

OUT
OF THE
BLUE

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A Generational
Love Story
to Last a Lifetime



Elizabeth Blake Schloemer

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Part One: Anno Domini 1916

August | 1

Part Two: Anno Domini 1918

April | 13

May | 83

June | 115

July | 151

August | 203

September | 247

October | 289

November | 319

December | 339

Part One:

Anno Domini 1916



August, Boston, Massachusetts



As if he were blending into the luxe damask wallpaper that shimmered in the light, John Edwards Junior faded into nothingness. His mother was hosting one of her infamous parties at her Beacon Hill mansion, and everybody who was anybody was there. Mr. and Mrs. Hobnob, Miss Pinky-in-the-Air Socialite, Mr. and Mrs. Aristocrat, Mr. Man About Town, and of course The Look Down Their Noses. These frivolous names are what John and his brother called people whenever they attended one of their mother's events.

Thinking of his younger brother made John smile. Yet even with his beguiling smile, no one noticed him just as no one had noticed him all night. Like many times before, John went unnoticed because he could communicate only with his hands. In a room full of exceptionally well-educated people, not one person knew sign language except a couple of servants and his parents.

John glanced down at the wristwatch that had once belonged to his father and sighed. Scanning the room, he sought out the best way to escape. He could zigzag through the crowd and out the front door, keep to the sides of the room and exit from the kitchen, or slip out into the garden and hop the fence. Hopping the fence seemed like a good idea and rather fun if it weren't for the fact he was in a stiff shirt and tuxedo that felt like a straitjacket. *Damn*, he thought. Boring like vanilla, he decided to leave through the front door. Less chance he would damage his expensive tuxedo, and perhaps he could spot his father on the way and take him home too.

John's parents lived discreetly apart. His mother, Evelyn Edwards, spent most of her time at her residence in town, a city mansion that was far too large for one person. John, his younger brother, Robbie, and their

father, John Edwards Senior, who went by the nickname JayJay, lived mostly at the family's summer home in Oyster Cove. Naturally, John had a room at his mother's, but he was never comfortable there. Only occasionally did he have a reason to stay in town—for instance, if he went to a baseball game at Fenway, or it was a holiday, or it was late, and he didn't feel like making the drive back to the beach town where he was most comfortable. Wherever his boat was docked was where he felt most at home.

John didn't have many friends, but he did have his brother who was his best friend. Except his brother was away in the navy, serving his country. John wanted to serve too but had been rejected because he was mute. He couldn't do anything he wanted to do because he had been born voiceless. He couldn't do serious, important things like join the armed forces or hold down a reputable job that would be deemed worthy by the society into which he had been born. Like being a banker or a stockbroker or an executive at the most prestigious company in town—his family's business, Edwards and Sons Shipping and Steel. Born on the shores of Massachusetts, the company had deep roots as it had been passed down to the oldest son for generations. Holding up the expensively decorated walls while gazing upon the sparkle of the crystal chandeliers and occasionally smiling at passersby were all he could do when he attended his mother's pompous parties. He couldn't wait to get away from the heat of the crowd made up of the wealthiest of New England bluebloods, debutantes, and big brass, generals, and admirals. Big brass that Edwards and Sons did big business with, stocking the navy with a fleet of ships.

John found his father in his secret hideout, a cutlery pantry in the corner of the ballroom that his father had fashioned into a small, wood-paneled bar so he too could escape from his wife's parties. JayJay was tall, good-looking, and always the consummate gentleman. He and his eldest son looked much alike; they even shared the same eye color. The only difference was the color of his hair. Pronounced salt-and-pepper strands feathered throughout his maple-brown hair, making him extra dashing in his tuxedo. Because he was a bit fatigued at such a late hour,

he wore horn-rimmed spectacles that only enhanced his silvery-gray eyes.

Comfortable in a wingback chair with his feet propped up on an ottoman, JayJay swirled a glass of brandy in his right hand while admiring a large painting that hung over the bar. The painting was of yachts rounding the light ship during a race. One of the yachts was JayJay's, the lead yacht in which he had won the race when he was about his son's age. Recalling the moment fondly, he did not see his son standing before him.

With a flash of his hand, John got his father's attention. "Jump ship with me."

John's father laughed. "I'm afraid I'm in till the bitter end. Your mother has me roped and tied."

"I'll cut you loose," John signed.

Again, his father laughed. "You did that last time, and I got my hand slapped. No, you go on home, and I'll see you in the morning. Go on before she notices you're gone."

"I highly doubt that. No one has noticed me all night. Not even Mother."

"Consider it a blessing in disguise. Go now and make your way out the back and over the fence."

John displayed his tux. "What about my glad rags? She just bought this monkey suit for me."

"It's a fine fit. Stash it in your closet and change into civilian clothes."

Liking that idea, John waved good-bye and headed for the kitchen, then up the servants' staircase and to his room. He changed his clothes and shoes and grabbed his motorcycle jacket. He skipped down the main staircase and was about to make his escape out the front door when he remembered his wallet. In haste, he had stashed it in his father's bar in the ballroom. Why he had put it in the jacket of his tuxedo he didn't know, for he had no use for it. Finding it cumbersome, he had tucked it into a secret compartment. After making his way to the bar, he found his father gone. No matter, he walked over to a side table where an old treasure map was displayed, turned the table slightly, and pushed on the side. Out popped the drawer that held his wallet. After putting the table

to rights, John took a moment to look at the map. Was it real or a dummy? He didn't know. One day, when his brother returned, they should set sail and investigate to see if the map really led to any treasure.

He heard the giggles of young women and turned to see three girls standing before him in their evening frocks, daughters of one of his mother's guests. "Good evening, ladies," he signed.

One of the girls giggled again. "Oh, you're right, it's adorable," she said. "Rather disturbing at the same time."

"I told you so. Like one of those oddities at the circus," another of the girls said before taking hold of her companions and fleeing.

"Terrible shame," said the third as she left. "He's not bad looking, if I do say so myself. What good will it do him, though?"

There was nothing wrong with John's hearing, and the snooty girls knew this, but that didn't stop them from being rude. And he was used to such ridicule as he was often treated as a curiosity. Not a lot of people had ever experienced sign language, and when they saw John speak with his hands, he was often met with insults instead of acceptance. It was sheer ignorance on their part, and yet John was glad to see them go.

Following the girls out of the bar, he watched as they soon became lost in the crowd of guests. Fixated on the swirl of pretty heads, John didn't notice his mother had emerged from the crowd and stood before him. She cleared her throat. He looked down at her and exhaled. "Mother."

"What are you doing in that outfit?"

"Leaving."

"There are important people I'd like you to meet. You'll need your father to interpret for you. I told you to bring your interpreter with you this evening, but you refused." Evelyn never liked interpreting for her son; she found it trying and bothersome. In truth, it humiliated her.

"No," John signed, putting her off. "I'm not meeting any more people tonight."

"But. . . ."

"But what, Mother? Why do you want me at these parties? When I was a child, you had me hide in my room because you didn't want anyone to see me talk with my hands. Now with Robbie out to sea, you

want me front and center. You won't let me work at Edwards and Sons even though I'm the 'Son,' so why should I continue to play this charade and make nice with people?"

"For the sake of the family, John. If nothing else, for the sake of appearances. Think of it as protocol."

Why does she always have to say things like that? I can't stand it. He never understood how any form of protocol could apply to him when his appearance was an embarrassment to her. "How can there be protocol when I have no position in the company? Whether you hide me away or put me out front, nobody sees me. Trust me." His mother had always made it clear that there was no role for John in the family company, reasoning that he could never represent the intricate workings of Edwards and Sons if he was mute.

"That is not true, John," Evelyn said, carelessly gazing out at her guests. "You simply don't let people take notice of you. You suffer from timidity." She turned her eyes back to her son.

And you suffer from denial. Feeling an argument building, John couldn't help but goad his mother. "When Robbie is in charge, maybe he will let me work there."

Evelyn didn't like the idea of her Robbie running the place either. In no way was she ready to give up control. "When your brother's commitment to the navy is over, we'll see about his position within the company," she said. Uncommon as it was, Evelyn was head of the company, not her namesake husband. He had taken a back seat to running the company so he could care for John and his brother. This role reversal of sorts had worked, to a degree.

You can't run my life forever, John wanted to say, but he refrained. "I have to go."

"What were you doing in your father's bar? You were fiddling with that map, weren't you?"

"I left my wallet in there."

"You do know that map came from that derelict your father insists on being friends with. The one that snoops around Oyster Cove." "Cannon Ball Bart. He was a merchant mariner, although some say he's

a swashbuckling explorer pirate who sailed the seven seas. Sounds fun to me.”

Evelyn was not amused. “What sort of a name is that? It’s godless, I tell you, and I do not want you to associate with him. He’s bad news.” *You don’t want me to associate with anyone who interests me.* John didn’t know Bart’s real name, nor did he care. Bart was a colorful character, never without a tall tale, seedy limerick, or seafaring tune, and John liked him, but he wasn’t about to argue that one with his mother. “Good night, Mother, and good evening.”

Evelyn folded her arms coldly. “Good-bye.” Even so, she held out her cheek for him. He dutifully kissed her, and she was on her way to mingle with her guests as if she were the queen of the Bay Staters, which she was. The revering crowd parted, and soon she was enveloped in adoration.

John took one last look around the ballroom and was off. Out the patio doors, through the pristine walled garden to the fence. Up and over, he went, down a walkway that led to a garage. Inside was his motorcycle, covered and waiting for him like a long-lost friend. Smiling, he ran his hand down her sleek frame and leather seat, walked her out to the alley, and started her up. Goggles on and the wind in his hair, he headed back to Oyster Cove, finally free.

Agate Manor, Oyster Cove, Massachusetts

Waking in a cold sweat, John panted as if he’d been treading water for hours. In his dream he heard cries of desperation and the gurgles of drowning, mangled bodies. He saw anguished young men clinging to the carcass of a ship, its debris floating in the water, and Robbie’s lifeless body thrashed against the rocks. In that instant he knew, with a cold chill of terror, that his brother was dead. Shivering as he stared out the window at the moonless night, he had a desperate urge to cry but couldn’t. Numbness filled him as he lay in bed thinking of his beloved brother. So, when the telegram arrived in the morning confirming Robbie’s death, he felt no shock or disbelief, only despair.

Battered by a rapid succession of giant waves against a dangerously rocky coastline, the navy cruiser USS *Memphis* had been hit by a tsunami off the coast of Santo Domingo. What had started as a peacekeeping patrol ended in death and destruction for those on board. Forty good men perished. One of those men was Robert Langley Edwards.



When Robbie died, John lost his only confidant, as well as a valiant friend, his verbal voice, and his primary connection to the outside world. No matter how far from home Robbie had been, John had always felt responsible for his younger brother. He berated himself again and again. *I should have saved him. He never should have died. It should have been me.* His inability to prevent his brother's fatal accident made him feel truly helpless. Now he had few friends, no job, and a hard-hearted mother who wanted little to do with him. Worst of all, he had no ambition.

At the age of twenty-seven, John should have been living life to the fullest. Nothing was out of reach for him as long as he could buy it. Goodness knows he had all the material goods anyone could ever want. Gobs of money, a grand mansion by the sea, an enviable college education. A Renaissance man with strengths in academics, etiquette, dance, and sports, well-mannered, and drop-dead gorgeous in a tuxedo to boot. Despite his credentials, women wanted nothing to do with him. He could dance with them, serve them caviar, mix a proper drink, buy them trinkets of gold or mink, but nobody wanted a pretty package that couldn't speak.

In the world to which he was born, there were beautiful mindless women and dull handsome men by the barrelful. Bespoke clothes, endless parties, exclusive social clubs, horse races, and fancy grown-up toys. Money competing for money did not thrill him. Flaunting old money was not his style either. Financially carefree, he could own yachts, automobiles, and motorcycles by the dozen; estates and city apartments in triplicate—but these did not interest him. If he wished, he could travel the world in luxury with a caravan of servants, but there was

no thrill in that for him either. No matter how many possessions John had, he lacked one very important thing: love.



John sought consolation from the only soul he found tolerable—indeed, the only woman who would have anything to do with him—Robbie’s fiancée, Clare. He’d known her most of his life, and through all those years, she had never ignored him.

When John visited Clare, she wasn’t crying, nor had she shed a tear in response to Robbie’s passing. John assumed it was because of shock, and he was glad when she hugged him and assured him that they’d be all right. In the process of hugging his late brother’s fiancée, he almost forgot his troubles. John touched her creamy soft cheek, and without thinking, unconsciously brought his lips close to hers. For a second, Clare seemed lost in the moment as well; then she snapped to attention and pulled away.

John retreated, stumbling over a small table, and upsetting a potted plant. Feeling as if he had betrayed his brother, he shook his head in apology. His vital hands useless, he could not say as much. Even more than remorse, he felt a desperate need to escape.

“John, you’re upset. Please come back,” Clare said.

As her voice echoed painfully in his head, his mind began to spin and his hands to shake. He had to get away, and quickly. If there was one thing John could do well, it was run. He ran all the way to his family’s home. He ran through the front door and straight up the stairs to his room. In a leather knapsack, he packed the few things he thought he might need on the road. Nothing of importance, really, and nothing sentimental either.



Packed and ready to go, John stood in the doorway of his father’s office; he knocked on the open door to let his father know he was there.

“Hello, Son, how are you?”

John's hands told his father what he didn't want to know. "I'm leaving, Father. I need to figure some things out. I don't know when I'll be back. I need to get away from here for a while; I just can't stay. There's nothing here for me, nothing. Do you understand?"

"I do, but are you sure there's nothing I can do to change your mind?"

"No, Father. Please understand, it's what I need to do."

Knowing his son's strife, JayJay didn't try to reason with him. He said simply, "Do you need anything? Money? Transportation?"

"No, I have money. I think I'll walk. I just feel like walking."

From behind the carved mahogany heirloom desk, John's father sat regretfully looking at his oldest son. He surveyed him from top to bottom, wanting to remember his face, his body language, even the clothes he was wearing. A final mental snapshot was all that he would have of his troubled son. "I almost wish I could go with you. I'm proud of you, John. I hope you find what you're looking for, that you find your peace."

"Good-bye. I love you."

"I love you too, Son. Godspeed and good luck."

No hug, no handshake, no tears, no emotion whatsoever was displayed between father and son. John felt numb and useless as he walked out the front door of his family home. He would feel that way for weeks. He would walk until he felt something, something that would make him feel alive. He wasn't sure what he was looking for or how to find it. All he knew was that he was tired of drifting along in a life that didn't belong to him.

Part TWO:

Anno Domini 1918



April, Parnell, South Carolina



After more than a year on his journey and weary of wandering the Eastern coastline, John turned toward Texas or perhaps California. In all, he had walked the shores of eight states, until he decided to take a right turn and, in the far western corner of South Carolina, found himself in the small town of Parnell. Weary, hungry, and out of supplies, he stopped at Tully Neston's Mercantile for some food, a much-needed toothbrush and razor, and possibly a visit to a bathhouse. He didn't have much money left, so food was his first priority.

John strolled around the country store and spotted a stunning seascape on a shelf. The small painting was dotted with soft brush strokes in rich hues of greens, blues, grays, and touches of red and orange that popped off the canvas, making it come alive as if he could feel the spray of sea air on his tired face. The pretty little piece reminded him achingly of the beach in front of his home. It made him miss the fun he used to have with his brother and his father—his comfortable house, a home-cooked meal, and most of all, his treasured boat.

Over the months, time had taken a toll on John. Grief filled him in such a way that he couldn't bring himself to buy new clothes. Woven with memories, his clothes were the only tangible connection he had to his past. He had lost too much weight, he was fatigued from lack of proper sleep, and not once had he cut his hair. Now, seeing the sweet little painting made him more homesick than ever.



John was still holding the painting as the store's doorbell jingled. When a woman entered, the first thing he noticed was eyes that were a shade of blue as brilliant as the tropical waters of the South Seas. Standing up straighter, he juggled the painting in his suddenly unsteady hands and almost dropped it. In all his life, John had never seen such a woman. The golden tones of her brown hair radiated in the light, making the soft pink of her cheeks look luminescent. The creaminess of her cheeks, which he would love to have stroked, made John wonder if they were as soft as rose petals. He returned to admiring the painting so he wouldn't be caught gawking.



Lizzy had noticed John the second she walked in the door. It was the first time she had seen anyone admire Sarah's painting. As if the stranger could feel her eyes on him, he turned around to see who was looking at him, so Lizzy hastily inspected a box of Lux laundry soap. She didn't want to seem as if she was rudely staring at him, which of course she was. *Who the holy heck is that delicious-looking man?* she wondered.

John couldn't help chuckling when he noticed the intriguing woman was intently reading the soap box upside-down. He had tantalizing thoughts of his own as he looked her over. But what good was it to fancy her, a beautiful, well-groomed woman? He would move on, and she would be only a pleasant memory to keep him company on his long journey to nowhere. Knowing there wasn't much he could do about such thoughts, he went back to enjoying the seascape. Then John returned the painting to the shelf. Walking past the woman, he smiled pleasantly at her and made his way to the counter.

Lizzy casually followed to the opposite end of the long counter. She wasn't easily enamored, but suddenly she was like a hound dog on the trail of a perfect scent. As she waited her turn to give Tully her list of supplies, she noticed John's purchases: five cheese sandwiches, two bottles of Dr. Pepper, three cans of hardy beans, Oreo cookies, candy bars, half a dozen apples, a couple of ripe peaches, two pieces of fresh pie, and a tin of crackers. She thought that wasn't substantial enough for

a man of his stature, but she also thought, after a bit more inspection, that he looked thin and a bit ragged. What he needed was a good home-cooked meal, a proper bath, and some clean clothes. His dismal appearance made him look as if he were hiding beneath a costume.



There was a war on in Europe, and people were tired, worn out, and waiting for it to come to an end. As John counted out his money, Lizzy observed that he should be in Europe with the rest of the boys his age. Even in his rough state, he looked able enough to be a soldier.

John had been hoping for enough to buy a toothbrush in addition to the food. Again, feeling Lizzy's eyes on him but not daring to look, he continued to count out his money. In an instant, he had become infatuated with her, and standing next to her, fighting the urge to stare back, was brutal. He needed to keep his senses.

Tully completed the transaction and told John it would be a dollar and ten cents, leaving him a mere six cents for a toothbrush. Without thinking, John signed his question to Tully.

Lizzy had never seen such a form of communication. As she tracked his beautiful hands and arm movements, she thought he was more attractive than ever—his hair, his body, those hands, his very being.

Tully, not understanding John, turned his attention to Lizzy. "Lizzy girl, you know you can't wear that thing in here."

"Tully, there's no law about it, not a one. If you have a problem, then you know who you can talk to," she snapped.

Compelled to look at her, John couldn't see what this Tully fellow was referring to. All he saw were long legs, an hourglass figure, long brown hair, and a perfect nose. There was absolutely nothing wrong with any bit of her. From the ground up, John was taken by her unique beauty. He thought to himself, *Statuesque and classy, not like those girls back home all skinny and flat. That hair! It would be down to her waist if it weren't for that ponytail. Not a bad backside either, round and very desirable. Not going to do you any good, though, so back to the real world it is for you.* He hoped his attraction for her didn't show on his

face, but he was a man, after all, and he knew a beautiful woman when he saw one. Tully's gravelly voice pulled him back to reality.

"Lizzy, confound it, I told you to take that damn thing off when you're in here. It scares people. Now, go give it to your man Rudi."

Lizzy never had understood Tully's blatant rudeness. The constant grimace on his face complemented his dirty apron and sour attitude perfectly.

"Does it scare you?" Lizzy asked John.

John's voiceless mouth fell open, and he could hardly shake his stunned head no. He still didn't know what Tully was complaining about. John only noticed how tall she was, almost six feet, if he had to guess. He noticed her hands, too. He noticed the nape of her neck and the gentle arch of her eyebrows. He had never even kissed a girl before, and now suddenly he found himself wanting to kiss Lizzy on her rosy lips, her neck, her collarbone, and well, just about every part of her. "Give me your list, Lizzy, and come back later. Now run along before I ring up Benny." Once more John was forced to abandon his thoughts about her when he heard Tully's annoying voice.

"No. This gentleman was before me; you'll help him first," she ordered as she looked straight at John.

Giving her a slight nod of his head in thanks, John went back to trying to explain to the irritable store owner that he wanted to buy a toothbrush.

"I don't understand you boy, stop wastin' my time. Pay up or git. I ain't got time to waste on no imbecile."

Having been called worse names in his life, John ignored the insult and smiled pleasantly at the shopkeeper. He began to reach for the pad and stubby pencil he kept in his back pocket for such occasions when Lizzy jumped into the conversation.

"Tully, you ignorant grump, he just wants to know how much he owes."

John's head spun around, and he locked eyes with her. "Do you know sign language?" he asked with his mesmerizing hands. He had never come across anyone who knew sign language. He was stupefied that this beautiful creature standing before him knew what he was saying.

“Um . . . oh no, I’m sorry, I don’t know sign language . . . I just assumed that’s what you were asking. Pardon me, I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“Thank you,” John signed.

It wasn’t difficult for Lizzy to understand the gesture John had made. “Yes, sure. You’re welcome. I’ve seen it in a magazine, sign language that is. Now, where did I read about it?” Lizzy mused. “Was it *National Geographic* or *Scientific American*, or maybe some book in the library? I can’t remember really. We don’t have a very big library. You see, our library is about as big as a shoe box, so it must have been some sort of magazine that was in circulation.”

John half-smiled at her words. He would very much have liked to discuss the matter further, but instead he returned to the problem at hand. He thought it best to not make trouble, so he decided to buy his food and leave. After putting the items in his knapsack, he stepped up close to Lizzy. “Thank you. I appreciate your help,” he said with his hands.

Lizzy stumbled as he came closer, and as she looked into his eyes, she saw they were gray. Gray with a blue ring around the pupils, a piercing quality that seemed wolflike. *Do wolves even have gray eyes?* she wondered. Unsure about wolves’ eye color or what John was saying to her, Lizzy felt dizzy because he stood so close. She couldn’t catch her breath as she felt an odd sensation curl around her body, a feeling she had never, ever felt before and could not identify. The two just stood gazing at each other. *This is ridiculous*, Lizzy thought. Her feet wouldn’t move, and she couldn’t speak out loud either. Nothing about her seemed to function properly at all as she gazed into those gray eyes.

Lizzy had thoughts of running away with the stranger. She had imprudent visions of him whisking her off to bed, only to have those miraculous hands all over her. *Oh, please stop, you stupid girl, just stop. You’re making yourself nutty*, she thought, scolding herself. It occurred to her that John could understand what she was thinking by the longing look on her face, or maybe he was a mind reader. When she nervously dropped her shopping list, John picked it up and handed it to her.

As John handed her the list, she imagined grabbing John by the collar and giving him a huge, wet, sugary kiss right on his tantalizing smacker!

She then envisioned kissing him so intently that they both fell on to the penny-candy counter only to roll around in the sweet sticky candy until her hunger for kissing the captivating stranger had been satisfied. Lizzy's eyes darted from her list to the stash of peppermint candies and back to the list in John's outstretched hand. "Thank you," she said nervously.

"Thanks again for your help," his hands flashed.

Perhaps it was her attraction to him that made it easy for her to understand him. "My pleasure . . . rather, uh, yes, of course." Lizzy reached in the peppermint jar, took out a candy, and popped it in her mouth as a distraction.

John reluctantly walked past Lizzy and out the front door. Lizzy clung to the list in her hands like a sacred document, merely because he had touched it. Tully's annoying voice brought her back to reality.

"Lizzy girl, give me that list, and come back in a half hour to pick it up. Stubborn as you are, you take that gun off before you come back in, or I *will* talk to Benny, and that will be four cents for that there pinched peppermint."

"Tully, there's absolutely no one in this store but me. Like I said, there's no law against it, so you can complain to the sheriff all you want. See if I care." She read over her list as she sucked on her overly expensive peppermint candy. "Four cents, why that's ridiculous! You're a robber and a thief, you know that?"

"Inflation, Lizzy. It's wartime, and I gotta make a livin' no matter what I'm a sellin'. Now pay up, or I'll report you to the authorities for stolen goods!"

"One piece of hard candy is hardly stolen goods. In fact, you're the one who's a criminal. I bet my bottom dollar that you overcharged that man for absolutely no reason at all except you're greedy." Lizzy reached in her pocket, gave Tully eight cents, and she took out one more peppermint from the candy jar. "The only thing inflated 'round here most undoubtedly is your fat head. I'll be back shortly for my order."



Outside the mercantile store, Lizzy saw the stranger walking down the road. She watched him for a while before saying softly. "Not bad looking from behind either."

"What's that, darlin'?" Uncle Rudi asked. "I haven't seen such a pleasant look on your face in quite a long time."

"There's no look on my face. I was merely making an observation."

"About what, darlin', the man's constitution?"

"For heaven's sake. I said nothing about the man."

"There's nothing wrong with my hearing, Lizzy."

"Honestly now, I never said anything of the kind." Lizzy didn't like how Rudi began to chuckle, so she handed him the other peppermint in hopes it would hush him up. "Have you seen that man before?"

Rudi Rollins had been patiently waiting by his truck while his niece ran errands around town. "No, darlin', can't say I have." Rudi popped the peppermint in his mouth as he contemplated the departing stranger.

Lizzy said, "He looks like a mangy dog. Obviously, he's not from around here. I bet he's one of those Yankees. Those clothes he's wearing are expensive . . . or were at one time. Posh department store clothes, and those boots too. I bet he's wearing more money than he's got in his pocket." Like a stray dog you want to take home and put back to right, Lizzy suspected the stranger might actually be a prized show dog down on his luck and in need of pampering. Little did she know how right she was.

"For a mangy 58, he sure did make an impression on you. Seems to me he needs some good food and a job. Go on and ask him if he needs work; we sure could use the help."

"He wouldn't last a day in the fields. Besides, those hands of his aren't meant for that kind of work. I have a funny feeling about him, I'm not sure what it is but . . . I don't think that's a good idea. Come on, let's finish up here and head home." When Lizzy went to get in her truck, she noticed Rudi staring at her with a look of great concern mixed with a whole lot of frustration. She had seen that look many times before and, just like before, she ignored it. The last thing she needed was Rudi pestering her or telling what to do. She knew she needed help, but her stubborn pride won over just like it always had before.



After she'd finished her errands in town, Lizzy visited her dear friend Kathleen Whitaker at the dress shop. Kathleen worked at the town's only women's clothing store, Miss Adele's Finery. After her visit, Lizzy picked up some books at the library, collected her supplies from Tully, went to the feed store, and then said hello to her other uncle who worked in town. Less than an hour after her first encounter with John, she was surprised to see him once again, this time walking down the road toward her farm.

"Isn't that the man you saw, darlin'?" Rudi asked.

"I think so, but he couldn't have walked all this way. Gosh, it's several miles from this point."

It was more than ten miles to town from Rollins Farm. "You should offer him work. He looks like he could use it, as well as a place to rest his head for a while. We could use the help, Lizzy," Rudi encouraged.

"It's obvious he's a high-class city boy. Besides, like I said, I have a queer feeling about him."

"He looks like a decent fellow to me. Pull over and ask him."

"Oh fine, fine, fine!" Pulling the truck to the right of the road a few yards ahead of John, she stood waiting between the cab and the open door.



Unable to believe his luck, John stopped dead in his tracks. There she was again, the long-legged, brunette beauty. A colored man sitting in the passenger seat of the truck got his attention too, though he never turned around to look at John, not once. The rifle Lizzy had been wearing slung across her back in town sat on the gun rack along the cab's rear window. She had her hand on its butt just in case she needed to use it. John suddenly realized that was what the clerk at the store had been complaining about, the rifle.

It was a stare-down between John and Lizzy as they stood in the road, each waiting for the other to speak first. Rudi cleared his throat, prompting her to speak up. "Yes, excuse me, but you're on a private road." "I didn't know, I'll head back," John signed.

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite understand. I must admit the things I read in the magazine about sign language were about general gestures." John tried to explain by motioning his head back over his shoulder and walked his fingers along to indicate that he'd turn around and leave. "No, that's all right. Did you walk all this way? It's a long way to go in such a short amount of time, especially in this heat." John waved his thumb in a hitching motion.

"Oh, I see." After inspecting him again, she observed, "You have no hat?"

He shook his head, self-consciously rubbing the top of it.

"Well, do you need work?" She glanced at her uncle sitting in the cab, but he continued to stare straight ahead. When she turned her sights back on John, he nodded his head. "Well, then, get in the back, but do be careful; there's breakables back there," she said with a surly manner and got back in the truck.



John had no idea where he was going or what he was in for, but he climbed into the back of the truck. At least he would be able to get off his tired feet for a while and enjoy a ride through the countryside. He was

also hoping for the possibility of a meal. Any decent food would do at this point, but a home-cooked meal would be heaven.

On his ride to the farm, he took in his surroundings. The seedlings growing in the field looked the same as they had for the last several miles. On a hill to the right was a building resembling an old sea captain's house. It was strange to see a house meant for the seacoast in the middle of rural farmland, in the midst of absolutely nowhere.

The house was enormous, with a white exterior, black shutters, and double front doors that invited you in. The structure was complemented by an enticing porch, and of all things, a widow's walk at the top. The drive was lined with sadly neglected rose bushes. They were miles and miles from the coast of South Carolina, so what was a house like that doing on a farm in the middle of tobacco country?

Turning a bend to enter a courtyard, Lizzy pulled the truck to the side of a warehouse, and both she and Rudi walked back to meet with their new employee. John quickly took in his surroundings, and he liked what he saw. Despite the neglected house, the property was in good shape. They were in a large grass courtyard with a picnic table, shade trees, a basketball hoop, and, in the near distance, a pond. In the horseshoe-shaped courtyard stood an old farmhouse that looked to be pre-Civil War. There was a magnificent white barn in perfect condition that was obviously more than a conversation piece, as well as a warehouse and some other odd-shaped buildings. At the base of the pond were a few old paddocks and a stall with one large black horse residing in it. The hillside was flanked by more tall shade trees, one with an old pair of swings hanging from it, and finally the large house on the hill, looming sad and desolate above it all. The old house appeared hollow, and the empty swings were lifeless too. Across the courtyard stood a cottage. It looked warm and inviting, matching the larger house with its white paint, black shutters, and black front door. It had charm, with two big windows and a small porch of its own. He couldn't help but wonder who lived there.

Lizzy pointed to the farmhouse. "You'll be staying in the bunkhouse. Which is actually the summer porch of Rudi's house." Leading the way, she assumed John would follow, but he didn't. She held the screen door open. "Well hurry up, I don't have all day." Grabbing his knapsack, he took a couple of long strides to catch up to her. "Pick a side, left or right bunk?"

There were beds on either side of the old screened-in porch, each with a side table, an oil lamp, and a chest of drawers. Choosing the right side, John put his knapsack on the bed. He stared blankly at Lizzy, his mouth shut and his hands still, awaiting further instructions. She gave him the once-over again, from his knapsack with the initials "JHE," to his clothes, his wristwatch, and his well-made boots. His shirt had the same initials monogrammed on the pocket. He surely didn't look the type to steal, so those had to be his.

Finally, Lizzy said, "Just in from the low country?"

To be sure there was no miscommunication, he got out his pad and paper and wrote, "Low country?"

"Charleston. Columbia or Savannah, perhaps, or have you come here by way of Raleigh?" Lizzy looked curious as John simply shook his head and offered no further explanation. "Well, have you ever worked on a farm? Tobacco that is?" John again shook his head.

"Then you should know the work is hard. Long days and not much pay. Not much that I can offer you anyway. I can only pay you five dollars a week plus room and board. You'll have three meals a day. Half of Saturday off and all-day Sunday to do as you will. If you're not planning to be around for the weekend meals, then you need to let me know. Rudi will tell you what to do and show you around." Lizzy nodded

toward her uncle, who was standing outside the door. “He’s the property manager here. This is his house, and don’t I expect you’ll have a problem following his rules. He’s up with breakfast ready at four thirty during the week, Saturdays at six. It’s his call on Saturday when you’re allowed to quit. Usually, it’s around noon. I’ll provide lunch and dinner. Dinner is at six o’clock sharp, every night. There’s an outhouse and bath set up around back on the other side of this house. Come late in the season, if you’re still around, you’ll be glad for the summer porch. I can tell you’re not from around these parts, so you may not be accustomed to the heat and humidity. It’s intense, to say the least, but you should be able to manage. It’s warm now, but it will be thick as pea soup soon enough. Be sure to use the mosquito netting at night; otherwise, there won’t be much of you left after the skeeters get done with you. Any other questions, you’ll just ask Rudi.” She was about to introduce the drifter to her uncle but realized she didn’t know his name and asked for it.

John had his reasons for not giving his real name, mainly because he didn’t want to be found. Getting out his notepad and pencil, he wrote his childhood nickname, Jack. The only last name he could think of on such short notice was that of his dog. In all the places he had been in the last few months, not one person ever asked his name. No one cared, and it wasn’t important. Now, however, it mattered. Taking the notepad offered, she read his name out loud, “Jack Montgomery?” Although she wondered why the initials on his shirt were different, she decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. He was a drifter and, in a day or two, he’d likely be gone. Rollins Farm had taken on many drifters, and it didn’t much matter what their name was so long as they could do the work. “Well, then, Mr. Montgomery, this is Rudi. As I said, he’s the manager of Rollins Farm.” “Rollins Farm?” Jack quickly wrote.

“Yes, it’s my farm. Please don’t forget, Mr. Montgomery, dinner is at six o’clock. That fancy watch of yours does work, doesn’t it?”

He nodded tersely. For the life of him, he couldn’t figure out why she was being so curt. She hadn’t been like that in town. He guessed she was apprehensive about a stranger working on her farm. Putting his worries aside, he shook hands with Rudi, a good firm handshake at that.

Lizzy took that as a good sign. She liked it when people shook hands, considered it a sign of good character and decency. Having nothing more to say, she turned to walk out and unload the truck. But before she could go, Jack gently touched her on the shoulder to ask a question. She jumped, instinctively and by now automatically reaching for something on her back. There was nothing there to reach for; her gun was still in the truck.

Lizzy breathed out slowly to regain her composure and turned back around, only to bark at him, “What is it?”

Quickly he wrote, “What is your name?” and handed her his notepad.

She had forgotten to introduce herself. “Jefferies, Mrs. Bertrum Jefferies.” After a diffident shake of Jack’s hand, Lizzy hastily left the two men to get acquainted and went about her chores.

There it was, Jack noticed as they clasped hands. How could he have missed it? A cheap gold band on her left ring finger. *That’s not right*, he thought. *It can’t be. How can she be married? This is wrong, very wrong.* Jack had principles and would never under any circumstance compromise a married woman, but he had a strong feeling something was not right. *I’ll stay, all right, stay and see why she’s foolishly married to the wrong man*, he vowed. Revealing the truth would not be such an easy task for John aka Jack. As he watched her unload the truck, he thought, *she’s scared too. She was reaching for that gun on her back.*

Scared and married. Not a good combination. Let's hope you know what you're doing, Jack. For better or worse, I get the feeling life is never going to be the same because of her.

Rudi showed Jack around the premises—his house, the barn, the warehouse, and the bathroom setup—and told him that the large house on the hill was referred to as the Big House. Thankfully, there was a toothbrush and some powder and all the other amenities he needed to revive himself.

Then he said, “Jack, I suggest you take a rest before supper. You certainly look like you could use one. Word of advice, don’t go asking too many questions right away. Lizzy needs time to warm up to people, you see?”

Taking out his trusty notepad, he wrote to Rudi, “That is her name? That is Mrs. Jefferies’ first name?” “Yes, Lizzy Rollins Jefferies.”

Dizzy from all that had happened in the last couple of hours, Jack lay down on his bunk to rest before dinner. The name Lizzy bothered him. He didn’t think it suited her in the least. It was a name for a girl, not a beautiful woman like her. It wasn’t proper, not for her. Instead, he would think of her not by her Christian name Elizabeth but by his name for her—Liz. He closed his eyes. It felt good to be on a bed and somewhere safe. It felt good to be around respectable people. Immediately, he had taken a liking to Rudi. Generally, he could size people up fairly quickly, and he thought Rudi was a well-mannered man of good standing. On the spot, he had the feeling that he and Rudi would become good friends. Maybe it was his kind eyes and even-toned voice, or his calm demeanor. Whatever it was, Jack had instant respect for him.

It didn’t take long for Jack to drift off to sleep. He was dreaming about secrets, his brother, the sea, crashing waves and wedding rings and Lizzy’s blue eyes.

“Jack, wake up.” Rudi shook him vigorously to rouse him, but he was so exhausted he could barely open his eyes. “Come on, it’s suppertime. You don’t want Lizzy to be mad at you.”

Suddenly he opened his eyes and remembered where he was. Rudi was looking down at him. He checked his watch to see it was a couple minutes before six. He had hoped to wash up before dinner. “Lizzy’s a stickler for supper on time. Get a move on, son.” Rudi paused a moment. “You all right? You’re looking a mite peaked, son.”

When Jack gave him a thumbs-up, Rudi continued, “Some food will do you good. You’ll be good as new in no time. Up you go.”

Jack was expecting to walk to the Big House, but Rudi led him to the cottage instead. Through the screen door, he could see Lizzy making dinner. He was expecting a cook, not that she herself would be cooking. He also expected a husband, but he was not there either. As instructed, he asked no immediate questions and hoped she was in a better mood. Rudi sat at the head of the old cypress farm table and told Jack to sit to his right because Lizzy always sat on the left. Raised with proper manners, he waited for Lizzy to sit before he did.

“Jack, sit down,” Rudi told him from his seated position. He hesitated but took a seat when Lizzy ushered a curt command for him to sit. Still in a bit of a fog, he found the delicious aroma of food made his stomach growl. He had little interest in what was being served; all he cared about was who was serving it. Keeping his eyes on her, he watched Lizzy move from the icebox to the stove and back to the counter

to finish fixing up the plates of food. Again, trying to be polite, he waited for Lizzy to start to eat before he did, although Rudi was eating before she even sat down. As she reached across the table to set his plate in front of him, Jack found he couldn't move a muscle. Due to lightheadedness, he didn't even have the strength to pick up his napkin.

Sitting down in her usual spot, Lizzy must have seen his odd expression, because she said, "Do you not like what I'm serving? Around here, you eat what you get. That better not be a problem, Mr. Montgomery."

With that warning, he forced himself to be alert and looked at the plate before him: meatloaf, mashed potatoes, collard greens, peas, salad, and biscuits. A true feast, scrumptious, every bite of it. He hadn't eaten food like this in over a year, not since he'd left home.

"This is great, thank you," he signed.

"Good, then eat up . . . please," she ordered.

With a slight nod of his head, he picked up his fork and said a little prayer. He was thankful for the good fortune to have met her twice in one day, to be working for money, and for the food he was about to eat. He was grateful for a lot of things at that moment, and he was even grateful that she was being so ornery with him. Somehow it made him laugh a little.

To hide his amusement, he began to eat. There was no conversation among the three, not even small talk. At first Jack tried to be polite and eat slowly, but when the delicious food hit his empty belly, he found he was ravenous. He forgot about his manners and making conversation as he inhaled his food. Lizzy and Rudi stopped eating and watched in amazement. Within minutes, Jack's plate was clean; not even a pepper flake was left.

"Well, if this was an eating competition, you surely would have won. Would you like some more? There's plenty; it's not a problem," Lizzy said kindly.

After he made the sign for "please," she got up to prepare a second plate of food. In one hand, Lizzy retrieved a couple of beers from the icebox. She gave one to Rudi and the other to Jack.

Jack was unable to believe what he was looking at—liquid gold, a delicious cold beer. He held the bottle as if it were a golden Incan idol he was paying homage to, and then, as a good worshiper should do, he downed the precious liquid in seconds flat. The last time he'd had a beer, he was on his boat sailing with his dog whom he missed very much. "Do you have a dog on the premises?" he scribbled down on his pad. He thought it was an innocent enough question to ask.

Astonished by his question, Lizzy became brusque again. "A dog, no. They just get underfoot, steal your food and the covers on your bed. Heaven knows, stray dogs are the worst. Once you give into them, they become comfortable and won't leave you, no matter how hard you kick them."

The look of smug superiority on her face made Jack smile. Even with his limited interaction with her, he guessed she would no more kick a dog in need than pass a wandering, hungry stranger on the road. He was sure she had a place in her heart for destitute souls. "But what about obedience and loyalty? All the comforts a dog can give you?" he wrote.

"Mm-hmm, comforts that pale in comparison to being an all-around nuisance, no matter how well they warm your feet or guard your front door. No, I am sorry. Dogs require attention, patience, and discipline, and frankly, Mr. Montgomery, I don't have the time or the need for such a nuisance, no matter how cute and furry the flea-ridden mongrel is. . . ." She became serious then, adding, "All they really do is die before their time and leave you lonely. Nothing else, nothing more."

Jack's innocent moment of lightheartedness faded when he saw Lizzy's fork drop to her plate and felt Rudi's eyes on him. As he looked over at him, Rudi was shaking his head as if to say, *No more, drop it*. Doing just that, Jack began to eat his second helping of food with the same gusto as the first.

"Would you like more, Mr. Montgomery?" Lizzy asked after he had cleaned his plate once again. Jack didn't want to be indulgent and greedy, but he was still hungry. "It's OK, you can have as much as you want." Without even waiting for an answer, she picked up his plate to refill it. Jack tried to thank her, but she had turned around and could not see him.

"So, Jack, where are you from?" Rudi inquired.

Turning his attention to Rudi, he wrote down on his trusty notepad, "North, up North, nowhere in particular."

Lizzy cocked her head to try to read the note upside down. Pressing her dry lips together, she rolled her eyes and went back to preparing his plate of food. *So much for knowing more about him*, she thought. She couldn't help but think that maybe he was the diversion she longed for, a mystery from some faraway land to take her mind off her troubles. She was sick of the South and all it had to offer. Sick of the small town where she'd been born, sick of the farm and everything around it. Lizzy's curiosity about Jack felt unnatural to the point of unsettling her. But she'd do what she always did when something good or interesting came along, make a conscious effort to resist it.

In such a short time, Jack had unlocked a feeling of happiness in her. This clouded her mind because it was battling with emotions she knew all too well: anger, frustration, and sorrow. Happiness had eluded her for so very long that she wasn't sure she could welcome it, even if she might find it with Jack. Disappointment and regret were things she knew how to deal with, like old worn shoes. She just put up a barricade and lost herself in emptiness that was just enough not to drown in.

Four years earlier, Lizzy had made the biggest mistake of her life. And now, she was still punishing herself by pushing everyone away.

Grabbing a couple more beers from the icebox, Lizzy handed one to Jack along with his third plate. As much as he wanted to, he didn't dare ask questions. He asked nothing about the house on the hill, the cottage in which he dined, the intriguing colored man sitting next to him, or the mysterious brunette across the table. He just ate and drank at breakneck speed, as if everything might magically disappear if he didn't eat fast enough. As he set down his second empty beer bottle, Jack started to get dizzy. His eyes glazed over, and then he began to sway as his eyes rolled back in his head.

Lizzy braced her hands on the table. "Rudi, I think he's going to pass out!"

"Got 'im." Before Jack could hit the ground, Rudi had caught the overzealous eater, brought him back to his bunk, taken off his boots, and put out the light. "Glad you're here, Jack, glad you're here," Rudi said quietly.

Maybe it was the full belly of food and the beers that made Jack pass out. Perhaps it was sheer exhaustion from wandering for months on end, or the fact that he no longer needed to find his way home. Home didn't have to be a place; it could be a person. Without knowing anything about Lizzy, Jack knew she was his home.

Saturday

Late in the afternoon of the following day, Lizzy and Rudi were talking in the courtyard after lunch. “Well, how do you think he did today? Will he last more than a week or two?” she asked.

“Yes, yes, I think he’ll be fine. He’s a strong man. He just needs food and rest. I think after a week or so, he’ll be more than fit. With any luck, maybe he’ll stay the season. We sure could use him. It will be a tough season as it is, and with Milo working at the Ramseys’ a couple of days a week; well, frankly, Lizzy, we need Jack in order to make a profit this year. I don’t know what we’ll do if we don’t make this season count for all it’s worth. As it is, we won’t make the whole season, why, we’ll be lucky if we make it to September harvest. With Jack, we can increase our profits, I’m sure of it.”

“I know, but if we can make it to September and clear the fields, that’s all we need. That and a good price. Let’s see how he does on Monday.”

Rudi nodded in agreement. “I’m off to Lula’s. You’ll be fine here; there’s nothing to worry about, darlin’. He’ll be sleeping the rest of the weekend anyway. You get some rest too.” With a kiss on her forehead, he was off down the road for his weekly getaway with his longtime companion, Lula Barclay.



Jack overheard some of the conversation as he lay in bed resting. Before he heard Rudi say he was leaving for the weekend, he fell sound asleep and didn’t wake until almost dinnertime. Still without a razor or a clean change of clothes, he took a shower to wash up as best he could before making his way over to the cottage for dinner. Again, having no idea what to expect, he vowed not to ask too many questions and to do as he was told. When he knocked on the screen door, he saw Lizzy turn around, salad servers in her hands, and motion for him to come inside.

“Good evening, Mr. Montgomery. Come in, sit down.”

He sat where he had the night before. Foregoing his manners, he sat immediately, just as she had told him to.

Lizzy went to the icebox to get a beer. Before she handed it to him, she asked, “You won’t pass out again, will you?”

Through his nose he let out a long, breathy laugh through and shook his head.

“Are you feeling better then?” “Yes, thanks.” he signed.

Before Jack could drink his beer, she put a hamburger with homemade potato chips, carrot salad, and cold rice salad in front of him. Another good-looking meal that he couldn’t wait to dig into, but this time he did wait for Lizzy to sit down before he started to eat. Once she was seated, he pointed to Rudi’s empty chair.

“Oh, he won’t be joining us tonight; he has other plans.” She left it at that, not wanting him to know Rudi would be away all night.

“OK,” he signed before her began to eat. As Jack ate, he took notice of her attire. She wore men’s denims with a wide belt and a simple white blouse that looked like a man’s shirt. She was barefoot and without jewelry other than her wedding ring. He remembered her wearing something similar the day before. Her hair was still in a ponytail. He also noticed her gun sitting directly behind her, within arm’s reach, which he found curious. Maybe she needed it fend off wild animals, or maybe it was because of whomever she was afraid of. Jack certainly hoped that wasn’t himself.

“Did Rudi explain things? That we are transplanting bright leaf tobacco right now and how the whole process works?”

“Yes, but tell me what you learned about sign language from the magazine,” he wrote on his pad.

“Sign language? I’m trying to talk to you about the farm, Mr. Montgomery, and how things work around here.”

Quickly he wrote on his notepad, “Yes, I understand. Transplant, irrigate, harvest, cure, auction, warehouse to cigarette companies.

Now your turn, how do you know about sign?”

“Mr. Montgomery, do you understand we don’t have a large crop this year? We are short on workers, and we can’t even use all our acreage. It’s important that we get all we can out of the season’s crop. I do most of the stringing; that’s where you loop the tobacco leaves with string on a rod, and then it’s hung to cure, just so you know. I don’t have any mules or even a beastly ox, Mr. Montgomery.”

“Mules?”

“Yes, mules. They help with plowing the furrows, and they pull the drags. I have only one draft horse, Gus. He pulls the wagon and now the drag and the tractor,” Lizzy explained.

“Why don’t you have mules, and what is a drag?”

“Oh yes, of course, a drag is a cart that the harvested leaves go into . . . to be removed from the fields. The mules died last winter. They were getting on in years, and I had hoped they would make it one more year but . . . well, I don’t have the means to buy new ones, and I may not continue on with the farm next year so . . . so I don’t want to buy new livestock or equipment if I’m not going to stay on. Um . . . anyhow, with Gus helping, we drag the leaves to the wagons, unload the leaves—carefully, of course—and then use the tractor to pull them. It’s a good system for the time being.” “Where are you going?” Jack wrote.

“I don’t think that’s any of your business,” she said sourly. “The heart of the matter is, it’s going to be a tough time for me, and I need all the help I can get. Tobacco has been at a good price the last couple of seasons due to the war, and this year it will most likely be even higher. Therefore, a little may go a long way. Fetch a high price at auction, very high. Cigarettes are the only source of comfort our soldiers get.”

“OK, I got it. Sounds like a great deal of work for only three people,” he replied, realizing she needed money and probably lots of it. He was determined to find out where she was planning to go if she wasn’t going to be around for another season. “Where are you going?”

“Relentlessness is not becoming, Mr. Montgomery. Do you smoke?” she asked abruptly.

He wrote, “No. Some doctors may claim it’s beneficial for your health, but nothing is ever going to help my condition.” It was common knowledge that nicotine was thought to cure a variety of illnesses, from asthma to winter cough. However, Jack had been born mute, and nothing, not even medicinal cigarettes, could change that.

“Heavens, I didn’t mean it like that. I was just wondering. I myself feel it’s a bit like working in a candy shop. Too much of a good thing, you know? Kills the desire to smoke for me.”

“I was mildly joking, I apologize. A tasteless joke on my part. No, I don’t smoke, never fancied it.”

“Yes, well, I’ve never fancied it either. My mother used to say that smoking stunts your growth. Maybe I should have taken it up, and then I wouldn’t be so tall.”

Jack loved her height. He wanted to comment on it, as well as her beauty, but realized this was not the time. He needed to get to know her better before he could comment on her appearance. In the meantime,

he was just pleased she was talking to him in a more casual way. Smiling, he looked down at his empty plate.

“Would you like another hamburger?”

“Please,” he signed.

After she handed him his second helping, she walked over to the desk to get him a new pencil, replacing the worn nub he’d overused. She was so nonchalant, as if she had done this for him every day and thought nothing of it. “Thank you,” he signed.

“For what?” Lizzy asked.

“For the pencil.”

“Oh sure, they’re in the desk if you need more paper too.” They sat in silence for a while, as she didn’t seem to want to talk much about herself or the farm. “Um, it’s not just the three of us, it’s four, for the time being that is.”

“Pardon?” Jack signed.

“Milo, he’s our other worker here on the farm. Didn’t Rudi tell you about him?”

He vaguely remembered something to that effect but did not respond.

“I’ll refresh your memory. He works Monday to Thursday, and he lives closer to town. You’ll learn a lot from him. I guarantee you that.”

The art of conversation seemed to escape them as quiet filled the room again. Quickly Jack looked around the cottage for something revealing about Lizzy that he could ask her about. He saw the kitchen and combined living area, one bedroom and, of all things, an indoor bathroom. The walls, the linens, and even the wrought iron bed were white. There was the corner kitchen and the farm table, a couch that sat underneath a window, and two big armchairs across from it. A coffee table completed the sitting arrangement. But what intrigued him most was what hung over the fireplace, more paintings done by the same artist as the painting in the mercantile store: a beach scene, a snowy mountain range, and orange groves. Another showed wispy tall trees, beautifully set as the backdrop against some golden hills. Other than that, Jack saw no photographs or other mementoes to give clues about Lizzy and her circumstances. Clean and well kept, but not sterile, the cottage seemed cozy to Jack. Inviting as it was, he thought he should put his attention back on his hostess. “Did you paint those pictures?”

“My sister, she’s an artist.”

“She’s very good. Where are they of?” Jack wrote.

“California. My sister lives there.”

“Is that where you’re going?”

“Um . . . I don’t know. Would you like some pie?”

“Please,” he signed. *That’s enough*, he thought as she fixed him a piece of peach pie, *No more questions. Watch your footing and don’t push it.* He quickly finished his pie, leaving the plate nearly spotless. Trying to do his part, he got up from the table and put the plate on the counter next to the sink.

“You don’t have to do that, Mr. Montgomery. I’ll clear the table.”

“Thank you for dinner.”

“You don’t have to thank me either. I don’t mind. Rather, that is, it’s my way of showing appreciation.” When Jack raised an eyebrow, she went on, “What I’m trying to say is . . . everybody works hard around here. The days are long. The one thing I can do to show my appreciation is make a good meal. Rudi, Milo,

and . . . well, anybody who works for me, I like to make sure they're comfortable and well fed. It's simple, but it's my way."

When was the last time somebody did something nice for you? Jack wondered, but he didn't ask. "My thanks and good night," he wrote.

"Good night, Mr. Montgomery." Lizzy stood at the screen door and watched him walk across the courtyard to his bunk. "Sleep well," she said for only herself to hear; then she closed the front door and locked it tight.