

One

*M*orning comes early to the summer camps on the eastern shore of the island, and on this Memorial Day, Tessa Bartlett tries to locate her feeling, now that she's back on the porch of Jake's summer cottage for another year; maybe she's a little nervous, or maybe she's a little smug. Happy? Sure. The house looks out to the bay and then to the shore that wraps around Grand Isle like a cupped hand, protective, full of water, waterbirds, and thick green leaves. Tessa watches the first sun ignite the flowerbeds along the brick path leading down the lawn to the dock.

From where Tessa sits, her bare feet propped against the porch rail, the late-blooming white tulips Jake agreed to last fall seem lit from within, as if they're exploding with their own internal light. This weekend, the spring flooding has subsided, and Jake has restored the dock to its summer spot on the speckled surface of the bay. There's a little wind, and Tessa can hear it rustling in the branches of the trees hanging over the porch roof. She feels fortunate, that's what it is, a little surprised, and hard on the heels of that, a flicker of her old feeling: undeserving.

She hasn't slept well, waking at two, at four, and finally at six, slipping out of bed so as not to disturb Jake, standing at the front window, watching the water. Now, her head hurts, and yet the day is so pitch-perfect, and the sun is so warm, that watching the tulips' heads bobbing on their green stems, Tessa wonders if this is happiness, sitting here with the flowerbeds and her good, strong coffee and her early morning moment alone. Soon, Jake will be getting up, and

he'll come down the stairs in his running attire, his sneakered steps light on the stairs.

She ought to ask Jake about getting new cushions for the porch furniture today. The old ones were here when Jake bought the cottage from his uncle three years earlier, when Tessa was first getting involved with him. The place was a wreck, and since then, together they've made it more than habitable. The old cushions are faded nearly white from the sun, and all the life's been squashed out of them. She could make a trip into Wisconset this morning, and she probably should, because later today the guests will be arriving for their traditional welcome-summer barbecue, the first of the season.

She hears Jake first by his humming. The mood will be good: it's "La Habanera" from *Carmen*, and then screen door opens. "Good morning, my sweet," Jake says. He surveys the bright morning, the bay, the perfectly tuned day. "Another day in hell." She turns to look at him and smiles. She's glad to see him. She is. "Yes. It really is," she says, as always when he points out the beauty of the place with his happy sarcasm wishing she had a more clever riposte. "Just awful."

He looks good for fifty, with his compact body that he's kept trim, in his baggy t-shirt and running shorts, curly-haired, leaning into the porch rail to stretch his legs. He looks boyish, especially without the rimless, round glasses he wears when he's working on a violin or reading music. Sometimes she thinks he looks better than she does, despite her attempts to keep up with running and yoga classes, and despite the fact that she's six years younger.

He straightens, steps toward her, and she thinks for a moment he's bending to kiss her; instead, he takes a sip of her coffee. "Ah," he says, shivering in mock-shock at the strength of it. "One sip enough to stop your heart. I'll be back," he calls, trotting down the porch steps, then trotting backward, blowing her kiss, singing out the high lines of *Carmen's* "La Habanera": "Mais, si je t'aime / Si je t'aime, prends garde à toi!"

Tessa stays on the porch for awhile, watching her luminescent tulips, drinking her coffee, appreciating the long sigh of open time ahead of her, when she doesn't have to rush to an early morning appointment with a graduate student, or, worse, with an anthropology faculty committee. The semester is finally, truly over, and for the next ten weeks she's free to work on her book on the early Arctic expeditions: how the Inuit ways of seeing the world changed with the arrival of those

first, strange explorers. She knows it would be more marketable to write about what's happening there now, with the customs melting along with the ice, but she doesn't like thinking about that; it's too terrible, too real.

She stands, and stretches. She's got to get a decent night's sleep. Hands on her hips, she too descends the steps, walks out into the yard, scouting the area around the little gardening shed, looking for evidence of ferns and flowers beginning to push their heads up from the leaved earth. If the place had been built on a much bigger scale, it could be called a "compound": beyond the shed, nestled among the forsythia, sits the former canoe hut that Jake has renovated into a studio for his violin making, but this is his inviolable territory, and she's left it unplanted, each year letting the forsythia and the wild asparagus fern take over.

She turns back toward the water and her flowerbeds. The moment of the most intense light has passed, the sun diffusing across the lawn, the tulips now past that initial stage of saturation. The perennial beds look like hell, and she probably won't have time to pick up new cushions for the porch, because she'll be in the garden all morning, and everybody's coming at six.

She doesn't bother collecting her tools from the shed; instead, she just drops to the ground and starts pulling the weeds, inspecting the leaves of the plants, raking aside the dead leaves from winter with her hands. "If you want to put in a flower garden, be my guest," Jake told her that first summer, when she said she could imagine it lush with perennials. "Flowerbeds are overrated. All that work and nothing to eat," he'd said. "And don't think you're putting me on weeding duty. It'll be your responsibility."

Soon, she's worked her way up the beds that line the long, straight pathway from the dock to the porch, and she's making her way toward the shed, carrying a handful of detritus, stones and leaves and little sticks, and things are looking better, less neglected, and that's when she hears it, a small whimpering cry. She stops moving.

The closest house isn't quite close enough so that she'd hear a bit of crying from it, but she looks up there anyway, through the spit of woods to the next lawn. Sometimes the owner, Ivy Bless, is about in her yard, pretending to garden but mostly spying, Tessa thinks. But today, the house looks utterly empty.

Above her, the salty wind of the clear day breezing up from the southern, sea side of the island is picking up. She can hear it brushing

through the needled branches of the tall pines that cluster around the yard. In the water, the dock creaks a little. There is no cry. She shakes her head, crouches to the bed that fronts the shed, which she'll fill mostly with annuals. Her hands are now covered with dirt, earth packed under her short nails. But then it comes again, she's sure of it. This time, the sound continues, and she turns toward the shed; she's certain it's coming from the shed.

As she stands, wincing a little as her knees straighten, the sound gets louder, and now she can hear that without a doubt it's a cry.

As she rounds the corner of the shed, the memory that still haunts her here comes back: the first time she and Jake came up to Grand Isle, when they'd been seeing each other just a few months, early spring, the flash of a cat bolting across the road, the thick thud of the tires as they hit. And then the rest of that trip, which she doesn't let herself think about. She has a flickering thought that what she's hearing now is the mewling sound of that cat, the ghost of that cat, and she even goes so far as to wonder why it would haunt her now. But then she's at the door of the shed, peering in.

It's dark inside, and smells musty, dirt and potting soil and manure, and something else too, a stronger, pungent smell. Everything is the way she left it last fall, her old pots lined up on a shelf, the rakes and shovels propped up in a corner, and the wheelbarrow tipped on its side, at Jake's suggestion, so that any errant rainwater or melting snow wouldn't collect there through winter.

She sees a motion down on the floor, and hears again the mewling, which she quickly sees isn't a cat at all, but is a raccoon, a tiny raccoon, too small to be on its own, and that's when she realizes that the smell is coming from the body of the mother raccoon, lying not far from Tessa's own feet. She gasps, presses her hand to her chest, frozen in that moment, having no idea what to do.

And then she hears Jake behind her, saying, "What's going on?" still panting a little from his run. He'll never learn to cool down slowly, preferring one last quick sprint down the driveway.

"Look," she says, and points into the shed, and he looks, and his breath catches, too, and he says, "What is it? A raccoon? Did you kill it?"

This is just the kind of thing he says sometimes that makes her wonder if she knows him at all. "No, of course I didn't kill it," she says. "I just heard the sound, and I came out here, and it was dead, and its baby is crying."

“God, Tess. Didn’t I tell you to shut up the shed tightly last year? We have to do better than this.” Jake exhales through his lips, making a sound a little like a horse. “Come on,” he says, “we’d better go inside and call Dick.”

“Dick? What’s Dick going to do?”

“He’s got a shotgun,” Jake says, turning toward the house, and he’s up the stairs already before she’s left the shed. There is the baby raccoon, nuzzling its mother’s fur, nudging the mother’s body with its tiny nose.

She sprints across the lawn and up the steps to the house, letting the screen door slap shut behind her. Jake is already in the kitchen, dialing the old-fashioned rotary phone, but she reaches over and taps down the hook, severing the connection, even as she does feeling her own heart begin to pound. Usually, when his mood turns, she makes herself very quiet and very small.

“What on earth are you doing?” he asks.

“That’s what I should be asking you,” she says. “You’re not really thinking of killing that baby raccoon.”

He gives her one incredulous look, and for a moment she’s scared of what he’s going to say, or do, but he hands her the receiver, shrugging, then he takes a glass from the drainer beside the sink, turns on the tap, and lets the water run before filling the glass. He drinks the water down. He’s still breathing hard.

“You can’t keep wild animals around, Tessa,” in the overly calm voice he uses when he’s angry with her. “You don’t understand how it is up here. That adult raccoon—”

“The mother,” she corrects him.

“All right, the mother raccoon,” he begins again, “is dead, and there’s no sign of foul play. I mean, it isn’t like it got hit by a car. There’s rabies around here. Remember when they had to put those dogs down?”

“That was years ago,” she says. “Anyway, they were Rottweilers.”

“Okay, what bright ideas do you have? What else are we going to do? Even if it isn’t rabid, we can’t have a raccoon hanging around the house getting into the garbage. Plus, I don’t want a wild animal that close to my studio. I’ve got thousands of dollars of tools and violins in there,” he says, and turns on the tap again. He drinks another glass of water.

She stands against the counter with him, both of them looking out the window toward the shed. Soon, they see the nose of the baby

raccoon appear in the doorway of the shed, then one small hand-like paw pushes open the door, and Tessa grasps Jake's arm. "This is terrible," she says, and he says, "Yeah."

She only says, *this is terrible*, but wants to say more, wants to tell him how she wants more than anything to go out there, cradle the raccoon in her arms, and sob. Instead, they stand at the window together, watching as the raccoon mewls a few times, looking up at the swaying pine branches, then wobbles away from the shed, away from the house, into the woods that run up to East Shore Road.

On Grand Isle, everyone knows each other, through avenues that are still a little unclear to Tessa. Torsten and Peg, who Jake has known for years in New York's in-grown world of artists and musicians and professors, own a low-slung, 1950s split-level on the eastern marsh just down the shoreline from Jake's place. Franci Weisman, who along with her husband made up a foursome with Jake and his girlfriend of the moment, inherited a camp from her mother on the island's western shore, the marshy side where the other mainland shore cups around the island. And then there's Dick Grasso, the only one of their group with a flashy house on the southern, open-ocean coast, who will come to the party with his new wife. They all know each other and have known each other, their stories and memories predating Tessa by far, sometimes making her feel, still, as foreign as a visitor from the Arctic to the equator.

To offset that feeling of being the newest member of the group, she's invited, at the last minute, the new pharmacist on the island, Kenji Tanaka, handsome, middle-aged, who just moved up last October. Tessa and Peg have discussed how if he's straight—a determination not yet certain—he's a good match for Franci, but no one's mentioned that to either of them.

By the time the party begins, as always with the arrival of Torsten and Peg just a little too early, Jake has buried the mother raccoon, and sprayed the floor of the shed with disinfectant, and because she got such an early start on the flower beds, Tessa found that she did have time to get new cushions for the porch furniture after all, and everything feels righted, or nearly righted, Tessa thinks, turning the vegetables in the marinade, the oily vinaigrette making them slippery as eels. She's changed into her gray and black striped linen shift and her sandals, even though she's beginning to wonder, this summer, if she can still get away with exposing her legs.

The first summer she and Jake were here, Tessa hated it that Torsten and Peg came and went so easily, intruding, as she saw it, on the romantic bubble she and Jake lived in, and maybe even in a way spying on her, assessing her worthiness. Once she saw that she and Peg would be friends, it all changed, but tonight, she feels the flick of old annoyance when she hears Torsten's big Swedish voice boom out as they come up on the porch.

Tessa looks to the shed, but there's no sign of the raccoon, *no evidence*, she thinks, and she lifts the heavy blue plate piled with cheeses and grapes and carries it out to the porch, smiling.

"Here, let me help you," Peg says, holding open the door. She looks older this summer. She's wearing her standard summer party outfit, a white t-shirt and her longish, gathered Mexican skirt, a string of heavy clay beads, glazed bright indigo. Like her husband, she has a head of hair that's entirely white. She's big-boned, and a little horsy, and Tessa always thinks she'd be good in an emergency, competent and take-charge.

Tessa turns her cheek up for Torsten's kiss. "Did you make it up here okay?" she says.

"Sure," Torsten says. "We drove up Thursday. It wasn't bad at all."

Tessa deposits the plate on the glass-topped coffee table. Everything looks right, down to the tulips she cut from the garden, their long green stems a little wavy through the glass of the vase, and she feels again the frisson of satisfaction she felt in the morning, which seems like a long time ago now.

"Tessa, didn't I ask you to put some music on?" Jake says, coming out of the house, Nina Simone's deep voice following him. He's wearing his own traditional summer-party outfit, khaki pants and a white button-down shirt, both softened by many washings. "I still can't do anything with her," he laughs, leaning in to kiss Peg's cheek, then clasping Torsten in a quick, manly embrace.

"Did you get new cushions?" Peg says, sitting down and patting the seat beside her. "They're nice."

"Thanks. I just picked them up today," Tessa says. The cushions, in actuality, are disappointing; apparently no one makes real cotton cushions for outdoor furniture anymore, or at least not for sale in a town the size of Wisconset, and she had to be satisfied with cushions covered in some kind of water-resistant plastic that makes an unpleasant crinkling noise when one sits down. As soon as she put them on

the chairs and bench, she started missing the soft old ones, which are now stacked in the shed waiting for the next trip to the town dump.

She knows she should ask Peg about her summer work, making the illustrations for a book on North American birds, or joke about Peg's penchant for rearranging the furniture every year, but she has a sudden restless feeling, almost as if for a moment she can't breathe properly, and instead she holds up one finger to say, "Wait a minute," and turns toward the house, calling over her shoulder, "What can I get you to drink?"

"Just a lemonade to start with," Peg says. "Do you want some help?" But Tessa waves her offer away and escapes into the dim interior of the house.

Inside, she takes the pitcher of pink lemonade from the refrigerator, and removes the skin of plastic wrap from the top. She arranges the glasses and the lemonade on a tray, and then, as if she had just been busying herself with the lemonade as an excuse, she stands for a long moment at the kitchen window, looking out toward the shed. It wasn't Jake who told her to shut up the shed tightly when they left in the fall, she remembers. *She'd* told *him* that. She remembers precisely, because, as usual, she'd been afraid to say anything about his house, but she had, even warning him that animals might get in.

Outside, everything's still, the eastern shore now completely in shade, the trade-off of getting all that good, early morning light. The white clapboards of the shed stand out in the afternoon shadow, and when Tessa sees there is no sign of the raccoon, her thoughts drift: maybe she could plant something more permanent out there this summer, maybe hollyhocks, deep purple, magenta, glowing against the shed. She can hear the humming voices of Jake and his friends. She wants to stay inside like this and keep watch for the raccoon, but she can't, and she lifts up the tray and carries it outside.

Once she's back on the porch, Tessa's trapped feeling begins to lift. What was wrong with her? Now that they're here at the island, the tensions that were brewing between her and Jake in the city seem to have evaporated, and now, she's just happy to be here. She is.

She crosses her legs, takes a long drink from her lemonade, eats a few grapes. Torsten and Peg are clever and thoughtful and bright, and soon the conversation is sailing off just the way it should, touching on the relief they all feel to be out here again, the traffic problems on the LIE, and Tessa is happy sitting there among her friends, on Jake's nice porch with the new cushions on the wicker furniture, her

flowerbeds ready for the summer. She can see the water turning that glassy, enameled blue that it gets just before dusk. Against the shadowy dark grass, the new white tulips seem to glow.

Soon, the others arrive, Kenji pulling down the drive in a Jeep that's seen better days, swinging gracefully out of the driver's seat, his hair, pulled back in a long, silky ponytail swishing across his back; he's like a new, black horse, Tessa thinks, with his black ponytail, wearing a black Mexican *guayabera* with silvery embroidery. He must be gay. He's brought a bottle of wine, and kisses Tessa's cheek, shakes hands with Jake. "Thanks for inviting me," he says, and not for the first time, Tessa wonders what kind of life he can have here, year-round, on this island. As he settles on the porch rail beside the wicker sofa, Dick bounds up the porch steps, holding the hand of his pretty new wife Jennifer, her summer slides scuffing against the wooden steps. She's wearing a short lavender shift, and Tessa imagines her considering what to wear to this party, weighing the pros and cons. Tessa can see a small Band-aid on the edge of one delicate toe.

The men smile at her, kiss her cheek. "What a pretty dress," Peg says, smoothing her own skirt with one hand.

Soon, everyone has something to drink, and they're having at the cheese and grapes and the big bowl of peanuts in their shells. To the side of the porch, Jake opens the bag of charcoal and rattles the black chunks into the belly of the grill. "I don't know why you refuse to get with the modern age and get a gas grill," Dick calls down from the porch. Even though Dick's speaking to Jake, Torsten waves his hand at this, as if Dick has proposed something so foolish it doesn't even bear a verbal response.

"Tessa won't let me," Jake calls back up, smiling. Tessa shrugs. They all know this about her, that in many ways she stubbornly refuses, as Jake puts it, "to pry herself from the twentieth century," lobbying Jake to keep the outdated fuse box, the rotary phone, the old phonograph. "You can bet which side of the cell tower controversy she's on," he says.

"Really, Tess?" Dick says, taking up a handful of peanuts and expertly shelling them with thumb and forefinger. "I thought only the townies were opposed. Don't you miss being in touch with civilization?"

"Oh, please, Dick, she's studying the Arctic in the nineteenth century, for God's sake," Torsten puts in. "And I bet she's happy to be out of touch with the university for the summer, as much as one ever is."

Jake douses the charcoal with lighter fluid, tosses a match in. The charcoal ignites in one great blow, and he jumps back a little. Peg and Torsten applaud, and Kenji shouts, "Bravo!"

"And for my next act—has anyone seen my trapeze?" Jake says. He picks up the lighter fluid and the charcoal and comes back up to the porch.

They all turn then at the sound of a car crunching down the driveway. It's Franci, in her old Saab, which, as Stiles—Franci's husband for twelve years—was always proud to point out, has been accumulating only about a thousand miles each year because it's only used at the island. "The engine is like a newborn baby," Stiles would say.

"Here's the newborn baby," Dick says, and indeed, when Franci emerges from the car, carrying a bottle of wine, he could be talking about her: she looks younger, renewed, closer to forty than to fifty. After Stiles left her, she had an affair with a woman named Leslie that lasted several years. It tested everyone's good liberal graces, Franci's refusal to label herself but happily living with Leslie—and with Franci's teenaged son—in her little cottage on the western marsh. Seeing her now, once again Tessa thinks the whole thing has been good for her, Stiles' leaving, the affair with Leslie, even though it ended. They can all see the evidence, the ten pounds Franci shed and the slightly darker shade of her hair. Everyone sees this except for Jennifer, who just sees another one of Dick's middle-aged friends approach.

"Hi everybody," Franci says, coming onto the porch. It's just now getting close to dusk, the day's light still reflecting back off the surface of the water. Jake kisses her cheek, saying, "You look terrific," and a murmur of concurrence ripples around the group. "Great earrings," Jennifer says, and Franci touches the big silver corkscrews self-consciously. "Thanks," she says, handing the wine to Jake. He reads the label out loud, with a passable French pronunciation, then lets out a low whistle. "Nice," he says. "Want to start with a glass?"

"Why not?" Franci says, brushing her hair from her face, her silver bracelets jangling on her wrist. "This is a party, isn't it?" She sits beside Tessa on the wicker sofa.

"Franci, you remember Kenji," Tessa says, but as soon as she does, she thinks this is too pointed—Franci met Kenji, as they all did, last August when he first came up to look at Grayson's. Anyway, he's probably gay. And maybe Franci is now, too, and Tessa has a giddy moment of thinking this would make them a good couple, as they shake hands, Kenji leaning across Tessa from his spot on the porch rail.

“Are these new cushions?” Franci asks, and Tessa and Peg laugh together.

“Nothing goes under the radar around here. Take a note of that, Kenji—welcome to the fishbowl,” Peg says.

“There are spies everywhere,” Tessa says.

“Duly noted,” Kenji says, then leans close to Tessa and stage-whispers: “They’ll never pry the code from me,” and everyone laughs and relaxes a little.

Jake hands Franci a glass of wine; over his own glass, he looks at Tessa and smiles his crooked smile. “L’Chaim,” Franci says, and “Cin-cin,” Torsten and Peg say, and Kenji says, “Kampai.” Everyone drinks.

“Where are you from, again?” Dick says to Kenji.

“New York.”

“But I mean—” Dick begins. Tessa sees Jennifer leveling a look at him, and that makes her like Jennifer more.

“Brooklyn,” Kenji says, smiling at Dick. Tessa sees he’s practiced at this.

“Sorry,” Peg cuts in. “What he means is, what brought you up to Grand Isle, especially to live here year-round? Isn’t it just deadly in the winter?”

Kenji looks out at the water, then back. The way the water seems both still and moving: that’s the feeling he wants to create in his new piece, to capture that in steel.

“New York just got to be too—*everything*. I wanted to get back to my metal sculpture, which I need a lot of room for,” Kenji says. “And I spent my early summers with my grandmother, in a place kind of like this, Shimoda, on the ocean, in Japan.” This last he says with a look toward Dick, who nods in satisfaction.

“Did I pass the interrogation?” he stage-whispers to Tessa, leaning down to her again, his ponytail sliding over one shoulder.

“For the moment,” she stage-whispers back.

“Well, if you want to get away from it all, there’s no better place than Grand Isle,” Franci says. She isn’t flirting with him at all, Tessa thinks.

Before Tessa can ask Kenji about his sculpture, “I almost had to call on your expertise with your shotgun today,” Jake says to Dick. They’re leaning against the porch rail, silhouetted against the background of the yard and the bay water. Tessa feels her chest tighten again; she hadn’t forgotten about the raccoon, but she now realizes that she wasn’t going to mention it; in fact, she realizes she was hoping Jake

wouldn't mention it, as if what happened is a small precious thing she wants to keep for herself, a thought she can pet when she wants to, privately. "Oh? Were the terrorists trying to take Grand Isle?" Dick says. Everyone laughs, a little uneasily. "It wasn't the dogs, was it?"

"What dogs?" Tessa and Jake say simultaneously.

"Well, according to our ferry master, a pack of wild dogs was causing some trouble this spring," Dick says. "You know, taking down a couple of cows at the West Shore Farm, terrorizing the locals. Did you hear about that, Ken?"

"Sure," Kenji says. "It was on the front page of the paper, right next to the story about the cell phone tower. Or would have been, if Grand Isle *had* a paper."

"They think they came across the ice, and then got stuck here," Peg puts in. "It sounds like some of it got ugly, but they haven't been able to round them all up."

"Well, this wasn't anything quite that dramatic," Jake says. "Actually, it was a raccoon. Tessa found a dead raccoon in the shed this morning."

"You didn't touch it, did you?" Jennifer asks, leaning forward for a handful of peanuts. She's been carefully putting the shells on her paper napkin, and has built herself quite a nice peanut-shell mountain. Her hands are freshly manicured, each nail curving in a perfect sickle.

"No, of course not," Tessa says. "Jake buried it in the woods."

"I hope you were careful with that," Dick says. "You know there was that case of rabies a couple of years ago."

"That was nothing," Torsten says, waving his hand again. "Wasn't that in dogs, anyway? Rottweilers? Rabies have been coming and going around this island forever. That doesn't mean every dead raccoon is lethal."

"Rotties?" Jennifer asks. "I love Rotties!"

"Thank you, Torsten," Tessa says. "That's just what I told Jake. He wanted to shoot the baby." She feels a panicky rush as she says this. She certainly hadn't been meaning to mention the baby.

"Baby?" Franci says. "There was a baby raccoon too?"

Tessa looks over at Jake, almost pleadingly. There's that feeling again, that feeling that she can't breathe, almost like a premonition. "Shouldn't you put the meat on?" she says to Jake, and he pushes off from the railing, saying, "If you think it's time, my sweet, then it must be," and he disappears into the house.

"What did you do with the kit?" Kenji asks.

“With what?” A fog has clouded up her head, but then it clears a little. “Oh, it’s called a kit? That’s great.”

“Not to mention the caboodle, which—yeah, which I have no idea *what* that is. But you want something even better?” Kenji asks. “A group is called a gaze.”

“A gaze of raccoons!” Tessa says. “Perfect. They do. They gaze right at you.” Now they’re all murmuring their own favorite words for groups and young of animals: a mischief of rats, a surfeit of skunks.

“Anyway, it wandered off into the woods,” she says, and remembers then its mewling noise as it nudged against its mother’s body with its soft nose.

Everyone’s distracted then by Jake’s return from the kitchen, the platter of chicken and hamburgers in his hand. “*La viande est arrivé!*”

Franci leans forward to pour herself another glass of wine. “This Medoc is to die for. Really. Doesn’t anyone want another glass?”

Soon the smoke of the barbecue, tangy and sweet, is coiling up into the swooping branches of the pine tree, and Jake and Torsten and Dick walk down to the water and step out onto the dock, followed by Kenji. Dick jumps up and down on it a few times, testing or proving its sturdiness. On the porch, Franci says Damian is home from his first year at Reed with his nose pierced and word of a girlfriend named Phoenix.

“A real girlfriend?” Tessa asks. In the past, they all know, Damian’s been more than reticent about declaring his affections.

“I think so. I know there’s something he wants to tell me, but hasn’t yet. I think things with this girl might be, well, serious,” Franci says, wincing a little, then smiling. “We’ll see if it lasts the summer.”

“Don’t worry, Franci, Damian won’t leave you for another woman until he’s at least thirty,” Peg says, and they all laugh.

“When he told me about her, he did say his heart will always belong to mommy,” Franci says, and they laugh again. “What every Jewish mother wants to hear. Anyway, he has to stay with me at least until we finish painting the house, and we haven’t even started the scraping.”

They all drink a little, letting the wine lift them into deeper relaxation. “Franci,” Peg says, “I’ve got to say it: you look terrific. What’s going on?”

Franci pushes a lock of hair behind one ear. “Oh, it’s just makeup. I made the mistake of going into Macy’s before we drove up, just to get some moisturizer. I walked out a hundred and fifty dollars later with a big bag of useless stuff.”

“You mean a little, teeny-tiny bag,” Peg says.

“Yeah. Teeny. Once the girl put everything on me, I thought I really did look better. I asked her what it all was and she said first she used a primer, so I had to get some of that—”

“What was this, a makeover or your house painting project?” Tessa asks.

“At this point, fixing the face feels like an enormous job compared with painting the house,” Franci says. “So, she started with the primer—”

“After a little sandblasting—”

“‘Would you like some sandpaper with that eyeliner?’”

“How about some spackle for those really tenacious wrinkles?”

By this point, the three friends are all in stitches. Jennifer laughs, politely, then rises, descends the porch, slips off her sandals, traipses across the lawn, and walks out onto the dock, where Dick swings his arm around her shoulder, kisses her cheek. From the porch, the women can see her toss back her hair as she laughs at something Jake says. Dick’s nice to her, Tessa thinks.

And then Tessa turns for a moment, her attention catching on a small motion by the driveway. There it is. She knows she is the only one to see it, in the dusk, wobbling down from the woods alongside the house, determined, pawing open the door to the shed and disappearing inside.

Tessa doesn’t call out. She isn’t going to mention this to anyone, certainly not to Jake. She turns back to the scene by the water. Now Jake is standing with Jennifer at the end of the dock, pointing to something far off, something that Tessa can’t see. His khakis and white shirt and Jennifer’s pale lavender shift seem luminescent against the dark water. It strikes her that Jennifer is young, lithe and tanned, her hair haloed a little against the water. They turn together, her husband and this girl, and he looks up toward the house, sees Tessa watching him, raises his glass as if toasting her, and starts walking back up the dock toward the porch. Soon he’s back at the grill, turning the meat again, and then cupping his hands around his mouth to make a more effective bullhorn, calling out, “Dinner’s ready,” to the people lingering by the water.

Kenji and Torsten and Dick and Jennifer, her sandals swinging from one hand, make their way up the lawn toward the porch, and Peg and Franci stand, picking up plates from the table.

They eat on the porch. There are just enough seats for everyone, with Dick perched on the rail. Jennifer smiles up at him. She really likes him, Tessa thinks, and for this, she likes Jennifer a little more, even though liking her feels like a betrayal. Of what? Unpredictable Marilyn, who she barely knew for a short time, and never felt comfortable with?

Peg laughs at something Franci says about Damian, about living with a teenager, then turns to Dick. "What's Cort doing with his summer?" she asks.

"Well, he's already here, mostly wanting to show off after his first year at UMass. Marilyn's got some kind of a summer teaching gig in Geneva, so he's stuck with us," he says, and Tessa thinks she sees a faint twitch of annoyance in Jennifer's lip. Spending the first summer of her marriage with the teenaged son in tow is probably not what she had in mind.

"And how about you, Tessa? Heading back into the Arctic this summer?" Peg asks, but then Kenji says "Look!" and stands abruptly, and all the attention swivels to him. He points down to the porch steps, spilling a little of his wine on the new cushion.

The baby raccoon is hoisting itself up to the bottom step with its paws, nose pointed up, sniffing the air.

"Oh my God, he's so cute," Jennifer says. "He wants some food."

Everyone watches as the raccoon crosses the bottom step and then continues to ascend toward the porch.

"What did I tell you?" Jake says to Tessa, and then, "Christ, this is the last thing we need," and he picks up the barbecue fork. Hitting it against the porch rail as he goes, he stamps loudly down the steps, and the raccoon scuttles away, down the steps, around the porch, and into the woods.

"Score one for the humans," Dick says, and everyone laughs. Jake, unlaughing, comes back, and takes a long drink from his wineglass, and sits again. He looks at Tessa. "I told you we can't have that raccoon hanging around. It's only going to be trouble."

Tessa doesn't say anything. If she speaks, she'll cry, so she bites into her hamburger, wipes her mouth with her napkin, without looking up. "It'll be fine," Torsten says, his deep Swedish voice soothing in the electrified air. "Don't feed it, and it will move on."

"Yeah, to our place, where it will feast on grapes and Gruyère," says Peg, and everyone laughs again.

When they're finished eating, Jake lights the citronella candles, even though it's too early in the year to worry about mosquitoes, and puts on Mozart's clarinet concerto, and they all sit together comfortably, watching the water go blue-black, the reflection of the last light looking almost oily on the water's surface. A few early fireflies wink out over the lawn. Dick moves from his perch on the rail to squeeze in next to Jennifer, and she rests her head against his shoulder. Kenji's on the other side of the porch from Franci, who doesn't seem to notice him at all.

In the growing dark, Tessa can just make out the white of the shed, but she knows the raccoon is in there. If left alone, maybe it will make a nest for itself in the old porch cushions.

The first point of the sickle moon rises over the water, and a few stars come out, and everyone keeps talking, their voices subdued now in the soft night air. The women pull sweatshirts or sweaters around their shoulders. Jennifer unfolds a soft lavender shawl from her bag. Tessa thinks that Franci no longer looks drunk, just sad in a vague way, as if she's misplaced something.

Maybe the new cushions aren't so bad after all; at least the wine won't stain them. She looks around with pleasure at the house, the bay, the garden, Jake, their friends. Maybe Torsten is right, and everything will be all right.

Even though Jake would hate it if he knew she were even thinking this, maybe while he's sleeping she can take a bowl of food out to the raccoon. Just because it's nesting in the shed doesn't mean it will get into his studio. What do raccoons eat, anyway? Everything? She'll have to look it up. The raccoon could turn on her. She feels her heart beat a little faster thinking this, sitting there on the porch, the light fading down at last to the blackness of night.