As I swung out of Copley Square onto the Mass Pike, the band on my radio swung into "Hernando's Hideaway." Desultory snowflakes were drifting through the orange sky like petals. Half an inch, the weatherman predicted. I'd picked this station because Oxbridge, Connecticut, is a three-hour drive from Boston and the rest were all playing Christmas songs.

My dad taught me "Hernando's Hideaway" longer ago than I care to remember. He'd stand me on his shoes and we'd sing it together as we tangoed across the parquet floor of our Manhattan living room. Dad's a ballroom virtuoso. As my mom says, he'll always have that to fall back on when he irks the State of New York into revoking his detective license.

What I hadn't noticed until now is that Robert Frost wrote "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" to the same tune:

My lit, -tle horse, must think it queer
To stop, without, a farmhouse near . . .

Try getting that out of your head when your alternatives are "The Little Drummer Boy" and "Jingle Bell Rock."

At Route 128 the projected snowfall rose to an inch. OK, I thought. No problem. Being a media person myself, I'd thrown my heavy boots in the car just in case. I've spent enough nights stranded in airports and motels to take weather forecasts with a bag of salt.

Dinner around seven-thirty, Lilah Darnell—or, rather, Lilah Easton—had told me on the phone. Cocktails whenever you get here. Come early, Cory, OK?—so we can catch up before the horde arrives.

Right. I was still too astonished to grapple with details. Lilah in suburbia? Hostessing a semiformal dinner party? Never mind that this was a fate we'd been groomed for since birth. The core of Lilah's and my friendship was our vow, copied from Jackie Bouvier (later Kennedy, later Onassis): *Never to be a housewife*. And now the notorious Delilah, legend of the Ivy League, was happily married to a textbook publisher? Unthinkable! You might as well imagine Jerry Garcia designing neckties, or Bobby Seale writing a cookbook.

It must be fifteen years since I'd seen her. Not often after we left college, in the wake of the Vietnam war. Lilah was my senior sister when I was a freshman: back then, a vast age gap. Over the years we'd become contemporaries. Sisters again, too, evidently, or why would she ferret through the Old Girl Network to find me?

The other question—why was I driving halfway across New England to see her?—had more than one answer. Curiosity, certainly. I'd picked Lilah Darnell for my role model before that term existed. She was bold, brilliant, and beautiful—just the kind of uncommon woman I planned to become at Mount Holyoke College. My second week on campus she electrified the grapevine by dumping Harvard's class president for a local woodworker. In January she flew to Japan to spend semester break studying calligraphy and the tea ceremony. In March she won a summer apprenticeship at a foundry in Perugia. Her plan after graduation was to become a famous sculptor, start an artists' commune, and launch a series of international affairs.

With this Amazon for my mentor I flourished. When Lilah sold a terra-cotta demon to a New York collector, I caught a bus to Boston and pitched my first story idea to *Phases*. While she skied the Alps, I covered the D.C. demonstration against President Nixon's bombing of Cambodia. She chiseled, I wrote; she exhibited, I published. Shortly after *Phases* hired me as a stringer, I received a handmade invitation to her wedding in the East Village. There we sat up half the night promising each other that our love lives would

never overshadow our work. Several years later she turned up on my Back Bay doorstep, divorced; praised my series on urban gentrification, bought me a dinner worth a month's rent, and left me a baggie of ganja from her Jamaican lover. That was the last I'd heard from Lilah until her surprise reappearance in Connecticut.

By Worcester I was glad I'd brought those boots. The petals had escalated to confetti. Crossing the state line I spotted the yellow lights of a snowplow. Possible four to six inches, announced the radio. I called Lilah to warn her I might be late, and scratched my plan of stopping in Hartford for gas and coffee.

But I, have pro, -mises to keep,

And miles, to go, before I sleep!

Past Hartford the traction got tricky. My little horse—an old VW beetle, restored over the years like the Tin Woodman—progressed down Route 84 in a series of glides. As the snow thickened, Friday night's rush-hour traffic had thinned. The forecasters now were issuing stern travelers' advisories.

I peered through the troop of tiny kamikazes hurling themselves at my windshield; picked out a truck with bright lights and lots of tires, and pulled in behind it.

Lilah's directions depended on spotting landmarks: bank, mall, Burger King. Maybe I'd better call her again at Oxbridge . . .

But I didn't make it to Oxbridge.

The balance tipped a few miles before my exit. I'd been too busy keeping my wheels in the truck's tracks to notice how much the weather had worsened. Now I glanced at my gas gauge and saw I should have filled up in Hartford after all. While I was taking that in, the truck pulled left to pass a van—the only other vehicle in sight. I started to follow and felt the VW skitter like a water drop on a griddle.

My stomach crowded my esophagus as I tucked in tight behind the van. You get used to navigating strange roads in rented cars, losing your way and finding it again, and you get cocky. You forget that travel holds greater dangers than

arriving after check-in.

At the Oxbridge exit I bid the van a reluctant good-by and inched onto the snow-lined ramp. The next thirty seconds were predictable: The VW took off downhill like a kid on a playground slide. We skidded past a guardrail, twirled across the road, and landed nose first in a snowbank.

The radio was playing "Blue Christmas." Otherwise the world had gone silent. Snow fell past my headlights, beautiful and implacable.

I surveyed the area. No bank, no mall, no Burger King. All I could see beyond my car was a distant glow where the highway must be.

I called Lilah's home number, twice, and got nothing. I tried her cell phone and got voice mail. My emergency road service regretted that due to unusually heavy call volume, all representatives were currently helping other customers.

I switched off the radio and pulled on my boots.

My husband, Larry, laughed when he found the bag of kitty litter I keep in my trunk. (He could afford to; he drives a Jaguar.) Later I would take a moment to savor his chagrin when he found out how right I was. Not now. For now I didn't dare think about Larry or vindication or the painful thinness of my driving gloves or why I keep refusing to buy a new car or anything else but getting out of here.

There was already half an inch of snow on my roof. Another round of phone calls produced the same results. Now what? Stay iglooed in the VW all night, or risk a potentially futile (or fatal) search through the storm for help?

I found a window scraper under my seat. I dug snow away from my wheels. If my flashlight batteries would only hold out till I finished . . . I'd dimmed the headlights and lit a flare but left the engine running. With the gas gauge on E, I couldn't take the chance that, once stopped, it wouldn't start again.

Not that any of these decisions were conscious. My brain had downshifted some time ago. All my energy was in my fingers.

I chopped. I scraped. I scooped. I cursed. I felt like an

archeologist trying to extricate a mammoth from a glacier. Fresh snow refilled the holes I dug and blew into my eyes and mouth. Though my feet ached with cold, inside my coat I was sweating. How many eons had I been here? How many seconds till the motor died?

Then lights, and the rumble of an approaching car.

Don't even think it, Cory. He'd be a fool to pull over. His only hope on this sloped, slippery road is to keep going.

He didn't pull over but up. "Hey!" A laconic baritone. "You need some help?"

"Yeah," I croaked.

It took me half a minute to reconnect my brain. Meanwhile my knight-errant had emerged from his car (a vintage white Lincoln Continental) and inspected the damage.

Given that he wore a dark sheepskin coat, fur hat, and fur-lined leather gloves, I couldn't tell much about him but that he was a few inches taller than me—five-ten, maybe—and not apparently short of funds. His manner was friendly, comradely even, without the smarminess one comes to expect from roadside rescuers.

"Got any rope?" he asked, as matter-of-factly as if this were a ranch and we had calves to brand.

I nodded. The key was still in the trunk. I opened it and fished out the heavyweight line I keep coiled beside the kitty litter in case of emergency.

He twirled the end approvingly. "Yippie-i-o-ki-ay! Now, if we tie this to both bumpers—"

"Not enough traction. You'll slide right off the road."

"Take a closer look."

I peered at his face—about my age, clean-shaven, distinctly handsome under the hat—before I realized he meant the Lincoln.

"I made them put on chains when I rented this sucker." He looped the rope through his bumper. "And is that cat litter? Oh, hell, podner, we're all set!"

He was right. Two false starts, a hearty heave, and the VW was back on the road.

We untied the rope. Now that my brain was revving up

again, I noticed that my hands were numb and trembling. The right one had blood on it. Where were my gloves? There, on the snowbank next to my flashlight. Oh, lord, how could I possibly find the Eastons' house in this zombie state? Was I even fit to drive?

A moot question. Rule Number Three of the freelance journalist: What is necessary can be managed. If it can't be managed, it's not necessary.

"Where are you going?"

"Oxbridge," I answered; and added with unreasoning hope, "Bruce and Lilah Easton's. It's off Old Mill Road, wherever that is."

"You haven't been there before?"

"No." Glancing around for something to wipe my hands on, I found a tissue in my coat pocket; and only then registered his change in tone. "Do you know them?"

For a moment he seemed undecided. "I did," he said at last. "In another lifetime."

Cocooned as we were between two pairs of headlights, my fists thawing in my pockets, snow sparkling all around us like glitter, this struck me as a reasonable statement. "That's when I knew Lilah. We went to college together. I haven't seen her in—oh, eons."

He nodded as if reassured. "You can follow me. It's on my way. What's your name?"

"Cordelia Thorne." I held out my hand.

"OK, Ms. Thorne." He rubbed my chilled fingers between his palms. "Now it's your turn to play good fairy. Don't mention me at Eastons'. Not to them, their guests, nobody. OK?"

"Sure . . . but who is it I'm not mentioning?"

He grinned back at me—sardonically, I thought, though all I could see was the tip of his nose, a medium-thin mouth, and a square chin. Without a word he climbed into his car.

"Hey, wait! At least let me say thanks!"

As he gunned the Lincoln into a skidding takeoff he powered down his window. "Hi-yo Silver!" he hollered through the snow. "Awaaay!"

Between the snowstorm and the darkness, there wasn't a chance I'd have found the Eastons' mailbox on my own. They'd plowed their driveway (or had it plowed) up to the road. I idled there in the mouth of safety and waved to my nameless rescuer as he patched out in another cloud of snow.

This is going to be a hard story not to tell, I thought. How will I explain . . . ? But when I looked at my watch I discovered that, thanks to the missed coffee break in Hartford, I wasn't even late enough to apologize.

The Eastons' driveway wound through woods and across a field. Along the verge stood wrought-iron street lamps, each hung with a holly wreath. On any other night I'd have paused to admire the view: snow draping hedges and trees like cheesecloth, the lawn an unstained sweep of white sloping down toward twinkling house lights. Maybe that's why I accepted this invitation, I reflected; because Lilah as a pillar of the country-club set must be seen to be believed.

On the phone her conspiratorial tone had assured me we were still allies. Only the world had changed. Protest marches were out, pragmatism was in. The Cold War had followed the Age of Aquarius into history, with the dot-com boom on its heels. Walt Disney, that kindly gentleman, had morphed into a mega-corporation. No one cared if China stayed red as long as it went green. OK, a revolution is not a dinner party, no Mudd Club or CBGB; but everybody has to eat, and with America's supermarkets stocking fresh bean sprouts and soy sauce, basmati rice, salsa, and couscous, at least our quest to imagine all the people sharing all the world had made headway.

Her husband, Bruce, said Lilah, was president and publisher of Communicore's Higher Education Group. I wouldn't have envisioned college textbooks as a plush line of work; but Bruce Easton, I learned when I nosed around, was pushing the envelope.

Bruce's most inspired coup was reviving the Caxton Press imprint. (This from *Phases*' business editor.) During the

post-World War II science boom, Caxton was *the* cutting-edge publisher of science books. Over the next half-century, as a succession of larger companies gobbled up it and then each other, its star faded to barely a twinkle. Bruce Easton revived it just long enough to rebrand it. He signed prestigious (though expensive) textbook contracts with a dozen Nobel science laureates and hopefuls. Then he folded Caxton Press back into Communicore except for its logo, which survived as a highly coveted decoration on the spines of selected titles.

Well, you figure, big deal. Textbooks: what could be duller? Not so. Suppose that the eminent Professor X wants to write a book about physics. If he aims it at a general audience, his publisher has to convince thousands of bookstore managers and Amazon browsers that fractals and string theory are a better way to spend $34.95 than pizza and a movie. On the other hand, if Professor X aims his book at college freshmen, his publisher can sell a hundred, five hundred, even a thousand copies at a crack, for a sum that once would have covered a year's tuition, just by persuading fellow professors to require it for their classes. And that market rolls over every semester.

My *Phases* informant put it another way. "It's big bucks, Cory, which means power, which means politics. Big fish eat little fish, and when the little fish are gone, the big fish start chomping each other's tails."

"What sort of fish is Bruce Easton?"

"Bruce Easton," he replied unhesitatingly, "is a piranha."

As the wife of a corporate honcho myself, I understood he meant it as a compliment. Nor was I surprised. Lilah had indicated on the phone how drastically her taste in husbands had changed since the previous one. Numero Uno, as she called him, was a fellow sculptor living in a drafty SoHo loft whose kitchen comprised a tiny porcelain sink, a hot plate, and an avocado tree growing out of a toilet. OK when you're young and dedicated, said Lilah with crisp finality, but I'm not anymore. Can you believe?—suddenly there I was at gallery openings, lusting after pin-striped suits and calfskin attaché cases!

Believe, yes. Empathize . . . well, not so much. On the surface my story sounded like an echo: a summer romance in Paris with a fellow writer who turned out to be Larry Thorne of Thorne Cosmetics. Au revoir to pastis and cahiers on the Boul' Mich'; hello to lattes and laptops on Charles Street! But when Larry set aside his novel two years ago to accept a vice-presidency, and I agreed to quit journalism and teach prep school, our marriage imploded. Only after a roller-coaster series of breakups and reconciliations had we vowed to find common ground. I would share my husband with the family firm, and he would share his wife with *Phases*. Some public functions he'd have to attend alone; but when I wasn't on the road I'd go with him, and I'd wear cosmetics.

Lilah's reappearance in my life couldn't have been timelier. If she could thrive in a mixed marriage, so could I. Even comparing notes on the phone made our schoolgirl sisterhood feel like a prophecy. Bruce's Mercedes, Larry's Jaguar. Their house in Connecticut, ours on Beacon Hill. Lilah's work with Planned Parenthood and the Parks Commission, mine with Oxfam and the Opera Company.

I was about to ask how she and Bruce dealt with the dual-identity issue (Larry calls my office the Bat Cave) when Lilah said practically: "But let me tell you why I called."

Among the Eastons' noblesse oblige gestures on behalf of Communicore was their annual Christmas party. A-list authors and staff were invited out to the Connecticut house for a sumptuous dinner, after which they helped Bruce and Lilah decorate their tree. This year's guest of honor was Professor Henry Howrigan of Harvard, whose forthcoming biology textbook promised to keep the company in paper clips for the next decade.

"*Not* my best subject, biology, as you may recall! You know how these corporate parties are, anyway. So I'm thinking, Oh, *gawd*, another night of bone-crushing tedium, and suddenly I flashed on that interview you did with Henry a few years ago. Remember—when Harvard threw their snit-fit about commercializing academic research? I *loved* what you wrote, Cory. I mean, it was so *him*, I could literally hear his

voice. So I thought, Perfect! Cory knows Henry, she knows science, and publishing—she can come keep me company!"

Friday the twentieth. Larry would be at Thorne Cosmetics' northwest regional sales meeting in Seattle. His mother had already proposed that I donate my empty Saturday to the sachets-and-potholders booth at her church's Christmas fair.

As for Harvard and Henry Howrigan, I'd heard a new snit-fit was brewing which threatened to defoliate the groves of academe. Over what? That was the six-figure question. No one in the local media could find out—not even Rik Green's hand-picked cadre of campus spies. When it comes to stonewalling, Harvard is four hundred years ahead of the rest of us.

"So I tracked you down through the alumnae office, and I'm phoning instead of writing so you can't say no. The guests all leave after dinner, then we're on our own. There's a marvelous little museum here, and a new bistro I've been dying to try—"

"Lilah," I interrupted.

"—or actually it's more of a tearoom; and the annual Christmas walk—"

"Yo! Lilah!"

"What?"

"You know I'd love to see you. But what's this about? I mean . . . why *now?* After so long? Ten days before Christmas?"

Three seconds while she chose a tack. Three more to pick the words for it. When she finally answered, I thought she was changing the subject.

"Cory! How are your parents these days?"

"Fine. We're spending New Year's with them."

"Your mother, the fearless traveler! And is your dad still a—what's it called?—private investigator?"

"Right." Was there a method to this meandering?

"We all had such a crush on him. Fathers' Weekend, lining up to dance with Cory's dad!" She managed a chuckle. "It's so perfect you went into journalism. Don't you think? Even back then, how you'd jump into any kind of a problem

—algebra, or who stole whose lab report—that nobody else could solve, and bingo!"

"Lilah, what are you getting at?"

There was a tiny pause. "Oh, gawd. Who knows? Nothing."

"Is there a problem you want me to—?"

"No, no. I just meant— Oh, you know. Old times! 'We shall overcome' and all that. Our glorious carefree youth!"

No, I reflected; of course there was no problem. When you've got money, status, education, charm, and every other imaginable asset, the one thing you're not entitled to is problems.

"So you *will* come, Cory, won't you? Since you know my heart will be utterly broken . . ."

She was always like that. She'd play a card at bridge and wheedle her opponents into letting her take it back. She'd hand in papers three days late and still get better grades than those of us who'd sat up all night typing.

"Lilah," I had to ask, "have you cut your hair?"

"Cory! *No!* Never. Have you?"

"No way. I wear it up a lot, but all I ever cut is the tips."

"Me too. Bruce would kill me." She giggled. "Men are so *primitive* about women's hair! Oh, and Cory, I have to ask: Is it true what I heard? You ran off with a rock star? I mean, not to pry, but— Are you and Larry still—?"

In clearing that up—yes, we were, and whatever she'd heard was much exaggerated—we established without further discussion that I would come to her Christmas party.

Not for a minute did I believe all Lilah wanted from me was company for a nostalgia trip. However, I knew better than to think I could find out more by asking her. Back when people used to mix us up because of our long auburn hair, I was known as the straight one and Lilah as the kinky one.

The steps leading up to the house were flagstones, swept recently but refilling fast. I'd followed the driveway past the drift-deep front walk and around to this side door. Servants'

entrance? Not unless the servants drove a BMW. I liked what I could see of the house, slung between woods at this end and a hill at the other as if it belonged here.

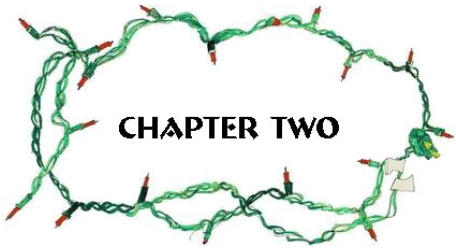
No one answered my knock. I wasn't in the mood to stand in any more falling snow, especially holding my suitcase, so I opened the door and stepped inside.

I was at the sports end of a long hall neatly stacked with skis, tennis racquets, volleyball nets, and a washer and dryer. At the laundry end stood a woman with her hand on the door frame, speaking to someone behind her. She wore a sweater patterned on a medieval tapestry: one whippet rampant and another couchant on a field of sienna edged with forest green. Her loose-cut pants were the same moleskin color as the dogs and looked virginal, as if they'd never touched human flesh till she lifted them from tissue paper.

But it was her hair I recognized: a reckless coppery cascade that tumbled down her shoulders and took me back instantly to art history class. Jo, James Whistler's wild Irish mistress.

"Lilah!"

"Cory!" Her arms flung open. "Oh, *gawd*, am I glad to see you!"



Sitting in front of the fireplace half an hour later, my feet in dry slippers and my bandaged hand cupped around a hot toddy, I wondered again why Lilah Easton had asked me here.

She'd kept up a flow of chatter since I arrived that blocked questions. After we'd hugged and exclaimed over each other, she whisked me off on the grand tour. About her house I now knew many new and interesting facts; about Lilah, none.

For example: Bruce had bought this property sixteen years ago while still married to his first wife. He heard about it at a MOMA retrospective honoring its late owner, a painter who'd built it as a weekend cottage in the 1930s. The painter's ex-lover remarked over champagne that the place hadn't sold because it was too small and rustic for a mansion-oriented neighborhood. Bruce left MOMA on the spot and drove to Connecticut; walked around shining his flashlight in the windows; dragged the realtor out of bed and made her draw up a purchase-and-sale.

I could see why. The painter's concept of a cottage was a spectacular two-tiered fantasy in wood and glass. Its main living area, where Lilah and I now sat, was a vast space floating above the rim of a lily pond, walled entirely with windows except for the stone chimney straight ahead of me, the bar to my left, and floor-to-ceiling bookcases to my right. Behind me were a swinging door leading to the kitchen, more bookcases, and a wide archway into the front foyer. All the floors I'd seen were dark red quarry tile.

"Rustic," Lilah repeated humorously. "As in, local stone, local tile, and no hearth—the tile goes right into the fireplace."

Rustic, I didn't add, as in Marie Antoinette's peasant village at Versailles.

The windows reflected a more Bergmanesque aesthetic. Reflected literally: in the room's left corner they made a black mirror, angled sheets of onyx in which shimmered a fruitwood table and chairs. The opposite corner was white: big glass squares in painted frames, like a stamp collection, reflecting patches of a thick white rug and a cubical section from the nubbly white sofa I was sitting on.

By daylight, I guessed, this trompe-l'oeil would reverse. The white grid would dissolve in light, while the black one emerged, framing selected views of the pond and woods.

More a curator's dream house than an artist's, I'd have thought. And more a photographer's vision than a painter's. Night and day, dark and light . . .

"Those white french doors open onto a deck." Lilah pointed right. "I call that corner my sunporch. The black ones behind the dining table fold up like an accordion, believe it or not. In summer it's like eating on the prow of a ship: air all around you and the pond at your feet."

Her head bowed: end of tour. She was half-sitting, half-kneeling, with her back to the fireplace. She'd twisted her hair into an improvised knot to keep it out of her way. The fire behind her lit the tiny wisps around her head into a halo.

Did you know about this, Lone Ranger? I demanded silently. Dammit, why didn't you warn me?

Lilah bent over a coffee table whose ends curled under like a giant scroll. Not marble as it looked, she'd confided, but pressed goatskin. Her right hand turned the crank of a shallow plastic cylinder which her left hand held above a mirror.

"Bruce will be here any second. Can you believe, he's e-mailing the phone company! I said, Like they'd come out in this? I just hope Melinda and Henry get through. Melinda Doerr is Henry Howrigan's editor, did I say? She flew to Boston this morning to tie up loose ends and then drive down with him for the party. They're pushing this book of his as if the future of humanity depends on it. Bruce actually thinks

the *Times* might review it . . ."

I gazed past her into the fire. I didn't want to watch her hands, nor her intense dilated eyes, nor hear her babble about Henry Howrigan's biology textbook.

Cocaine is a drug I've always disliked. I don't care to use it nor be around it, for both its short-term impact and the long-term havoc it can wreak. Lilah's expertise disturbed me. The mini-Cuisinart she'd taken from the stereo cabinet. The small round mirror she'd lifted off a nearby wall. The faint note of defiance when she explained she really wasn't that into it, but with a business crowd about to descend on us . . .

A log cracked, shooting sparks against the firescreen. Lilah set down her grinder and picked up a razor blade.

"Shall we wait?" She glanced up at me. "Or let him catch up?"

Oh, hell, I thought. Look at your face in that mirror, Lilah! You're too thin, edgy, you've got circles under your eyes that not even TC's Unshadow can hide. You've lived a rich life by any definition, and you're still the most beautiful woman I know. What do you need with cocaine?

"Your call." I hoisted my toddy. "I'm sticking with rum."

Her eyebrows arched. "You don't—?"

"No thanks."

Her gaze dropped to the coffee table. Out of touch, out of reach.

"Lilah, why did you invite me here?"

That brought her head back up from the silver straw in her fingers. "Well, I thought," she began brightly. Then, with a tiny frown, "I mean, I wanted— I hoped—"

"Good evening," came a cool clear male voice.

Lilah jerked upright. I swiveled.

"You must be Cory."

And you must be psychic, I thought. Unless you eavesdrop.

His smile etched lines that softened the planes of his face. He wore office clothes: an impeccable gray suit, pale blue shirt, soft gray leather shoes like the ones Larry's cobbler sends over from Italy. His tie—silk—was silver, mauve,

and cobalt, an assertive pattern which stopped short of aggressiveness. The silver at his temples conferred distinction without compromising his youthful physique. Bruce Easton, I suspected, was used to attracting attention, and skilled at either holding it or thwarting it.

He approached us with the lithe grace of a dancer. As Lilah made unnecessary introductions, he extended his hand over the back of the sofa. "So glad you could join us."

"Thank you."

His grip was firm, his hand thin, clean, long-fingered. Not an artist's hand (I thought of Numero Uno) but a collector's. And cold.

"I waited for you," said Lilah, accurately if not truthfully.

Bruce Easton walked around the sofa. "Melinda couldn't get through about the phones, but she'll keep trying. They should appreciate the urgency, in a no-cell zone. She and Henry stopped in Waterbury to put on chains. ETA half an hour." He sat beside me, leaving an unoccupied square between us. "Lilah, you'll want to tell Mary Helen."

"Yes." She offered him the straw.

He set it down. "I'm sure she'd like to know sooner rather than later."

With a mute nod Lilah rose and headed for the kitchen.

I expected him to apologize. Instead he slipped on the role of host like a smoking jacket. "Such weather! Ghastly for you, driving all this way alone. But then it wouldn't be a real Christmas party without snow." He smiled and indicated the mirror. "Will you—?"

"No thanks."

One of my many objections to social snorting is its guilt potential. Say yes and you're taking on an obligation to repay; say no and you're a spoilsport. I've seen couples who were best friends for years— But that's another story. My impression of Bruce Easton was that he grasped every nuance in this game, and no had qualms about turning the screws when it suited him.

It didn't suit him now. On the contrary. For me he was all graciousness.

"I was so pleased when Lilah told me one of her oldest friends would be here for our little fête." He settled back against the cushions. "She mentioned the famous resemblance. Your wonderful pre-Raphaelite hair. Did you cut yours, or have you—oh, I see. That chopstick holds it up? Marvelous." Another brief smile. "What do you think of Lilah's portrait?"

We both looked at the painting over the fireplace: Lilah in a long white gown, her head bare, a sheaf of lilies in her arms.

I considered. *Derivative?* No, Cory.

"Lovely."

"I commissioned it from Halsey as a wedding present. Long before he was well known." Bruce Easton crossed his legs; laced his fingers around his knee. "Lilah reminded me of Whistler's 'White Girl' the first day I met her. I daresay that contributed to the attraction." He chuckled. "For Halsey as well. He was as eager as I was to make certain her beauty would be preserved."

"Lilah's done a good job of that herself," I couldn't help remarking.

"Yes," he agreed with a collector's dispassion. "She has, hasn't she?"

Cory the journalist was growing more than a little curious about this marriage, or acquisition. Tact prevailed, however, and our conversation drifted among the current hot banalities: Beaujolais Nouveau, the Dow, the euro, ski conditions in Vermont. The tax-policy debate I dodged, since that's an issue Larry and I always clashed about. My view is that nobody with as much money as we've got is entitled to complain.

When Lilah came back she and Bruce inhaled their lines. Instead of speeding her up further, as I'd feared, the coke seemed to relax her.

"This is my favorite part of the day," she sighed. "When it's just us."

She stretched out her legs under the white goatskin-marble coffee table.

Bruce nudged her knee with his toe. "You'll make Cory feel unwelcome."

"Oh, no." A warm grin at me. "She counts as us. My old buddy. Gawd, Cory, can you believe? Who would've ever thought *we* would get *old*?"

That drawled *gawd* I'd heard so many times brought it home as sharply as Westminster chimes from a clock tower or the smell of mystery meat and powdered potatoes. "Like those alumnae we used to laugh at, who'd come on pilgrimages to their old rooms, wallowing in nostalgia for their lost youth."

"But we're not wallowing in nostalgia," Lilah said stoutly. "We're reveling in the present." She scrambled to her knees. "Darling, Cory needs another toddy and so do I."

"Let's all drink to revelry," agreed Bruce, and carried our glass mugs to the bar.

This was a mirrored alcove between the dining area and the swinging door to the kitchen. Over it was a skylight; shelves of begonias and African violets lined each side.

Bruce took bottles and a pitcher from a cabinet underneath. Why not leave them sitting out? I wondered idly. And realized that, except for the blown-glass bowl-within-a-bowl on the coffee table, I hadn't seen one extraneous object in this house. Books in the bookcases, yes—that's hard to avoid—but TV and music equipment, if any, were stowed out of sight. Nowhere was there anything so mundane and personal as a knicknack.

A twinge of uneasiness shivered up my neck. Lilah's dorm room had been a regular rotating exhibit of half-finished terra cotta figurines, wire mobiles, and gifts from her current crew of admirers.

"Darling," commanded the object of my concern, "tell Cory about the rest of our party."

She settled again on the rug in front of the fireplace, an anticipatory glint in her eye, nothing more profound on her mind than keeping her toddy from dripping on her pants.

Bruce alighted rather than sat on the sofa. Though his face was bemused, his body seemed twitchy. I got the idea

parties bored him. Were we in for one of those volcanic evenings, then, when FBI lookalikes drink, drug, and goad each other into Saturday Night Live?

Not yet, apparently. Bruce rested his elbows on his knees. His fingertips met as if in meditation.

"As Lilah may have told you, this gathering tonight has a twofold purpose. One, of course, is to celebrate the holiday season. The other is to express Communicore's great appreciation to Professor Henry Howrigan for completing a manuscript which we believe will revolutionize the teaching of introductory biology."

Part of me suppressed a snort; but another part was moved in spite of myself. Bruce's voice, his eyes, even the angle of his head conveyed a depth of conviction that would have done credit to a monk. Though I knew nothing about the teaching of introductory biology and cared less, something in me yearned to join his revolution—to march behind his banner, to link arms with him and storm the barricades of academe. I began to comprehend how Bruce Easton had won himself a divisional presidency.

"We'll start the festivities with a toast to our guest of honor. Then later, after dinner, Lilah and I will invite all our guests to help us decorate our Christmas tree."

"I'm doing the eggnog, darling, don't forget. Organizing the tree is up to you."

Bruce didn't seem to hear. He was moving across the floor to the white sunporch corner, where he dragged the sofa cube out of the way of an imaginary tree. Watching his hands I saw its height, its placement in the window angle, the fullness of its branches, the glitter of its lights . . .

"Reflecting from here over to there," he finished with a sweep, "so that one might be gazing into a starry sky." His hands fluttered downward. "Messy with the needles and such; but the effect will be breathtaking, I assure you."

Evidently I was the one he was assuring, because Bruce addressed me as he strolled toward the fireplace. "You're a writer, yes? Perhaps you can suggest some," he searched for the right word, "auxiliary activities." He lifted a brass poker

from its rack. "I had thought of reading the Christmas story; but there's the danger someone might overlook the melodious language of King James's Bible and take its religious content amiss."

"If you want melodious, we can sing carols," Lilah proposed. "That's nonsectarian. We did it every year at school. Cory, do you still know all the words? She has an incredible memory!"

"I think we want something less participatory, darling, or your wonderful eggnog will be wasted." Bruce stirred the logs behind her. "Cory, what's your recommendation? Seasonal poetry?" He swung the poker to the floor and leaned on it like a walking stick. "'A Child's Christmas in Wales' is too long, I'm afraid. Or 'Snowbound.' Robert Frost, perhaps?"

I choked on my toddy. "Oh, yes," I managed. "Robert Frost. Absolutely."

Bruce's voice took on a dreamy melancholia. "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by."

He dropped his poker back into the rack for punctuation.

"Home is where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in," said Lilah.

"Darling," Bruce touched her hair reproachfully, "that's hardly the mood we're after."

"Birch trees," said Lilah to me. "Woodpiles. That's what he wants. Do you remember those? American poetry 101?"

I was feeling giddy. "Give me a couple more toddies and I'll sing you one."

"Excellent!" Lilah clapped her hands in delight. "Cory will sing a seasonal poem! Now, how about the tree, darling?"

"I expect Melinda will take care of it." Bruce ran a fingernail around the inside of one nostril. "Melinda Doerr is a vice president at Communicore—"

"Bruce promoted her last Spring as compensation when her husband flipped out."

"She was promoted," Bruce corrected, "because she was and is an outstanding editor. She's been my right hand since we moved the Press to New York."

"The steel-trap hand in the velour glove." Lilah slid around the coffee table out of Bruce's reach. "She's got a whole wardrobe of designer sweatsuits, Cory, all different colors—"

"More significantly, Melinda is skilled at organizing anything in need of organizing."

"As well as disorganizing anything that can stand disorganizing," Lilah said irrepressibly. "She likes throwing her weight around. She's got so much of it."

Bruce swiveled; but instead of the quelling retort I expected, he picked up a paper packet from the coffee table. "We'll put her in charge of handing out ornaments, shall we, darling?" He unfolded a flap and ticked white chunks into Lilah's grinder. "And you can be in charge of keeping everyone happy."

"That's my strong suit," she assured me. "Shall we start with a toast to Henry's book?"

She slid the mirror toward Bruce, who crouched beside her and divided the powder with a razor blade. "Poor old Henry!" he murmured. "Drinks like a fish, sweats like a horse, and won't take off his jacket for fear of committing a faux pas."

"Now now," said Lilah.

"Which it is, given his penchant for polyester turtlenecks." Bruce sniffed a line and handed the straw to Lilah. "Here are some gilt balls for you, Henry, old boy. See if you can figure out where to hang them."

Lilah giggled and cringed. "Really, darling, you're awful to him! You and Melinda both."

"Keep him honest. Henry's nose belongs to the grindstone, so to speak, until he's met his obligations."

I recognized that tone from social-business occasions with Larry. Bruce Easton was not joking.

"I must make sure Gloria has his galleys ready." He rose. "Excuse me, ladies."

He exited through the swinging door to the kitchen.

Lilah wiped the mirror with her finger and dabbed her gums. I was about to ask her about dinner when I noticed her

hand was shaking.

"Lilah, are you OK?"

"Oh, Cory!" She forced a smile. "I just can't *tell* you how glad I am you're here!"

"Why? Is something wrong?"

"Not— No. I mean— Oh, pfh! You're still my sister, you know that? Like at school? I've been so *proud* of you! Not just the story about Henry. I subscribed to *Phases* for years to see your name in print. Of course, being a sculptor I've got to keep up . . . But I always looked for you first."

I didn't know what to say. Lilah seemed to mean this scattered speech as some kind of tribute. Why? What was she getting at?

"I would read one of your stories and it was like being back in college. Really! The way you'd walk into some weird scene—that racial violence thing in Southie, remember? and child abuse at day-care centers, and those women who patrolled the subway tunnels shooting rats?—and you never sounded scared. Cool, capable Cory! Just like when Suzanne and I used to bring you our problems. You'd sit there looking deep, listening, the same as you are right now, and then you'd come out with the one perfect comment that cut straight to the heart of it."

God help us, I thought, she's confused me with somebody else. Deep? Cool and capable? Do I look like the Delphic Oracle?

"Lilah," I said helplessly, "every story I've ever gone after I was scared. I never felt so much relief as when I married Larry and I could stop walking out on limbs for a living. And college—what problems did you ever have? You were Delilah, the femme fatale! Heart throb of every man from Princeton to Bowdoin! Not to mention your sculptures, those wonderful gargoyles—"

I stopped because tears were running down her face. She made no move to catch them, though in a moment her mascara would muddy the flow and spoil the youthful complexion she must have spent half an hour recreating.

"Come on, Lilah." I shoved a tissue into her hand. "Don't

cry. Tell me what's the matter."

I put another log on the fire while she pulled herself together, blowing her nose in flagrant disregard for the fifty bucks she'd just stuffed up it.

"I don't *know* what's the matter!" Too close to a wail. She took a couple of deep breaths and began again. "I didn't want to say anything because I was afraid you wouldn't come. It's— Oh, *gawd*. I think I'm losing my mind, that's what's the matter. Or else we're under a curse. Maybe both," she added with a damp wry grimace. "That would be perfect, if he cursed all Bruce's projects to fall apart the same as he did, and me along with them."

"Who, Lilah?"

"*Who?* Tony Cyr." She sniffled. "Bruce's ex right hand. Melinda's ex-husband. The ex-head of Caxton Press. My ex-friend Tony," she concluded bitterly.

I thought: I don't want to hear this story. Did I drive four hours through a snowstorm to untangle Lilah Easton's drug-twisted mind? No. Consult me on Robert Frost, draft me for the Christmas tree brigade, but don't turn me into Oprah-wan Kenobie.

"Well," I said, wishing I hadn't given up cigarettes, "I guess you'd better tell me about it."