

1

The magazine ad said people could exchange houses for an indefinite period and enjoy the advantages of living far from home. Between an unfinished demitasse of espresso and the slow slender strokes of the artist's brush, Mattie shuffled beneath her studio's frosty wire mesh ceiling, and gently held the magazine's glossy cover. New England Life's photographs possessed depth and perspective. In her thoughts she approached the arched entrance of a red covered bridge in Vermont, as a fast moving stream gurgled below. But John was not with her as she pretended to amble through the bridge's darkened corridor to the yellow maples on the far side. She had come to despise John, dreading his return from extended business trips, his predilection with sports and gambling, and his simple neglect.

She lifted the slender cup to her thin lips and sipped the liquid perfection. With her long smooth fingers, smeared with okra and crimson acrylic, she turned the newly printed magazine pages; the articles read and reread. She had scrutinized each rural picture since the magazine's arrival yesterday afternoon and longed for a new perspective from parched, dry Arizona and her absent husband.

EXCHANGE HOUSE, an 1850's house with farmer's porch, restored to the simplicity of another era. Located in rural Rexford, Maine on twenty-five acres of spreading woodland, a rock cliff ocean view, and hiking trails. Owners will arrange house exchange for indefinite periods of time. Details to be arranged.

Mattie checked a New York area code and penciled the numbers across the envelope for John's subscription to Corporate Maneuvers, a publication he claimed was essential to his business activities. She smiled and shook her head. Sometimes she wished he was dead or at the minimum, gone. All the nights spent at home, anticipating his calls from some distant part of the country or the world, waiting for his infrequent airport arrivals, had accumulated into a heavy burden. Maine was light years from Phoenix and John.

She reached for the slim, white phone atop the wide screen TV, pushed her lips together and punched in Deborah's number in Tempe. Deborah would have an opinion about a trip alone to Maine. The line clicked and rolled over loudly as the Tempe line always did.

A young voice shot out a quick greeting through gum popping.

" Good morning, Blaze Cuts, a Unisex Hair Cutting Salon."

" I would like to speak with Deborah Raynes please."

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

The phone dropped, probably onto the white and black tiled floor, and loud bass pounded through the salon's speakers she remembered were above mirrored walls. Mattie's short, rusty hair was shaped perfectly by her college friend just ten days ago. Deborah said bright aqua eyes should not be buried in a dead bird's nest.

" Deborah Raynes."

" It's me."

" Well, I have to say you have perfect timing. I just finished six seniors ready for class pictures. In August, can you believe it? Did we have our class pictures taken in August?"

Mattie's upper lip curled as she thought back to a younger time before John. Her friend's animated manner, such a contrast to her own sedate ways, enlivened Mattie. " August, yes. It was August. But then again, that was fifteen years ago, D.R."

" Was it? Oh, God, we're becoming ancient. When are you coming back, Mattie? John must be out of town, *again*."

" He sent me roses."

" His calling card."

John was out of town again, a swing through northern California to open new corporate accounts, but promised to return for the weekend. " John will fit me into his schedule starting Saturday morning."

" Drop him, kid."

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

" I took a break and was looking through New England Life."

" Another again. Mattie, why don't you just plan a trip to New England? You always wanted to go to the place. Hell, you've never been east of the Mississippi."

" True. There's a certain ad that allows you to exchange your home for a beautiful old house from the eighteen hundreds." Mattie looked down at the ad. " They don't specify a time period or limitation on the arrangement."

Deborah yelled something back to one of the girls in the salon and then her voice swung back in a higher volume. " I think that is a perfect arrangement. Go... alone."

Deborah's words were exactly the words she wanted to hear. " I just might, but I worry about John."

" I'd worry, too. Who knows what he does on the road?"

" John is devoted to business or finding the odds on the next NFL game. He hasn't got time for women."

" A man always has time for women, especially if he's away. Forget about him sending you yellow roses. You go up to Maine. Stay there for a month if you have to. Maybe that will smarten him up. John is a self-centered pig."

" But how do you really feel about him, D.R.?"

" You call Maine and let me know how you made out."

" Okay."

" Talk to you later, Mattie."

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

Mattie slowly set the phone back into the cradle and lifted the glossy magazine upward. A rural house with a farmer's porch, overlooking a rocky cliff in Maine was spread across the center pages. In another month, the trees would be vivid with color along those hiking trails and she could almost hear the ocean waves crashing against the worn rocky extrusions. She checked the long distance number, lifted the phone to her ear and dialed.

2

John arrived exactly when he said he would arrive, at nine-thirty on Saturday morning. His red tie, gold initialed clasp perfectly in place, matched his suspenders, and was flawlessly looped over his unwrinkled white shirt. The early breakfast meeting in Bakersfield must have left him chipper as he strutted boldly up the terminal ramp. When he caught sight of Mattie, he swung the overnight bag over his right shoulder, tightened the cheek muscles and broke into a run.

The routine was the exactly same at every arrival. She would tuck her head quickly into his chest and he would tell her how much he missed her. Yet, within forty-eight hours he would be back to his pugnacious world of new accounts, budgets, and sales quotas, and reachable only through voice mail. Mattie had left the magazine on the front seat of her sports car, but unsure when she would tell him she was going to Maine alone.

* * *

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

She resented the way he would take over her car, racing onto the freeway, while she listened to what great things he had accomplished during his trip. The magazine, open to the Exchange House ad, was gripped tightly within her sweaty hands as John wove her car through the sparse freeway traffic. He alluded to playing a few rounds of golf when they passed the luscious, eighteen hole spread. The club only represented more time away.

" I painted a magnificent sunset this week. Over the desert. I modeled it after the Frederic Church's painting, The Twilight in the Wilderness."

" Had a good week, did you? I know some corporate people who have connections to market art work. I'll make a call when we get in." He handed her a wad of bills from his pocket.

" What's this, more money from a poker game?"

" I always say it doesn't matter where money comes from as long as you have it in your hand."

Mattie winced and squinted her eyes over the city buildings, bright in the morning light. Again, she looked down over glossy page, adjusting for the glare. As John talked on the cell phone about betting on some preseason game, she wished things were different. In another realm she fancied herself in bed with him at this distant house, looking out the window at the heightened fall leaves near the blue ocean. At the same time, solitude in the exact same setting meant no complications or demands.

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

The car jolted and tire rubber scraped the concrete. Mattie hoped he had not seen her wince. John pushed the remote and the front bronzed, aluminum gate electronically swung open. He shifted and moved along the fabricated stonewall garden. Everything was precisely where he had planned it and the landscapers had placed it. When he stopped abruptly at the terrace garage, Mattie knew exactly what he would say next.

" Good to be home. Damned good to be home."

* * *

Mattie opened the bathroom's pastel green louver door. In his blue boxer shorts and propped on several pillows, John clicked the remote between a fast paced soccer game and a lazy West Coast night baseball game in Seattle. He slowly turned, exposing his straight bright teeth, as she tightened her white silk robe. " You were great, Matt." Then he switched to a preseason football game.

" Thank you." Mattie glanced at a red tailed hawk in flight over the starry early morning skies on the back cover of New England Life. She shared the bird's quest for the open space freedom, pursing her lips slightly as John channel surfed past three movies, an interesting older classic and ended back at Seattle baseball game.

" These guys have a damned good team. I like them."

" Seattle?"

" No, Mattie, where have you been? Baltimore... The phone rang and he picked it up immediately. " John Summers. Yeah, no, no, you're not disturbing me, Harland." He stood and walked the phone over to the side table near the slider drapes.

She rolled her eyes and removed her robe and slippers. As she slid across the soft sheets, he flipped on the hanging wicker shade lamp and sat down. He never got away from business. She watched helplessly as he plugged in his laptop and data sheets soon filled the screen readout. Company figures and statistics stood like soldiers at attention across the screen as the sportscaster's velvet voice spewed forth colorful stories and a rundown of major league box scores. She grabbed the remote and found the black and white film noire from forty years ago.

" No, Harland. I see a fifty-two percent gain in that account. Right, we've got the bastard."

Mattie furrowed her brow, slapped the remote on his side of the bed and stood. She crossed the plush alabaster rug in her bare feet and retrieved the magazine. Once in bed she stole his pillows and lay down with her long legs over the folded quilt. She propped the magazine on her stomach. For fifteen minutes she visited every brightly colored New England shot and stopped at ocean pictures of lighthouses photographed against inflated cumulus puffs along Maine's rocky coast. Her anger and resentment whirled out of

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

control. She clenched her fists at sound of John's clicking keyboard and slapped the magazine against the sheets.

" John." John's head snapped away from the screen and he raised his index finger. " No, John. The conference call is over, damn it!"

" Mattie," he said, turning down the corners of his mouth. He shook his head at her as if she were some aberrant little schoolgirl.

" Harland, you're not disturbing anything. Right. Yes, we would enjoy having dinner with Mrs. Hynes. Let's set a date. Sure."

Mattie crawled over the bed like an annoyed lioness and swung around the table. She pinched the laptop's phone connector in her fingers and quickly pulled it from the jac. John's screen went blank. His eyes opened abruptly as if someone had died. She smiled, holding the connector in her hand. " Your plug has been pulled."

" Ah, Harland, I seem to have had some line problems here. Listen, why don't we check the Texas accounts in the morning. Sure. Say seven-thirty? Right. And you have a productive night now." He set down the phone and his strong facial muscles wrapped around his high cheekbones as he thrust out his jaw. His speech was stilted. " Just... what... the hell do you think... you're doing?"

" You can pull the plug on the laptop, John or pull the plug on this marriage."

" That's a little extreme, wouldn't you say, Mattie?"

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

" Don't talk about extreme, John. You spend more time sweet talking Harland than you do me, although I have to be more convenient for you."

John stared at her and said nothing. Aware of his violent temper, she was not sure what he would do. He lowered his head, shot toward the liquor cabinet and poured amber liquor into a tall glass. He gulped most of it and looked into the glass as he spoke.

" You enjoyed it."

" Yeah, I enjoyed it, but I have to plan for it. Stick it in your schedule. Pay attention, will you, John? You're always away. Oh, you send your roses all the time, but that doesn't cut it."

He lifted the remaining liquor to his lips and poured it down his throat. Then he slammed the glass on the silver tray. " Hey, I support that studio of yours downtown. I had this spread out here built. You have the pool, Mattie, you have the grounds and the mega house."

" But I don't have you, do I?"

His body tensed, he lunged and squeezed her arm. The hatred in his steel cold eyes shook her. She had crossed the line with him and she knew it. Maybe she wanted to cross the line and provide herself the cover she needed for Maine. " Don't you ever interfere with my business calls..." The tightness in his jaw eased, but he continued to grip her arm. " Or you will regret it, Mattie. I'll make you regret it."

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

He released her arm, leaving a red band of trailing pressure points across her skin. Seconds later, he had on his pants and had thrown over a jersey as he carried his sneakers downstairs. With moistened eyes and mouth open, Mattie shuffled to the bedroom window and pulled the louver back as John trotted down the slate walk to the lower garage.

" Go ahead, John. Bail out... This is one account you've lost."

The garage door slowly rumbled upward and her car started. He skidded, probably deliberately, down the concrete, somehow opening the front gate, and then he spun the tires down the road.

Mattie lingered at the open window for fifteen minutes, staring at the stars over the desert and the lights in the darkness away from the city. He would not return soon and she did not want him back. She moved back, her throat tight, and plodded down the cold back stairs to the kitchen. Goose bumps covered her bare skin and she felt as if his hand still encircled her arm. In darkness, she opened the lower sliders and turned on the pool's underwater lights. She removed her nightie and let it fall to the tiles. The cooler air invigorated her soft exposed skin. She walked over the concrete and placed her feet on the shiny blue tiles. This feeling of being alone was not so bad. Then she dove into pool's warm water, swam below the surface and cleansed her body as she tried to forget she had ever met him.

3

On a clear October day, designer sunglasses shading her eyes, Mattie drove a sputtering red compact with marginal brakes, up the winding two-lane highway near Rexford. A faint cigarette odor lingered, and although she found no ashes in the tray, she kept the window cracked. The engine did not approach the power of her Mercedes and any car complaints only contributed a creeping anxiety; the accumulated result of sleepless nights and a failed marriage. The barrage of color lining State Highway 102 to Rexford masked her somber mood, but the cooler air brought in a variety of new scents, including the lure of breakfast from roadside restaurants and pervasive chimney smoke, hanging in the burgeoning sunlight. Fog pockets sunk into glens across the undulating countryside's colored popcorn trees.

In the four weeks since she had separated from John, Mattie had contacted the owners of Exchange House, the Rialto Hotel concern in New York. She had met a couple called the Burgesses and their two boys, who had traveled from St. Paul, Minnesota to bath in the sun and see a land where they would not stand knee deep in snow before Halloween. Selling the Arizona house was not far away.

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

She slowed at the overhead traffic light and pulled to a squealing stop behind a battered black pickup. Rubbing her eyes, she wanted to rest her body in the poster bed advertised in the freshly printed Rialto brochures she had left on her kitchen counter in Phoenix. She turned left and was drawn to the sloping meadow behind a weathered stonewall to her right. The pale dried cornstalks shielded a deep emerald field, dabbled with grazing white and black cattle a few hundred yards away. Everything went at the pace required up here.

She searched for the window push button, smiling as she manually rolled up the side window, sealing out the pickup's rich gas mixture. Only ten minutes ago, she had reached in vain for her cellular. Now she twisted the noisy AM radio dial as the truck turned and she accelerated ahead.

" Good morning!" exclaimed and unpolished local radio personality.

Mattie laughed, covered her lips and turned down the chrome radio knob.

" Well, this is Chester Osbourne and the Morning Road House Gang, hoping you fall morning is bright and wonderful. It did get chilly out there last night, didn't it? My wife read a full nineteen degrees on the kitchen mercury at four-thirty. But it has warmed up to a balmy twenty-seven here in downtown Rexford. Warmer

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

temperatures are expected before unsettled weather later in the week."

" Rexford. I'm going to Rexford." Mattie held the plastic wheel with both hands and the tiny car whined down the highway. " Yes, I'm going to the Exchange House, Mr. Chester Osbourne and the Morning Road House Gang."

* * *

REXFORD

THE DOWN-HOME TOWN

It was not the usual green and white highway sign. Atop a wooden post, gold letters were carved into glossy chestnut paint and the remnants of yellow pedal flowers with brown centers were surrounded by deeper hued, azure wild flowers and dew-laden grass. She spotted a few daises up the embankment as she passed into Rexford. Where she lived everyone grabbed for land, developing every square inch to its maximum potential. Mattie wondered why the forest and occasional farmer's field had escaped new buildings and housing tracts.

She emerged from a dense thicket and sunlight danced across the road's solid yellow line. At a long bridge span, a dirty white state highway sign indicated Rexford center was two miles away.

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

The radio's flowing violin and French Horn chorus fit perfectly into the spreading river's sparkling ripples below. Red and yellow leaf trees, nestled between towering pines and clumps of paper bark white birches, lined the sloping river banks, merging into a marshy grass plain along the steel ocean to the east.

It was the openness and freedom she had long sought.
" Peace..."

Distant rocky oceans cliffs with hairline trees pushed through the dissipating fog, coating the sandy beach expanse. What looked like a large space capsule or corrugated teepee was planted within the marsh at the river's wide mouth. A thin gray smoke layer spewed from its top and twisted like a lost thought out to sea. She entered the woods again and a few clapboard houses, mostly white, with green or black shutters appeared behind stonewalls, set back from the highway. Many had upward and outward additions. All had chimneys. Side barns and sheds near the remnants of harvested fields were left natural or painted red. Mattie had never seen structures so steeped in history and bordered in color bursts. It was all new and vital and seemed to ease the Phoenix pain, yet a constant creeping uncertainty followed her into town.

* * *

She mailed dusty envelope back in Phoenix. The instructions were contained on a professionally arranged letter inside, with detailed directions from Portland along Highway 102 as well as a more complex map from Rexford center to the Exchange House. Her first order of business was to make a stop at 601 Main Street, the upstairs office of the house's caretaker.

" Daniel McCabe."

She nodded her head and checked his phone number as she rounded the bend near a white clapboard church and weathered gravestones. A group of green neck mallards cut through the reflected foliage across a clear pond behind the graveyard. A linear waterfall, less than a few feet high, emptied water under an aluminum fence bridge below the road. The highway swung around, completing a wide turn from the church. A string of gambrels and saltboxes, were set back from the road across green lawns busy with leaves spinning within periodic wind gusts.

Rexford's downtown, brick and weathered shingled buildings, brought her back in time. Main Street, according to the sign past the waterfall, traversed the highest hill, with numerous side streets descending onto rolling landscape bulges along a fast moving stream. Mattie located number 601, a white shingled two story gabled building, wedged between the town's movie theater, The Ballyhoo, and a run of shops including a stationer's shop and

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

drug store. The brakes squealed again and she pulled the little car along to curb to an expired silver parking meter.

When she shut off the engine, the car shuddered and spit before chugging off. She slid her brown leather coat over the front seat as the cooler air and residual gasoline exhaust filtered into the car. Her first instinct was to check the outside temperature on the car thermometer, but smiled when she only saw the rental car's simple tan vinyl dash.

Without power locks, she did not bother to lock the car nor did she place money in the sidewalk meter. She stepped onto the concrete, crunching a few random leaves as she peered down the sidewalk. People frequented the busy stores of the cozy little town. All ready she relished this slower life away from the freeways and the malls.

4

The faded black wooden sign swayed, squeaking at the rusted hinges.

MC PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

She opened a heavy green door and stepped into a musty hallway, lighted by a single cobweb window with two large panes, one of them cracked. Thin-varnished wood slat molding followed the narrow, steep stairway. She knocked on the paneled door to her right and waited for this Daniel McCabe, probably a potbelly maintenance type with tools hanging from his belt.

Someone turned down a radio inside. Mattie waited as a woman's shaky, muffled voice escaped through the door. " He's upstairs."

" I'm looking for Daniel McCabe."

" That's right."

A few moments later the radio voices again bantered about the apartment, Mattie raised her thin brows and started up the brown vinyl stair treads. A square stain glass window cast a sea green light across the wood wall as the stairway curved into the

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

darkness. Mattie was not sure whether her heart thumped from exertion or uncertainty.

Another heavy door, unpainted, set within the chipped brick wall, showed no designation for the property management company. For a brief moment, she set one foot on the lower step and knocked briskly on the bare wood.

Her increased heartbeat had nothing to do with climbing the stairs. She was in tremendous shape from daily workouts, but fatigue had handed her an unkind and pervasive fear, not only of what might lurk behind the door, but of the days ahead alone. As she turned to leave, a soothing yellow light covered the hall and warm air crawled over her exposed neck and legs.

" Your car is illegally parked." The voice was strong, masculine and carried authority. Over her shoulder she saw a well-built man, black hair straight and red flannel shirt molded over his large frame. He smiled with a confidence conveyed in his dynamic black eyes. " Then again, I only manage property and haven't been appointed sheriff... yet."

" I thought I'd only be a minute." She extended her hand.

" Nice to meet you, Mrs. Summers."

Mattie's mouth dropped momentarily, but she understood this was a small town and her arrival was big news to this guy. " I take it you are Mr. McCabe," she said in her most liberated and clear tone.

" You take it right." His smile lessened as he squinted and folded his arms across his chest. " You gonna hang out in the stairway? Should I shut the door? "

At floor level she looked across the spit polished oak floor and several new desks and computers. " Quite the office."

" You mean in light of the dump you see outside when you come in?"

" Right. I mean, well, I..."

" It is a dump."

He took her hand and walked her inside. The vinyl rimmed windows looked new and so did the plastered ceiling and green textured wall covering. Mattie looked through the vertical blinds at the red rental car parked at the expired meter. She put her hands in her coat pockets and turned. " So, you're McCabe?"

" The Fairbanks House goes way back. I helped restore it when Rialto bought it five years ago. Belonged originally to a sea Captain."

" Lost at sea?" Mattie's stomach growled. She had not eaten since a dreadful airline breakfast over Ohio. " Haven't eaten..."

McCabe's ability not to flinch and not respond to her questions baffled her. " Captain Fairbanks is buried in the graveyard."

" Oh, yes, I saw the graveyard as I drove into town. I usually drive my Mer-"

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

" No, the Captain is buried in the graveyard near the sea. Most visitors usually want to hike the trail up there." McCabe moved near her and looked out the window. He had large, strong hands with veins protruding even when he held something as light as a stack of papers. " I heard your timing problems."

" My what?"

" Your car."

" It's a rental."

" The car doesn't shut off properly because the timing is off."

Mattie looked into his penetrating dark eyes and was nervous about being so close. She shuffled for a moment and then stepped back toward the other desk. " It won't blow up or anything, will it?"

" Not unless somebody bombs you." She knew he was trying to be funny and she finally produced a quick smile, but her hands shook.

McCabe turned away from her shaking hands. " Look, Mrs. Summers."

" I'm separated. I'm just telling you that because... Why did I tell you that? I guess I'll be using my maiden name again. I'm surprised you don't have that information, Mr. McCabe."

" Kendall."

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

" How did you know *that*?" This time she laughed and sat on the edge of the desk. " How... okay. The Rialto ap. They asked for my maiden name."

" Bingo. Listen, Mrs. Summers or Miss Kendall..."

" How about, Mattie?"

" Mattie... You have the perfect place to get rid of whatever is making you tense, okay?" She did not know she was so transparent..

" I apologize if I seem rude. I just want you to know that the Fairbanks House is isolated, majestic on the cliffs and you're in Maine at peak foliage. You couldn't ask for anything more."

Mattie turned to the window again, aware John might have shared this quiet time, but now John was gone. " Having lived in barren Arizona, Mr. McCabe, I find this area unique and enchanting."

He moved by her and peered down at the car. " You sound like the Rialto promo literature." Mattie tensed her face and was about to challenge his words. " But I can appreciate what your saying, Mattie. I've lived here all my life, except for three years in the Corps."

" First lieutenant?"

" No, I was a military lawyer."

" You were?" She looked up to his stubble face within the silver window light. " What-"

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

" What happened?" he asked and took out a pack of cigarettes and tilted the pack slowly toward her. " Cigarette?"

" No, I work out..."

" I see."

She thought, as she stared at the slow moving traffic, he had glanced down at her legs. A large woman in deep blue police uniform veered toward the red rental. " Oh, no!"

McCabe smiled and exhaled. Smoking the cigarette somehow enhanced his vital appearance. He pushed up the vinyl window, the cooler rushed in, and he stuck his head outside. " Penny, she's a client."

The woman adjusted her glasses and looked up toward the second floor as if she were checking who was in the window. She tipped her hat visor. McCabe pushed the window back into the casing and twisted the clasp. Then he put out his cigarette in a blue, metal ashtray compacted with black ashes and more half smoked butts. Mattie figured he was trying to break the habit, but was also the type of guy who would not overtly admit it.

" Thank you."

McCabe grinned as he walked to the side desk and typed something on the computer keyboard. A few seconds later the printer shuddered and spit out a perforated bordered document. He tore it off the sheet quickly and went back to the window. It was a simple statement designating her time of arrival as well as

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

specific directions to Exchange House. His upper arm neatly pressed against her leather coat as he explained the directions. She made no attempt to pull back, perversely comforted by the touch of a man she had just met.

" I'm just a phone call away, Mattie." He turned, she lost his touch, and felt alone again as her stomach gurgled.

" This is your job?"

He put his hand briefly on her shoulder and smiled. For some reason she trusted his smile and thought he was sincere or very clever. " I own extensive property in the area. Managing the house is something the Rialto Group needed. You want some breakfast?"

Having breakfast with McCabe was a good diversion. He looked both interesting and fun. She did not sense anything beyond that on his part either. " Well."

" And you probably need to have that tin can looked at."

" Tin can?" She grinned. " I'll be here for a few weeks."

McCabe picked up a leather brief case between the water cooler and copier. When he started toward the door, she realized the meeting was over, and followed him across the office, all the while questioning why he was not a lawyer now.

" Rental companies are technically liable for problems with their vehicles." He motioned her into the darkened staircase. As he closed the door, she was wedged between the brick wall and his

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

taller and stronger body. The lock clicked and McCabe put his hand over her back and started her down the stairs.

Mattie liked the way he opened the outside door for her and she scurried with him down the outside wooden steps, the colder air biting her neck and legs. She turned, hesitated for a moment and looked into McCabe's deep eyes. The one thing she did not need was trouble with the rental car.

" You look as though you're going to ask a question, Mattie."

" The car agreement. I'll call the company and then find a garage to work on the car."

McCabe pointed across the street to a red painted, brick building with translucent dirty windows. Three bays had two cars raised up on hydraulic stainless steel lifts and the outside lot was strewn with assorted vehicles in various stages of repair. McCabe was a townie and probably would arrange to have the car fixed. He saw her staring at the old building. " Never judge a book by its cover."

McCabe again pointed further down Main Street to a faded yellow diner with a corrugated aluminum roof. " You won't find a better breakfast than the Down Home Diner."

" Care to join me, Mr. McCabe? I mean if you have the time. I don't know this place very well."

" I have an appointment. Do you have your car rental agreement?"

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

Mattie nodded and moved down sidewalk. She opened the passenger door, bent over and reached into the glove compartment. With the four copies in her hand she turned quickly. McCabe was studying her legs but she relished the attention. " I have it."

" Yes, you do... Give me your keys."

" Excuse me?"

" Your keys. I'll have them fix your car at Belsons Garage."

Mattie closed her eyes in the brightening sunshine and several times she tried to speak. Giving McCabe the keys was a stupid idea. She hardly knew the man. " The rental company..."

McCabe moved his new tan work boots across the concrete. He gently grasped the agreement. " These people are liable, remember?"

" That's what you said."

" Take a walk down to the diner. I'll get your car in the garage and by the time I'm back, say around eleven, I'll bring you over to the property."

" Okay." She placed the car keys into McCabe's callused hand. Again, she trusted he would take care of the problems.

" Nothing worse than a bum car. See you around eleven."

Mattie stood on the curb as McCabe opened her driver's door and set his leather case on the passenger seat. The engine started and blue smoke billowed down the sidewalk. He shook his head from inside, leaned over, and rolled down the passenger side

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

window. " This car has Major League problems. I'll see what the rental people will do, Mattie."

" Thank you."

McCabe shifted into drive, checked the side mirror, and the tires crunched the sand as he looped across the cracked pavement. The car rolled into Belson's front lot smoothly as if it were on a predetermined course. Mattie pulled her pocketbook strap over her shoulder and her shoes clicked against the concrete sidewalk, sometimes sliding in the sandy residue as she headed for the diner.

5

She waited for a small truck to pass before she crossed the street. McCabe, rental papers in hand, punched numbers on the wall phone adjacent to Belson's register and counter. An older man, hands gyrating, walked into the garage. McCabe yelled something and motioned inside. He was like a military man in the way he called out orders made things happen. Seconds later, an old clunker, rusted along the trunk, began a quick descent down the closest hydraulic lift. One of the mechanics, a little guy with a crew cut and a blue uniform, backed out the car, screeching the tires.

She stepped onto the sidewalk near the diner's parking lot and cocked her head. McCabe threw the keys to the mechanic. The mechanic fumbled and dropped the keys, but quickly scooped them up. He started the rental and drove inside.

Mattie waited at the curb as an olive and white telephone repair truck turned into the diner lot. Then she walked onto a pressure treated plank ramp and held a shaky banister up to the aluminum door. She opened the door. A tinny radio blasted near the cooking grills. The greasy air was packed with the early morning aroma of bacon and eggs breakfasts and cigarette smoke was sucked outside through the open window next to the pie case.

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

One by one the locals looked her over. She should not have worn such a short dress, but she assumed she would have arrived at the Exchange House by now. These men looked benign, went back to their sports pages, or argued about local and state politics as they ate breakfast. It was just as well. She wanted anonymity while she was in Rexford.

She took a step toward the open booth down the end. The Formica table top was cleared, but not set. Her perfume must have drifted behind her as the heads turned. She should have worn jeans and an old shirt. They would all talk about her now. As she prepared to step into the booth, a short man, unshaven with a blonde ponytail, slid in front of her, captured the booth and spread a newspaper across the table. He looked up with a toothless smile and a swollen left eye. "It's mine."

"Thanks a lot."

"I won. I really did win."

"Good for you."

He pulled out a cigarette pack and turned the newspaper pages. Mattie shook her head and this time as she walked back to the counter, made eye contact with the men in the side booths. Eyes darted and swung by her in an unexpected mass confusion. Now the counter was taken up by a group of telephone repairmen.

She pursed her lips and was about to leave, when a man, probably in his fifties with a thick mat of gray hair and a green

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

checkered shirt, motioned one of his friends up. He waved her forward at the counter as he stood. " Free seat right here."

" That's all right," said Mattie, shaking her hands. She looked at his wedding ring and then up at the full plates lined on the stainless steel racks, awaiting transport by the pink uniformed waitresses.

" Okay."

She walked around end stool and sat.

" I'm Preble. Work for the phone company. You just passing through?"

Mattie grinned. She had met a man who had no idea why she had come to Rexford. " No, I'll be here for a few weeks."

" Really? You don't look like you're from around here."

" Arizona." A short waitress, elevated by the floor behind the counter, held a yellow pencil over a small green pad. " Order?"

" Do you have bagels and cottage cheese? Maybe some espresso?"

" Got English Muffins and butta, and La Fontaine blend."

Mattie paused. The grungy guy with the ponytail stared over the top of the newspaper. " That's fine."

" I throw in some jam," said the waitress as she turned to Preble.

" Your eggs and bacon are on the shelf, Preb."

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

" Good." She could see Preble turn toward the guy in the booth.

" Raymond Snowden. If he keeps looking at you, I'll have a little talk with him. Sometimes he takes things a little too seriously."

Mattie nodded and listened to Preble talk about his wife and three boys, all playing on Rexford's football team this fall. He was about to celebrate his twentieth wedding anniversary, but his eyes lit up when she mentioned the Exchange House. He described the acreage, where he played as a boy on the cliffs and said Captain Fairbanks was buried in the graveyard through the woods.

Mattie nibbled through her muffin, but had trouble with the acrid coffee. Raymond Snowden was not in the window booth, but his cigarette burned in the glass ashtray next to the newspaper and a plate of half eaten pancakes. He had stoked her insecurity about being so far from home and in the middle of a marriage breakup.

" Mr. Preble," she said as she stood and pasted a happy glow on her face.

" Preb." Preble stood briefly and shook her hand. " If you need anything while you're here in Rexford, you call me or Abbey. Leave rested and relaxed when you get back to Arizona."

" Thank you... Preb."

Mattie left a crisp ten dollar bill under the plate, waved at Preb again, but as she headed for the door, she focused on the smoldering cigarette in the window table's ashtray. She checked

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

her thin French watch John had bought on an overseas business trip. McCabe would return from his appointment in an hour and a half.

Goose bumps swept down her legs as she pushed the door's Plexiglas and stepped into the cooler air down the ramp. She had the odd thought someone was watching her as she looked past the numerous shops and older brick facades. Such a jittery feeling was normal, she thought, for a new person in a small, rural town. The storefronts, sidewalks and parking lots revealed nothing unusual. Rexford might allow her to regain her peace of mind, deposited in the time before she met John. In a short while she would arrive at the quiet house from the last century, along the shore, and when she left, she might attain the confidence she so sorely lacked at this very moment.

6

McCabe's polished black pickup pulled away from Belson's Garage. Unlike many new models, it was trimmed in glistening chrome and reflected a distortion of yellow leaves in the late morning light. The tires were wider than most trucks she had seen roaring past her Phoenix studio.

" I see you're still here," said McCabe with a quick grin from behind the wheel.

" I am." He left the powerful engine running and trundled around the truck's shiny black hood. Mattie thought, as he opened the side door, how John had never opened any door for her.

" Thank you."

He closed the door and the smooth new gray leather seat soothed her bare legs. In the wide mirror's spotless and polarizing light, McCabe walked into Belson's Garage.. She leaned back in the seat, circling her long fingers over the flawless, taut seat leather, and within the new truck's freshness her anxiety quickly abated. At least she did not have to deal with those garage mechanics and the loud popping when they removed lug nuts within the choking, stale automobile exhaust.

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

McCabe emerged, carrying both her white suitcases and tucked the overnight under his arm. His biceps were rounded and long straight veins laced his hairy forearms, forming a conjunction across his wide hands. His knuckles whitened. He lifted the cases upward in one singular motion, while keeping the overnight bag pressured against his chest, and set them all inside the black vinyl truck bed liner. He placed the overnight next to the other cases and stretched a red elastic cord securely around the girth.

Mattie studied every pristine inch of the cab before McCabe returned inside. A CD case was the only item out of place or not put away, and country music inundated the air. She peered through the rear view mirror again as McCabe tightened a third cord with a vicious intensity, around the suitcases, but as she glanced in the side mirror, the pony tailed Raymond Snowden slowly savored his cigarette back in the garage. Her body tensed and she enveloped her smooth hands around the truck's thick door handle. She turned away, toward the church bend, but her eyes gradually crept back to the side mirror and a bare cloud of cigarette smoke rose into the warming air surrounding the empty garage doorway.

McCabe opened the truck door and instantaneously his large frame and red flannel shirt filled the cab. He smiled as he looked over at her, furrowing his brow as he started the truck. " They said the weather would be warm. You all right, Mattie?"

" Who is Raymond Snowden?"

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

McCabe's face soured. " Raymond. Little Raymond..." He checked over his shoulder and turned onto Main Street. " He give you a hard time?"

" He took my booth at the diner."

" Big man. Maybe somebody will kick the shit out of him again and he'll smarten up for a few months." McCabe smiled as if he had just relayed poignant words for living. Then he looked at her again. " Don't worry about Raymond Snowden, Mattie. He has a predictable routine. Spends nights at The Surfside, gets home around nine-thirty, his mother puts him to bed. By seven he's working at Belson's."

" Scary character."

" He's just a little kid that never grew up. If you stole his marbles he'd probably go crying to his mother."

" He works at Belson's?" She sat up in the seat as McCabe's blinker pounded on the dashboard. " That man is working on my car, the rental car?"

" Good mechanic, Raymond. I'll give him that."

Mattie closed her eyes and her stomach knotted. She pictured Raymond's self-assured grin when he took the window booth. He was a little kid taking what he thought was his, but with no compromise. His glossy blue eyes were probably the result of smoking marijuana, although she had not detected the distinctive odor. But her mind shot back to John and his sometimes-frequent

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

use of that drug and other drugs. John scared her, Raymond scared her, and soon she would be alone.

The truck dipped, jostling her as she checked the side mirror. Raymond Snowden, the rental car and the garage were back atop the hill behind the bridge girders. The truck rumbled to the other side and McCabe went left, under a weathered black railroad trestle, stretching over a series of rapids.

" The good news is that the rental company will foot the bill."

" You didn't have to do that. Thank you."

He did not have to do anything he did. His politeness seemed to good to be true, yet she sensed he was genuine, probably the result of his military background or maybe his mother taught him good manners.

" Some things you just don't let go... Hey if you're worried about Raymond. Taking the booth was a power play. He has no power, Mattie. He's a little boy. Let him play his games."

" Has he ever been violent?"

His muscles tensed as he gripped wide wheel and his blue eyes tightened when he turned. " Mattie, the Fairbanks House is safe, Raymond is a little shit, and you're losing control."

She pushed her lips together as she closed her eyes. Ever since she walked into the upper office, she had the odd feeling McCabe knew everything about her, not just what was contained in the

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

official Rialto application. " My husband and I separated. I came up here to forget that and all the failure that goes along with it."

When McCabe said nothing and turned onto a long length of forested highway, she sensed he knew about John and the dead relationship. " You have artist supplies coming."

" How did you know that?"

McCabe stared ahead but he must have known that outburst was inappropriate. " Forwarding slip from Federal Express. You directed the supplies to my office."

" I was afraid there would be no one at the house."

" Mattie, you don't have to defend yourself. If I seem to know things about your personal life, I'm sorry. It's my job."

Now she had the only semblance of a friend up here mad at her. She sat upright, so rattled she wanted to crawl into a tub of hot water and stay there for hours. The distance from town and his ensuing silence contributed to her accumulating tension. " How far out are we?"

" Five miles. The cut off is around the bend. Another mile and a half to the hilltop."

" Hilltop?"

" The Fairbanks House was built on a high igneous protrusion. Geologically, it all happened in the Silurian period, four hundred plus million years ago. "

" You a geologist?"

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

" I like facts. They stick in my head."

" Hence, the rocky view over the bay... "

McCabe started to reach for the cigarettes on the seat as he slowed the truck. She looked back in the side mirror, cognizant the tree lined road had not a single house since they emerged from the railroad trestle road. In another time she might have traveled this road next to John in a fast moving sports car. She slowly turned. McCabe's mighty hands controlled the wheel and she visualized his bare broad shoulders and wide chest under the flannel shirt, but clenched her fist for sheltering such thoughts. She wanted no relationship now, physical or otherwise; only time alone.

He did not signal and turned right onto a narrower, tree covered dirt lane. Electrical and phone lines, sagged between leaning weathered poles within the pines.

" Many people use this place?"

" Year round."

" You live back in town?"

" Split colonial south of town." The road's slope started upward.

" Oh."

" Can I buy you dinner tonight, Mattie?"

" What?"

" I said, can I bring you to Brisky Whiskey's for dinner?"

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

She glanced at him quickly, skimming his dark eyes, hoping he would have asked her, but afraid he had. " I think I'll stay in."

McCabe ground his teeth and looked through the forest. She was too abrupt again, but he seemed unusually miffed as if he had problems dealing with rejection. His knuckles tightened to the bone on the wheel, the veins pushed back under the skin. He said nothing for several minutes as Mattie studied the roadside red underbrush and colored slopes, dotted with birches and pines. The tree lined entanglement and McCabe's continued silence disoriented her, and more unwanted tension pulsed down her tight arms as he tapped on the door handle.

Between two maples, branches thick with wide yellow leaves looping over the earthy lane, was a clearing and a bordering gray stonewall, constructed like a fortress barrier atop the hill. A white-shingled shed was nuzzled between a lumpy oak trunk and another stonewall running diagonally up a wooded knoll to the right. She saw lawnmower blades leaning against a dirty side windowpane.

McCabe did not brake, but coasted along an uncut green lawn with a black volleyball net, bordered with a pink neon strip, an adjacent horseshoe pit and a brick arched barbecue. He steered toward a brown, mildewed stucco garage, but Mattie studied the house.

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

The Exchange House's almond clapboards provided a linear smoothness around two small wings and the pane windows were bordered by aging maroon shutters. Dormers protruded from the rear section's cedar shake roof. Lacy curtains and the window's tiny square glass sheets, reflected the dazzling autumn display against the blue sky. She loved the way the tree branch shadows waltzed over the facade, but she was taken by the farmer's porch. Beyond the fluted posts, the rounded rock cliffs cut a swath through the foliage, revealing a wide blue ocean expanse to the thin horizon.

Mattie turned to express her delight, but McCabe had already opened the door and moved around to the truck bed. She stepped outside and removed her leather coat in the warming sun. Smiling broadly, she took a few steps across the smattered crushed blue stone and tire worn tracks. McCabe hoisted her bags as she surveyed the extensive grassy grounds behind the house. She had done nothing wrong by not accepting his dinner invitation. Maybe in a few days she would enjoy a place like Brisky Whiskey's.

Holding the bags, his eyes looked as if they were irritated by an elevated pollen count and he spoke in a higher, snappy voice.

" Listen, my beeper number is on the card next to both phones inside. Call me if you need anything."

" McCabe, maybe another day."

" Your car will be done in the morning. I'll call or leave a message on the machine if you're out. You can check out the

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

grounds from the information provided on in the packet. I'll see ya."

" Listen, I want to say something."

He opened his door and slid inside, reaching over to shut her door. The engine started quickly and he backed up in a large circle in front of the garage's two bays. He spun the truck tires toward the maintenance shed and raced through the two spreading maples at the hillcrest. In a dusty mass the truck disappeared like a skier on a downhill slalom.

She tried to forget his touchy attitude, closed her eyes and inhaled the forest sweetness. The bright sun flickered over her lids as a sea breeze brushed against her face. She opened her eyes and exhaled. Birds chirped deep within the woods up the hill along the sea cliffs behind her, but like a tranquilizing drug, the incessant quietude finally entered her body, soothing and relaxing her conflicting emotions.

Past the towering pines, the yellow-green birch leaves bordering the cliffs were set within a cascade of radiant hued maples and oaks. Scrub bush along the forest floor deceptively retained a summer green appearance. Occasionally, a new wind burst would pluck a leaf from a yard tree, spin it upward and glide it down to other fallen leaves across the dirt and grass.

She crunched the drier, curled leaves as she retrieved her bags, glanced past the maintenance shed and wondered why

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

McCabe became so indignant. Holding the bags, she perused the house's exterior again before entering. The house and the gray porch boards were crisp and clean. She smelled the fresh paint. The stone foundation, held in place with chipped and replacement mortar, revealed the house's true age. Dark cellar windows were cracked open and the side clapboards housed a glass electrical meter and junction boxes for the telephone phone and power. The black wire was painted up the clapboards and connected at a white gable corner. Both lines slumped to the weathered pole behind the garage and then continued back through a series of other poles to the highway.

She stepped onto an uneven brick walk and started toward the porch, but she stopped, captivated by the realization she was alone and miles from anyone. Huge trees with leaves still half green, spread sinewy branches toward the house. She stepped onto the smooth gray porch floorboards and her blue cotton dress was revealed through the screen door and the inner door's darkened glass.

Her dark image reminded her of what she had lost in Phoenix. Yet, her fears centered around McCabe's incensed attitude about her declining his dinner invitation, and she feared she had somehow offended the recalcitrant Raymond Snowden. As she shuffled across the straggling porch leaves and closer to the door,

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

the textured lines of her rusted hair and the intensity within her eyes crystallized beyond the screen.

She spun back quickly across porch and gripped the varnished balustrade. Controlling her accelerated breathing proved impossible. A smooth suede rock ledge extended toward the most brilliant blue water she had ever seen and the surf gushed against the rocks below. Without thinking, she descended the stairs and ran across the dirt. She became aware of the height above the sea when her shoes touched the rock edges. Across the vista, a curving sandy shore emerged, sandwiched between the green marshes she had seen on the highway bridge, and the continuously breaking wave crests, sloshing up the beach.

Mattie smiled, glancing briefly from the teepee structure near the river's end to a rock cluster, alternately covered with retreating white brine directly below. The spray shined in the sun for a fleeting moment before disappearing. Vertigo pushed her back. She rustled in the leaves and cranked her heart to a workout pace.

The surf crashed behind her and the breeze flapped the tree branches along the rocky edges. Conscious of her vulnerability she meticulously scanned behind every bush and tree trunk until the dense forest darkened her line of vision. Her heart pounded and she held her fists tight as a gray squirrel innocently scampered up an oak trunk and flew through the air to an nearby branch.

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

She closed her eyes for a second and started back to the porch. As she ran and fumbled for her key, she compulsively focused on the cliffs. A flock of Canadian geese honked high over the bay, no doubt heading for a warmer climate. She pulled back the screen door, keeping it open by securing the pneumatic tube, pushed the key into the oxidized metal lock, and twisted it several times before the inner mechanism popped. The worn steel knob turned easily and the door creaked open.

The reading room was to the left according to the floor plans she had memorized at poolside in Phoenix. A second floor staircase bordered a long and rectangular room, and afternoon light poured through the two rear windows over the wood grained floorboards. She imagined herself reading a magazine or a new novel as she stretched across the red button upholstered sofa below the staircase and high ceilings. Two additional chairs were placed at the corners next to brass-based lamps with wide pleated shades and an empty black and gold rocking chair stood motionless between the two back windows.

Mattie walked across the floorboards to the extensive brick fireplace. Its white mantle was set within sea green wallpaper, peppered with symmetrical pink roses. Knickknacks, candles, and a deck of cards were strewn along the mantle. In the center, a brass framed glass clock's mercury filled pendulum slowly swayed under a flowery, ivory clock face. If she could overcome her fear of

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

the isolation, the time here would gradually bridge the gap to her new life away from John.

She turned, her arms crossed over her chest, glanced briefly at a tattered black rotary phone on the small table near the staircase's newel post. Then she passed through the large white-framed opening into the kitchen. The newly waxed blue vinyl floor squares squeaked as she walked. She pulled one of the white cabinet's shiny chrome knobs. Sweet smelling inner shelves were stacked with dishes.

She turned again, feeling giddy as she retreated to the drop leaf oak table and saw the ocean again, visible through the forward bay window. Only the sound of her breathing and heartbeat broke the pervasive stillness. She tiptoed to the bay window and sat inside the ledge, smiling as the distant breaking waves rolled across the blue bay. Just as she had desired, even when she was with John, she was now completely alone.

7

As evening swept over the cliffs, she wanted to watch TV and would have stuck a video into the VCR had she been back home in Phoenix. But wide screen TV sets and crisp CD players were replaced by an AM yellow plastic radio on the kitchen counter next to the chrome toaster. In the moonlight stillness, miles out of town, Mattie soon became preoccupied with every creak and crack in the century old house.

The radio's speaker had amazing fidelity, resonating throughout the kitchen and reading room. She held a sketchpad in her hand, knowing her supplies would arrive from Phoenix soon, and studied the charcoal beginnings of a landscape sketch of the cliffs, shore and river, purposefully omitting the industrialized incinerator. She held it up to the end table lamp's soft bulb.

Then she set the drawing on her blue jersey and folded her hands across her abdomen as the radio sonata from the kitchen played clearer than she had hoped. The fireplace's smooth, white painted bricks outlined the neatly scrubbed inner hearth while above, the deep green wallpaper was adorned with a gold framed landscape painting tinted in somber dark hues.

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

The phone's long ring overpowered the violin concerto, but she let few moments pass. Maybe someone had dialed the wrong number or one of those computerized surveys had finally reached the rural woodlands of Maine. With a half smile, she grasped her pad and was about to start sketching again as another ring shook her.

She took the sketchpad as if she were carrying a book to class and marched over to the black rotary telephone. The ring trickled off and she stared at the phone. But the ascending clatter soon gyrated around the room again. She grasped the heavy black receiver, placed it against her ear, brushed back some loose hair, and an intermittent hiss rolled into the earpiece. Through the crackle she heard a car move by and waited for a human voice.

" Who is this?"

Distant through the hiss, a melodic chiming faded and the line clicked. Mattie held out the receiver and stared at the perforated, hard black plastic mouthpiece. When she put it to her ear again, she only heard the voice of the announcer on the kitchen radio. She became cognizant of her pumping heart as she set the receiver back on the hook. For several seconds she fixated at the bold numbers and letters on the white dial.

Now she could not concentrate nor sit down, and retreated to the kitchen. She turned on a lower wattage wall light, shaped like a large black rooster with a matching red and yellow shade, and

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

panned across the darkened kitchen windows. She wondered if the phone would ring again. Maybe she should leave it off the hook. She sprinted across the kitchen and reading room, and removed the receiver. The loud dial tone now drowned out the radio commercials. Leaving the phone off the hook would stop any unwarranted calls, but also leave her isolated. She returned the receiver to its original position.

The pink plastic clock's black minute hand moved continuously above the ceramic double sink. Nine-thirty in Maine meant seven-thirty back home. She twisted the radio volume control and returned in silence to call D.R. She spun out each number, the line clicking as the dial rotated slowly back into position.

The line made an assortment of noises, understandable since she was dialing through the fragile set of wires extending down the lane back to the highway and then across the United States. When the line connected and she heard D.R.'s number ringing, she raised her arm in the air and smiled. But she remembered thinking about the previous phone call and the muted chimes.

" You have reached Deborah Raynes. If this is a business call please leave your name and number and I will get back to you as soon as possible."

" Damn!" Mattie tapped her tightened fist against her pursed lips as the machine beeped. " D.R., this is Mattie."

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

Someone picked up. " Mattie. God, you made it. Where are you in Maine? What's it like? Cold it must be cold..."

" Mostly warm. D.R., listen, I'm miles from nowhere. This house is so quiet!"

" You wanted to get away."

" But it's beautiful. The view, I've already started to sketch the cliffs and the ocean. It's so quiet."

D.R. chuckled. " I know what that means."

" What does that mean?"

" Means you miss your man. He called here, you know. Over the weekend. I guess he was in Chicago or somewhere."

Mattie gripped the phone tighter. " You didn't tell me that. What did he want?"

" Wanted to know how you were. I think he has second thoughts about the divorce."

Mattie's eyes pushed upward as she nodded her head quickly.

" He's still in Chicago, isn't he? Things aren't going to change, D.R."

" He sounded real sorry, Mattie... I told him I'd talk to you once you got back from Maine." Mattie's mouth slowly opened but she did not say anything. She had kept the Exchange House trip from John because she wanted total privacy. Again the distant chimes bounded through her thoughts. " Mattie, are you there?"

" What else did he say, D.R.?"

" He said he missed you."

" I'm sure he does... If he calls again, just tell him it's all over. I can't live with him away and he knows it. He just doesn't care about me as much as he does the business. If he would tell Harland Hynes he quits..."

" Then you still love him."

" Let me know if he calls you again."

" I have your number up there. You relax, Mattie. Paint those cliffs and the ocean... Enjoy the time away."

" Thanks. I'll talk to you..."

" Night."

Mattie let the phone fall into place. She pushed air from her lungs through her grinding teeth. She grabbed her pad, shut off the reading room lamps and plopped herself back on the velvet couch. With just the dim kitchen lamp's glow, she pulled the cliff sketch from the pad and set it on the coffee table. She propped her feet on the table, using her thighs to stabilize the pad. Grasping the pencil, she dragged the lead over the rough paper, creating the oval outline of a man's face, and squared off the jaw. When she carefully outlined the wide brow and the straight nose, she knew she was bringing McCabe to life on a piece of sketch paper, inside a distant darkened room, above the nearby crashing Atlantic surf.

* * *

The gushing water from the second floor tub's polished chrome faucet sounded throughout the house. Mattie opened the screen door and stepped into the cool moonlight. Ocean waves, stark their motion, forever marched inward toward the dreamy marsh. The shore was white under the moon and a lighthouse beacon on the hill beyond the river swept the bay. She closed her eyes and listened to the distant breakers, overlapping the surf bashing the rocks below.

Fear moved concurrently with solitude and loneliness. The house was so far removed from town. The idea of anyone coming out here was ludicrous, but she was bothered John knew she was up here. She folded her arms again. John hated to lose and there was no telling what he might do.

Mattie moved back into the house. She pulled the door shut, listened for the lock to click into place and then she turned the dead bolt, maneuvering the metal slug into a wood drilled tunnel inside the frame. On the staircase she shut off the reading room lights from a side switch and the room blackened. Her smooth bare feet nestled on the soft stair runner as her eyes adjusted to the moonlight's swath cutting across the floorboards.

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

She climbed the stairs, past an octagon window and the narrow storage room on the second floor. The white ceramic tub, raised on little brass legs, was centered in a bathroom, separating the stairs and the bedroom, and directly over the back of the reading room. The tub bubbled with a hovering steam as the cascading water produced a deafening cacophony across the hall. Mattie turned the paddlewheel handles, embedded with a circular white ivory and black **H** and **C**. The warm vapor soothed her dry skin and she paused.

She walked to the right, above the kitchen and into an oversized bedroom with a single rose flowered hurricane lamp, glowing next to a four-poster, cherry wood bed. The room was swept by pale yellow wallpaper, with creeping English Ivy woven within a pattern of baby's breath. Four elongated, thick-beveled trim windows were adorned with beige laced curtains, furrowing in the evening breeze. From an antique cherry highboy, she slid open the bottom drawer and gently removed her flannel nightgown, but she doubted she would need it.

The wide floorboards creaked as she returned to the bath and stepped onto the cold white tile. She pulled her jersey over her shoulders and lifted her feet into the soothing waters, inundated with a sweet jasmine body lotion she had sprinkled on the dry basin. Her sensitive skin slid against the ceramic and into the

The Fitton Chronicles Exchange House

massaging water. She closed her eyes and inhaled the fragrance and raised her arms along the smooth tub rim.

The black telephone on the tiny downstairs table rang and startled her in the warm water. She sat up quickly, clutched her dry terry face cloth and waited for the next ring. A second escalating ring soon rattled the house. Mattie debated whether leave the security of the heated water. In her mind as the phone rang a third time, she stood next to the rotary dial phone in the moonlit room downstairs. The hiss and muffled chiming of the earlier call never left her and she prayed the ringing would cease.