

Carl Bean

Winter

Lynne Loschky opened her eyes; faces watched her. She slept; the faces faded. A light glared, piercing the haze; she opened her eyes again, though she didn't want to. She didn't want to wake up, didn't want to live. She lay under an examination light in a makeshift hospital. A doctor wearing bloody gloves sewed her closed. She struggled. Someone held her down. A black mask moulded to her mouth. Darkness followed.

It was the same darkness she had experienced earlier that night when she, Robert, and Carrie, among others, had tried to escape the city. Suddenly the night had illumined with flares, chunks of earth had begun to explode, and the headlights of the lead car had vanished in a flash. Some of the occupants of the other cars had abandoned their cars, but it was useless. The last thing she had remembered was being dragged from her car and beaten.

When she was on her feet again, she learned that part of her punishment was her segregation from her family. Defiant, she went out and sat in the rubble of the city. The soldiers told her to move on. She asked them what harm there was with sitting and thinking. The soldiers threw her in the back of a truck. She ended up in a tent prison in Wisconsin.

She did what she was supposed to do after that, kept her mouth shut. Soon she was walking back and forth to the place where the women scrubbed laundry on rocks in a stream. Because she was a nurse, she volunteered to return to Chicago to work in a hospital. She was anxious to get back to the city, where Carrie was in jail (Lynne had no idea where Robert was).

Her work station was on the third floor of a converted brick building near the fire-gutted downtown. At the end of her wing was a restricted area. Occasionally she entered the area and glanced through a wired-glass window at a laboratory filled with test tubes and bottled chemicals. The laboratory looked harmless enough, though when Joe McGinnis, a security guard, caught her in the area, he threatened to report her.

She told him she didn't care. It was true, she didn't. Besides, he was twenty. She hated someone half her age telling her what to do, even if he was taller than she. All she had to do was take a hard look at his uneven blond hair, which he obviously cut himself, or at his inchoate green eyes, and she had trouble taking him seriously anyway. In fact, were it not for his deformity, she wouldn't have listened to a thing he had to say. The deformity told her he deserved respect. On the left side of his neck, under his ear, was a cavern sealed by a scar. The scar ran to his collar bone. Later, when she got to know him better, she asked him about the deformity, but he got so flustered she never asked again, not even after they had moved in together. He did wear a radiation tag, though, which meant he had been in the war.

As good as their relationship turned out to be, though, something was missing, perhaps because she knew so little about him. She told him about herself, went into great detail, but he never reciprocated. Once or twice she even mentioned they might be closer to one another if she knew him better, but he only laughed, his crooked teeth showing. He laughed about everything. When she pointed that out, he told her she was no better—she overreacted about everything.

It was true. She did have a tendency to overreact. She didn't know why, but it didn't take much to set her off. She could be calm and reserved one moment and the next moment she would explode. Indeed, she had been at odds with one person after another since she had returned to Chicago. Most recently it had been the hospital's chief of staff, Dr. Roudebush, to whom she had complained about patients receiving excessive amounts of narcotics. He had told her it wasn't her concern what qualified physicians ordered. She had told him doctors were not gods, hospitals were public institutions, and people had rights. That's when Joe had pulled her aside. He reminded her that she would never be reunited with her family if she caused trouble. She had gone back to Dr.

Roudebush to apologize, which had appeased him. He had even invited her to prepare a report about the narcotics distribution on her floor.

When she had taken him the report, though, he tossed it aside.

She became so flustered that on her way back to her floor, she knocked down a doctor, sending his papers flying. As she helped him collect his papers, he introduced himself, David Hill, a biochemist visiting from the University of Chicago. Back on his feet, he was taller than she had realized, well over six feet. She wondered how she had missed seeing him in the first place.

He was at the hospital doing research, he said as he organized his papers. Pushing his aviator-style glasses up his nose, magnifying steel-grey eyes, he asked if she knew who had a key to the laboratory at the end of the third floor. She telephoned security. Joe arrived, checked David's credentials, then unlocked the lab door.

The next day, David was in the lab again. Near noon, he unlocked the door, catching her looking in the window, and asked where people went for lunch. She invited him to go with her.

They ate in a local café. Two other hospital employees, Kate Joswick and Paul Stubblefield, joined them. Lynne introduced them to David.

Opening a napkin on her lap, Kate asked Lynne if she knew a Dr. Walker from the Health Institute.

Lynne shook her head.

"That's funny," Kate went on, using a knife to scrape the mustard off a sandwich, "he was talking about a nurse named Lynne, and I was sure it was you. I really don't know what gave me that idea—" (She put the sandwich back together and took a bite.) "—but somehow I couldn't think of anyone but you. You do know Dr. Walker, don't you?"

Lynne shook her head. "Nope," she said.

Kate stopped chewing. "Hmph. That sure is funny," she repeated. "I could have sworn it was you." She started chewing again. "The person he was talking about was at our hospital and everything."

Lynne said, "There's a nurse named Helen down on the first floor. Could it be her?"

Reddening, Kate said, "Oh. I guess I assumed it was you." She swallowed.

"Nope."

Kate smiled. "That makes me feel better." She took another bite. "The things he was saying weren't very nice."

Paul laughed. "About our Lynne?" he said. "Come on, she might raise a little hell now and then, but everybody loves her." That got a laugh from everyone.

For the rest of their lunch break, David and Lynne walked along Lake Michigan. "That Kate goes on and on, doesn't she," Lynne said.

"Yes, she does." He ran a hand through his wild grey hair.

They followed the cement barricades, against which waves crashed.

"Could I ask you a confidential question?" she said.

"Sure."

"What is that laboratory for at the end of my wing? Security treats it like a top-secret lab."

He laughed loudly. "Hardly," he said. "They wouldn't even trust me with such a project." He laughed again. "No, we test water samples," he told her.

She shook her head. "Then, why all the top-secret mumbo jumbo? They make it seem like it's some huge project that deals with national security or something."

He shrugged. "I don't ask questions," he said. "I just do my job."

"You do lab tests, huh?"

He nodded.

On Lakeshore Drive, a tank passed, its tracks grating up asphalt. A machine-gunner watched the lake. A formation of jets roared in. They shot overhead.

"I remember visiting the city when I was a child," she said over the sound of the jets. "I thought this was the most beautiful city in the world." The city was charred and obscured by smoke and haze, a haze that threatened rain. "It's sad to see what happened, isn't it?"

David nodded. He pointed at a domed building in the distance, a building of many colors that stood oddly intact outside the haze. He too had been to the city when he was a child, he said. He told her, "We took a field trip to the aquarium and watched sharks and giant sea bass swim around in glass tanks; then, we went out on the lake on a ferry." A wave hit the barricade, throwing mist. "The further out we got, the more choppy the water became. Then the captain told us to go below and put on life jackets. We stood in the glassed-in lower deck and watched the

water hit the glass, as if we were in a cage ourselves and nature was striking back at us. To this day I can't close my eyes when I take a shower without thinking about sea creatures watching me." He laughed at himself. His glasses intensified his cold eyes. "Isn't that a riot!" Lynne smiled. Another wave exploded.

Near the graffiti-covered aquarium, Lynne said, "Say, I hate to rush off, but I need to run an errand before I return to work," she said. He asked if he could see her again. If he wanted to, she told him.

Several blocks from the lakefront, she entered a fire-burnt building whose lobby was filled with silent people. The room smelled of smoke. A receptionist at a desk asked Lynne what she needed. Lynne said, "I need to see Dr. Walker."

The receptionist asked, "What time is your appointment?"

"I don't have one," Lynne said. "I'm one of his patients, Lynne Loschky, and I need to talk to him for a couple of minutes."

The receptionist looked at her appointment calendar. "He can see you next Wednesday at—" Her pencil went down the page. "At three."

"I'll wait," Lynne said. She remained at the desk.

The receptionist left. When she returned, she whispered, "Dr. Walker will see you for two minutes."

Dr. Walker, an albino with white hair and a white goatee, was sitting stiffly in his chair. "What can I do for you, Lynne?" he asked, not looking up.

Lynne said, "I've been talking to Kate Joswick. Do you know her?"

Still not looking up, Dr. Walker held a ghostly hand towards a chair. "Sit down," he said.

She remained standing. "Do you know Kate Joswick?" she repeated.

"Yes," he said. "I do." He looked at her with bloody eyes.

"She told people over lunch that you had been talking about me," said Lynne. "I'm curious what you had to say."

"I might have mentioned your name."

She said, "You're not allowed to discuss your patients in public."

"What's the big deal?" he asked her. She stared into his eyes. They blinked. "Everyone is assigned to one of the government's doctors for prescriptions and the monitoring of blood levels. You happen to be assigned to me."

"You're still not allowed to discuss your patients in public."

Dr. Walker sat forward as the receptionist handed him a chart. She left. "I would hardly describe our relationship the same way you do," he said. "Everyone is monitored by a doctor. Our relationship is little more than an occasional blood test, a prescription, a name and number." His bloody eyes studied her. "The way you're acting, though, concerns me. Is everything all right?" He opened the medical chart and looked at it. "Let me see your papers."

"Don't change the subject," she said. "This isn't about my papers. This is about my rights—"

"Let me see them!" he demanded.

From her pocket, she produced a passport case. He flipped through the pages, stopping at a blue page, which he studied for several seconds. He made a note in her medical chart, then handed back the credential.

At the door, she told him, "If you talk about me again in public, I'll demand an inquiry." She pulled shut the door.

That night, the military police raided her apartment building. There was scrambling and loud voices in the halls. The police demanded papers from the women. Lynne opened the door and waited, papers in hand. One of the officers studied it, especially the blue page, then returned it. The police went on. One woman was found hiding. She didn't have papers. The police took her away, though Lynne knew they would be back. Maybe by then the women who had not been found would get their papers fixed.

Back inside their apartment, at an aluminum table, she told Joe about David. For once Joe didn't laugh. He eventually interrupted her with the words, "Do you like him?"

She told him, "I'm intrigued."

Studying the wall, he told her, "I remember when my older brother Paul was returning from the fighting. Being a younger brother who worshipped him, I sat on the porch waiting. Finally a military car arrived and a major told us Paul was dead." Joe looked at her. He said, "I never have minded waiting for someone I care about."

Lynne reminded him she was still married. "Don't care about me too much," she said. She said it, but she wasn't sure she meant it. She had learned to live without Robert and was beginning to care about Joe, though she wasn't sure he cared about her in the same way. She often wondered what she would do if he found someone his own age.

He didn't look elsewhere.

As the days passed, she became confused. Within a couple of months, she couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't think. At last she got out of bed one night determined not to go back until she had made a decision—to give up on Robert completely and to choose between Joe and David.

She stood at the window, thinking. Outside it was raining. Water was getting in; the floor in front of the window was wet. Lightning flashed, illuminating an armored personnel carrier in the street below; blackness replaced it. She tried to close the window; it was stuck. Thunder growled. Standing on the damp floor, she breathed rain. If only she knew Joe better, knew how he felt, then it would be better. He never told her. How could she trust someone like that?

Joe asked, "What's wrong?" The flare of a match showed him, half-covered by a sheet, sitting in bed. He shook the match into blackness.

She said, "Nothing."

The red tip of a cigarette grew brighter, then darkened. "Yes, it is," he said. "Something's wrong. I can tell."

She stood facing him, though it was dark. She could smell the cigarette smoke. "You remember how it was when you were a child and wished for snow at Christmas?"

He laughed. "That's not what's wrong?"

"I'm serious," she said. "This is winter now, and we haven't had any snow. It's depressing."

He said, "There's snow up north they say. Maybe sometime my brother Rick can sneak us up there for a couple of hours on his fishing boat. He's a fisherman, you know."

"I didn't know you had another brother," she said, then asked, "You think he'd really take us up there?"

"If I asked him to, he would." His voice wasn't reassuring. He asked, "Have you taken your pills?"

"Not yet."

"Better take them and get some sleep."

She went into the kitchen, where she lit a candle. In an aluminum cabinet, she dug around in some packages. From a jug, she poured a glass of water. She looked at the pills: two light capsules, a dark tablet and a greyish tablet. She dropped them into the drain and poured water after. Joe appeared; she blew out the candle.

"Are you all right?" he asked, vanishing.

She passed him. "No," she replied.

His feet padded along behind her. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Spinning, she thumped his chest with a fist, sending his cigarette flying. "I'm sick of living like this, that's what's wrong! I'm sick of wondering what's happened to Robert. I'm sick of wondering if I'll ever get Carrie out of jail. I'm sick of everything."

Though she couldn't see him, she saw the red ember of the cigarette rise from the floor to his lips. There was no smile on them as they took a puff; the cigarette glowed brightly. "Are you sleeping with David?" he asked.

"Maybe." She got back in bed.

After grinding out the cigarette in a bedside ashtray, he hugged her, laughing.

"What?"

"Remember when you told me you needed something more in a relationship?" he asked. He snuggled her. His bony nakedness was warm.

"Yes."

"I'm beginning to realize how much I care about you," he said. It was the first time he had ever gone into such detail about his feelings. "I know I'll never take the place of Robert, and I know when I say I care about you that doesn't mean much because I'm not very good at explaining how I feel, but—"

She kissed him. "Sssshhhhhh." He couldn't possibly know what he was talking about.

They made love.

The next morning she was back at the window, exhausted, staring at a city overrun by trash, graffiti and fire. Haze and smoke obscured most of the demolished buildings. An explosion rattled the glass. There were gunshots. Joe kissed her. "Have you been up long?" he asked.

"A few minutes," she lied. "I heard trouble in the streets." She started to dress.

"There's always trouble in the streets," he said. He kissed her again. "Get rid of David and stay with me," he said. "I promise I'll be loyal."

"Quit worrying," she told him.

At the hospital, she discovered two uniformed guards in the third floor narcotics room. They were rummaging through papers. "What's wrong?" she asked one of the guards.

"Routine inspection, Mrs. Loschky," the guard said, searching.

Lynne sorted through her mail. She found a copy of a letter directed to her:

"Dear Tom:

"It has come to my attention that one of my staff, Lynne Loschky, has mailed to you certain information about our narcotics distribution to patients. I have not authorized the release of that report.

"In fact, a number of my staff have devoted time and energy to a study of our narcotics distribution. As you know, we are all concerned about the potential for abuse of addictive medications during these troubling times. Our study is not yet complete. Would you please return all of the above mentioned materials immediately?

"Thank you.

"Sincerely,

"Bob Roudebush, M.D.

"cc: Lynne Loschky, R.N."

Letter in hand, she went to Dr. Roudebush's office. "What's the meaning of this?" she demanded.

"I think it's quite clear," he said calmly. "You distributed a confidential report without my permission. Who told you you could send it elsewhere? Of all people concerned with the confidentiality of medical information, I would have expected you to be a stickler for such a principle." Looking up, he winked. "Needless to say I wrote to have the report returned," he told her. "It's a small world," he mentioned as he wrote a note on a piece of paper. "I happen to know the person you sent the report to, and he contacted me."

Lynne said, "The distribution of narcotics by a government hospital is a matter of public record and people have a right to know what's going on—"

Jumping up red-faced, he slapped his hands on the desk. "Don't give me that public crap!" he said. He was a short man who looked as if he never got enough sleep. "I'm damned tired of you. I'm tired of you

making waves. Tired of you making trouble. I run things here. If you don't like it, get the hell out! Do you understand?" She didn't say. "Do you understand!"

She nodded.

One of the security guards stuck his head in the doorway. "It's clean, Dr. Roudebush," he said.

"Thank you, Pete," he said. The guard left. Dr. Roudebush, calmed. Smiling suddenly, he told Lynne, "Now, see, nothing to get all worked up about. You made a mistake sending out that report without my clearance. A harmless mistake, which I'm sure won't happen again. Right?"

Lynne left the office. She hated him.

Joe caught her in the hallway. "What's going on?" he asked, pulling her aside.

Lynne said, "I'll tell you later." She was fuming.

"At lunch?"

"Tonight."

At lunch, she ran with David through a downpour to a bakery.

Over donuts and coffee, she told him what had happened. He was understanding. Then she said, "I can't see you anymore." She wiped her damp face with a napkin.

He didn't say anything.

She added, "I think I'm in love with someone." She wadded the napkin.

He laughed. "That's a riot! I didn't think love was possible anymore." He reached for her hand.

She pulled it back. "I'm serious."

He withdrew his hand.

"I needed someone when you came along," she told him. "Someone older, like Robert. But now I'm resigned to never seeing Robert again. For all I know, he's dead. They probably executed him." She smiled as she took a bite from her donut. Mouth full, she said, "I still can't believe how much alike you and he are."

David smiled too.

"It's like you were sent to take his place," she told him. "You like the same things I like—philosophy, classical music, literature—" She shook her head and took a bite of her donut, licking her fingers afterwards. He

reached out again, but she moved back. "You've had a tough time too—several temporary assignments in the past six months. Robert was that way. Never could hold a job or get along with anyone. I know how rough that is on someone in his fifties—I saw it with Robert—especially when he's good at what he does—well-educated, etcetera, etcetera." She sipped some coffee. Putting down the cup, she said, "Your wife committed suicide; my husband's probably dead. And, you care about your two sons, though you realize you may never see them again. I can tell you care by the way you've been supportive about Carrie."

"How is she?" David asked.

Lynne shrugged. She blew a kiss at a customer who entered the shop. A group of armed soldiers passed in the rain. "Oh, she'll never be totally all right," Lynne said. She looked inside her cup. "I guess it's one of the risks of adopting an abused child," she said. "She's even more outspoken than me. She'll probably never get out." He smiled. "You know, when she first started stealing, Robert and I asked ourselves a lot of questions." She fell silent, then asked, "Am I repeating myself? If I am, tell me."

He said, "You never repeat yourself."

She smiled. "You're a doll," she said. "I remember how shocked Robert and I were when we found out," she said. "We were staying at a place up in Door County, Wisconsin, and people in the other cottages kept losing things. The people were friends of ours, and it was weird because we were the only ones who weren't getting hit. Then one day Robert discovered some money missing from his wallet. He had been in the shower and had left his wallet on the dresser. When he got out of the shower, the wallet was on the bed. He found Carrie in her bedroom. The first chance we got, we searched her room, and sure enough, things from all over the area were hidden in there. Then she broke down and told us about another hiding place down by the lake, an even bigger cache. It was chocked full of things—it took us two days to get everything back to the rightful owners." She shook her head. "I've never been so embarrassed." She glanced at her watch. "Listen, doll, I hate to rush off, but I've got to get back to work. You're not too hurt, are you?"

David took her arm. "Don't go," he said.

She pulled away. "Please, don't make this any harder than it already is." She left him sitting there.

He showed up at the nurses' station. She was confused. "David," she complained.

"Can we talk?" he asked. The other nurses looked back and forth between David and Lynne.

She got up. They walked down the hall together. She whispered, "I told you I can't see you anymore."

They stopped at the laboratory.

David whispered, "This has come at a bad time. Things are piling up on me. Last week my department head asked me to make my own distilled water for the lab; he said the department budget was short of money. I said okay—it's no big deal, you know. Now, a few days ago, he asked me to start re-using marble chips. Can you imagine washing marble chips to get all the acid off so you can re-use them in other experiments? It'll be no time before he gives me the axe. And now you tell me you can't see me any longer—"

She took his hands. "It's not you," she said. "I promise. In fact, you're a wonderful person; and, as I told you, you've helped me through some difficult times. It's just that there's someone else—someone who was before you. That relationship has grown into something I hadn't expected. I have to give it my loyalty. I really am a loyal person. I mean the only reason I gave up on Robert is it's clear he's dead. Please understand."

He sighed. "Then it's really over?" he asked.

She nodded.

He brought out a small scrap of paper, holding it out. "I analyzed those pills you asked me about."

She didn't take it right away, but instead looked past him, down the hall, to see if anyone was watching. "What did you find?" she asked.

He shrugged, smiling coyly.

"I won't be bribed."

He gave her the paper. From another pocket, he brought out an elegant black case, opened it and carefully removed a black fountain pen. "Do you know this pen's been in my family for generations?" He held it out. "Feel how heavy it is."

"David," she complained, trying to glance at the note.

"Please, feel how heavy it is." While she was holding it, he said, "I want you to have it."

"David—" She tried to give it back.

"As a gift," he told her. He smiled. "I care about you."

She smiled. "You're a doll." She kissed his cheek. "I wish everyone was as nice as you are."

"I really do care," he whispered.

She opened the paper while he was blocking the view of the nurses' station. "Are you sure about this?" she asked, looking up.

"What?"

She crumbled the note. "I knew they were some kind of birth control pills. Isn't this that long-term pill?" He didn't say. "No wonder they're always checking the women's papers. I thought everyone was sterile from the radiation."

"Most people are."

She unwadded the paper. "What's this other thing? Thorazine?" He didn't say. "And some kind of diet pills." Shaking her head, she crumpled the paper once again. "These are the things they told us we needed to stay alive?"

He shrugged. "I'm sure they serve their purpose," he said.

She shook her head.

"You're not going to cause a scene, are you?" he said. "I mean, I was trying to do you a favor because I thought you would be discrete. Please, don't get me fired over this."

Again she kissed his cheek. "Don't worry. I'm not going to cause a scene." She put the paper of lab findings under the felt lining of the ink pen case and left him standing there.

That night she reminded Joe about the boat trip up the coast. They sat in their apartment, at the kitchen table. A candle flickered between them. When he didn't say anything, she said, "You remember, you told me your brother would take us up there sometime."

Joe was flustered. "I said 'maybe,'" he told her. "Maybe. That's why I never like to mention anything to you because one minute I say 'maybe' and the next minute you're accusing me of breaking a promise." He sounded angry.

Her fingers strummed the table. "Don't get all bent out of shape," she said. "I didn't accuse you of breaking a promise. I was just thinking that I needed to get away."

"Take a couple of days off work," he urged her.

"Forget it," she said. "A couple of days won't do. I have to get away."

"Why?"

"Because I can't live like this."

"Come on, there's no choice—"

"I'm pregnant." Her voice was calm.

He laughed loudly. "That's a riot!" he said, clapping his hands together. "That's what I love about you—you're always so funny."

She didn't laugh, but something about him caught her attention. She tried to figure out what it was.

"You're not serious, are you?" he asked, becoming serious himself.

She sighed. "Yes." She looked into the distance, still trying to figure out what was bothering her.

"Pregnant?"

"What's the matter, you don't think a woman can get pregnant after forty?" She looked at him.

"You really are serious?"

Her expression was solemn.

"But that's impossible." He was confused. He asked, "Have you been taking your pills?"

She asked, "What's this have to do with taking my pills?" Then she was angry. "You know what's in them, don't you?"

He sighed. "Lynne, you know those medicines are mandatory."

"You didn't answer my question."

"How could you let this happen?"

"It doesn't make any difference. It's happened. I have to go away."

"Tell them. They'll take care of it."

"I don't want them to take care of it. Are you going to support me or not?"

He was silent for several moments before he said, "I can't just up and run away like that."

She sighed. "That's what I thought."

"I didn't mean it like that," he said quickly, taking her hand. He came around the table and held her. "All I meant was that if we both run away together, they'll know something's up right away. First, we'll get you away, then when the time's right, I'll follow."

She nodded.

Within a couple of weeks, she was in his brother's fishing trawler, travelling up the coast of Lake Michigan. Away from land, she opened the hatch of the compartment where she was stowed away. The roar of the trawler's engine was lost in the open water. She was sick to her stomach from the motion of the boat. She sat down and closed her eyes. She dozed. Eventually pine spiced the air. The smell made her sick again. She looked out the hatch. The trawler approached a cove. A crew member crouched on the forward deck as the trawler neared a fishing dock. The man leaped off the trawler and secured a rope around a post.

As crew members stacked supplies on the dock, Lynne climbed off the boat, her legs weak. She vomited before she could get very far. The trawler's engine revved, a man retrieved the thick rope, and the rig backed away, leaving her on the dock. Sputtering blackish smoke, the rig turned. Lynne watched until the boat was out of sight, then began to lug the supplies up the hill. The trawler hummed for a long time.

In the forest, she found the cottage with faded shutters. Inside was dark and cold. There were yellowed sheets over the furnishings. She unpacked and uncovered things. It was different from her memories of it—from the time she, Robert, and Carrie had spent their summers there together. Smaller. Less perfect. In the back yard were two butane tanks. She turned the knob of one; gas rushed through the line from the tank to the house. She went back inside.

The next morning, she came downstairs and put on coffee. While she waited for it to perk, she went into the living room, where, finding the hardwood floors cold, she stood on a soiled rug and stared out the dirty window. Despite the absence of the sun, she found daybreak intensely bright. Fresh-fallen snow covered everything. She smiled. It was the first time she had seen snow since before the war. A cherry cardinal fluttered to a tree branch in front of the window, perching so close that Lynne could see the cardinal's shiny black eye. It blended with the strip of black that encircled its pink beak. The cardinal fluffed. Even the tuft of cherry feathers on top of its head ruffled. In an instant, the bird shot away, though so gracefully as not to disturb the snow on the branch.

After breakfast, she hiked through the forest. Above the beach, she found the cave where Carrie had hidden all her stolen items in earlier days, though its small entrance had become entangled with brush and roots. Lynne held them aside and crawled in. Inside was black and cold.

Looking at the brightness through the roots made her feel like she was caught in a spider's web. She hated the feeling. She squeezed back out of the cave, her clothes damp. She returned to the cottage, where she sat at the hearth of a roaring fire, warming herself.

Fountain pen in hand, she pondered the lab findings David had given her. They generated thoughts. She filled page after page with words.

With time, she collected her pen, some pages from the growing stack of notes she had made, and a fishing pole. She trudged to Lake Michigan, where she cast out a baited hook. She sat on a rock, her hands clasped around her knees, and stared at the reflection of a dull sun in the wet sand. Seagulls, hundreds of them, arrived, crying for food. A number of gulls stood in the sand like guards. Snow was in the air. She could feel it. She dozed.

The gulls flew up in a gust. She looked around. On the horizon grew a white speck, humming. A red insignia appeared on the speck. Sand began jumping near her. Pop! Pop! Pop! reached her ears. Confused she got up, grabbing the paper of lab findings. Her leg jumped from under her, and she dropped to her face. Pop! came again. She tried to find the scrap of paper, but the sand blurred her vision. She found herself running, favoring one leg. In the forest, trees reached out to stop her. Flakes of snow blew through the naked branches.

After tearing a strip of cloth from her shirt, she tied off her leg, so she wouldn't trail blood, then backtracked to the beach. She crawled into the cave and pulled the roots and brush back in place. Outside, snow thickened.

Steps approached. There was a familiar voice, then another familiar voice and laughter. David appeared on the beach, dressed in a military uniform. Joe was with him, also dressed in a uniform. David bent down and retrieved his black pen. After unscrewing it, he tapped something out. He carefully put the pen back together and returned it to its case. He picked up the bloody notes she had been working on. In silence, she watched as he put them into an attaché case that Joe provided. Armed soldiers gathered around. Joe spotted something in the sand. "Look," he said proudly, producing the scrap of lab findings. He showed it to David, who had been looking in her direction, as if trying to remember something. The interruption gave him a new focus. He took the paper.

Lynne, her left leg throbbing with blood, sighed. A foot pushed against her stomach. She pushed back at the foot to get it to relieve its pressure. With soldiers everywhere, there was nothing to do but sit and wait. One soldier ran down the white hill, to where the waves rushed in and withdrew.

The soldier, panting, said, "The cottage was empty, sir, though there were lots of notes—like she was putting together a book. We can't tell if she made it back to the house or not."

David told him, "Burn it all. Burn the surrounding cabins too. She won't survive for long."

The soldier saluted. "Yes, sir," he said.

Seagulls flew about crying, one cry blending into another. David and Joe's combat boots sank into the sand as they walked away. Numb with shock, Lynne sat back and waited, concealed beneath a web of roots and brush.