. We think it's best, really. And it would be fun to see more of each other. You're not going to be droopy forever. You'll see, you're all there, intact and smart and resilient as always."

CHAPTER 5

Sara and Ian were in a tandem kayak on the lake paddling in a perfectly matched rhythm. It was one of those exquisitely beautiful days in spring. The air was soft and warm, birds were chirping, insects buzzing, humming and clicking. The water was absolutely calm, glassy and reflective. There was a perfect mirror image of the land on the water. They were heading toward the shadowed darkness at the waterline...it looked like a low cave or a tunnel...Now Sara was alone in the kayak, the kayak much smaller, shorter. She stopped paddling and just sat, motionless, as it glided straight ahead, sliding into and through the dark opening without a ripple. She was underwater now, but not wet. Looking ahead she could see a very faint glow, far off in the distance. Everywhere else is only directionless darkness. Her paddle is gone and the kayak's glide slowing down...

Sara woke, gasping, frantic at the darkness, until she opened her eyes. She rolled over and almost rolled off the futon in Jen and Nick's guest room. After the panic passed she lay on her back staring at the pattern of shadows on the ceiling, trying to avoid letting the exhausting litany of hurt and disbelief begin again. The cool air of the room burned her cheeks, turning the tears that had begun to flow into salt.

A gentle knock and the door opened. Jen walked in carrying a breakfast tray—with a flower in a vase, even. She perched the tray on the corner of the night table and wiggled in next to Sara. They hugged and Sara tried to stop crying. "You can stay here forever if you need too, Sara. Really. Nick and I talked again last night and he says you absolutely shouldn't rush into anything—you need to get your bearings, explore your options. Also, it can be hard to find a good place. You stay here until you are ready."

"Oh Jen, what would I do without you guys? It makes me feel like somebody cares..." Sara felt more tears roll down her cheeks as she returned her friend's hug.

"I'm not going to let you deal with this by yourself. Are you really ready to get your stuff today? I can cancel today's appointments, if you are. I want to give you moral support. And I'll tote boxes."

"Jen, Thank you. Yeah, I think I should. I can't stand the idea of her touching anything of mine. Or at least not touching anything more than she has. Oh, why would Ian leave me? I loved him!" and she started to sob.

At lunch, her eyes were puffy and her nose red..."not fair!" she scowled at the restroom mirror. She was sure there was a mournful song in this—"You took my man, you took my stuff, and now sorrow has taken my looks." Sara smiled wanly back at herself. She splashed water on her face, refreshed her lipstick and walked out to rejoin Jen at their table.

"At least eat the chicken, Sara. You need your strength. Starving yourself won't help."

Sara picked at the chicken masala. "It tastes like cardboard." she offered.

"Sara, this is your favorite place. You *LIKE* the Masala, really, you do. A few more bites at least. Look, you have me sounding like my mother. Shall I get a box?"

"Whatever," Sara responded listlessly.

"I think we should pick up some more packing boxes. You ready to go back to your place, try and sort through a bit more?"

"My ex-place"

"That's yet to be decided."

"That's true. But when Ian says he wants something he usually gets it." She could feel despair flooding in again. "I still can't believe he is taking my share of the business and all the properties away from me. And I think he has pulled it off as far as the properties go. It is so spooky that this has been happening for months and I didn't know! What is wrong with me?!"

"Sara, nothing is wrong with you! Ian is doing something really creepy and wrong. And I'm starting to think there may be a bit more to this than just a philandering husband. The Ian I knew would not be so malicious and premeditated. You know, we really don't know anything about this Karen. I bet she played a big part in this."

"Whatever. He participated. ...is participating. He set up those LLC's so that I was excluded from holding. And Jen, what is really weird is that I was never a partner in the business. I never even thought it through, but I know Illinois is an "equitable distribution" state. What kind of deluded idiot have I been? I just assumed that being married gave us equal standing...but I should have known better. I know the law. We almost never handled divorce cases directly, but still I know the law. How could he have done this? I loved him. I thought he loved me!" Sara's pitch was getting higher and higher. Heads were starting to turn their way.

Jen got up, and gathered Sara toward her. "We gotta go, girlfriend." and steered her to the front of the restaurant. The manager was as concerned about getting the woeful customer on her way as Jen was about her brokenhearted friend's condition. She was a little unnerved at the intensity of Sara's reaction. It was true Sara had never had any other serious, really serious, boyfriend than Ian, but how could someone so pretty, smart and accomplished as Sara be totally undone like this? It was almost inconceivably snaky of Ian, but still... "Sara, honey, here's my car. Let's get in and we'll decide what's next."

"Jen, I'm sorry, I can't believe I fell apart like that!"

"It's OK. Really. You've had a serious shock. It can hurt and take a while to work through. But I absolutely promise, you will work through this. There is another side and a bright future ahead. Trust me."

"Oh Jen, you sound like my mom, just a bit more emphatic"

"I'm emphatic because I know. You've never had anything this devastating happen to you. Violated trust is incredibly wounding. But I know you can heal. 'Falling apart' is a good thing. It is totally okay and totally understandable."

"I'm glad it's understandable to you, because I can't really believe the way it just sweeps over me."

Jen managed to get them into the flow of traffic. "I think we should go get more boxes now and plan on doing our packing in the morning. Maybe we can talk to the people at the box store about someone to help move your stuff to our place."

"Yes, more boxes, lots more. It hurts. Separating all Ian and my things makes it more real. I need to face up to what is really happening. Unbelievable as it is." Sara gave a big sniffle and then blew her nose, for what seemed like the millionth time in the past week. "I am just so glad my folks aren't here to see this. I don't think even they, sainted and loving parents that they were, could have resisted saying 'we told you so.' How could they know and not me?"

"They didn't 'know' Sara, they just didn't want their particular dream for you to change. As weird as it sounds, you don't know where you are going until you get there. You need to love and follow your feelings and be alive, have dreams. It all leads you where you, and only you, decide to go. It just isn't the kind of conscious decision you usually make...this is the big one, your very own heart path."

"Oh God, Jen, you make it sound so portentous and heavy"

"Give it a few months, okay? Just do the one day at a time thing. It won't seem such a load then, I bet."

"Yeah, one day at a time...easy to say."

"You need to do things to take care of yourself, that make you feel better."

"How about one vengeful act at a time? I'm thinking of putting the furniture on Craigslist!"

Jen giggled. "If it'll make you feel better, let's do it. I can grab my camera and we could go over there now. Actually, let's wait until tonight. Nick can come with us and help move stuff around."

Chapter 6

"But that was my furniture too! I am going to live in this apartment. That furniture was part of the apartment!"

"Actually, Ian, it was 'our' furniture and 'we' no longer exist...so the furniture is gone. Just like our marriage. Although, in my case, I am choosing to share the proceeds, unlike you."

"You are getting your share from the apartment, Sara."

"How's that?! In dribbling increments, and only because the court ordered it! What happened to that 'partnership' we had?! The firm is just as much mine as yours."

"Not according to the law, Sara. We had a partnership in that we both worked together to build the business, however you always got a salary, good times or bad, you were an employee. I couldn't count on a salary. I took a financial risk as an owner. The business was a law firm. Only lawyers can be partners in a law practice, Sara."

"Don't 'Sara' me! You sound like a fucking automaton."

"Don't use obscenities with me, *SARA*...."

From the other side of the room Rashid shifted his 6'6" bulk forward from where he and Tony had been leaning against the wall. "Speaking of, what do you like us to move here, *SARA*?"

She looked at Rashid's wide friendly face gratefully. "Yes, that is what we came for, isn't it? To get my things." Turning back she looked at the man she had loved. The only man she had ever loved. She barely recognized him. He was wearing a leather greatcoat and a black shirt. He looked like the manager for a failing rock band. He looked like an avaricious rat. "Why are you here anyway, Ian? What do you want now?"

"I am here to look after my interests"

Sara gave a high pitched laugh... "your interests? Like what?"

Ian responded stiffly. "I have personal items in this apartment."

"And they will still be here when I am gone. I don't want any of your 'personal items.'" Sara hesitated a moment, looked around her, and then ventured, "I am taking the painting though."

Ian looked puzzled. "What painting?"

"The Burchfield."

"The Burchfield?"

"The one in the dining room."

Ian shrugged. "Go for it. I never liked it anyway. It looks like it was painted by a nutcase."

Now it was Sara's turn to look puzzled. "You never liked it? But you bid against me for it."

"...just so I'd have an excuse to talk to you. I'm sick of looking at that painting."

"Oh..." Sara felt her world view shift. The painting had always seemed talismanic to her. The ecstasy implicit in the sunlit view of a tree backed meadow, or swamp, as the title described it, had been a window through time back to that day she had met Ian. Ian had chauffeured his mother to the estate auction and he bid against Sara for the painting. The fact they were both in law school had made it seem even more fateful. The story had become one of those tales told at family gatherings and whenever their courtship came up. Had Ian just been pretending all these years? Mentally she cautioned herself to just be grateful he didn't care about the painting...because she did.

Giving her two giant helpers a wobbly smile she said, "Let's start with the kitchen, okay, guys?" and they started through a maze of empty boxes toward what had been her favorite room in the apartment.

"The kitchen! That stuff is as much mine as yours, Sara!" Ian exclaimed, starting to follow them. Rashid took a long look at Ian, then he bent over and started gathering up empty cardboard boxes. Once he had an armful he straightened up and looked at Ian again. "The lady said she doesn't want any of your 'personal stuff.'" He said levelly. "She's not gonna take any of your 'personal stuff.'" Rashid paused and took a deep breath. "We're busy here. It is time for you to go." He stood absolutely still, a mountain of boxes in hand, watching Ian as he turned and walked out.

"Kitchen?" he said with a smile on his face.

"Kitchen" she answered, then, pausing, asked, "Shall I make a list?"

"Naw, Don't bother. Tony's got a photograph for a memory."