

MAHARISHIVILLE

by Julie Long

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Prologue

In the Old Farmer's Almanac *Guide to Watching the Weather*, you'll find some helpful rules of thumb. For instance, if a jet airplane doesn't leave a visible trail, you can be fairly certain it won't rain the next day. If it's snowing hard enough that you can't see with your high beams on while driving, you can figure the snow is accumulating at a rate of at least an inch per hour. If you feel a chilly downdraft when you see an approaching thunderstorm, the storm most likely will break overhead instead of blowing over.

These are not myths. Here's a weather myth: Cracking your windows during a tornado will equalize pressure and may save your home. In fact, it's a useless waste of time — time you could be using to get to a safe place. Myths and folklore, like six more weeks of winter if the groundhog sees his shadow, are not reliable. (The groundhog, by the way, has only been correct 25% of the time over the last half-century.) But a rule of

thumb, by definition, is based on experience. You can pretty much count on a rule of thumb.

Midwest living has its own rules of thumb. Particularly in a small town. The most exciting thing happening on a Friday night is the high school basketball game. When you sit down to a meal, the main ingredient will be meat (and there's a good chance the salad contains Jell-O). And when you're ready, you'll fall in love with a nice, down-to-earth girl who believes in the same things you do.

These were the rules of thumb when I grew up in Iowa. They were the rules of thumb I was counting on when I decided to return.

Of course, I should have remembered another rule of thumb, the one about going home again: namely, you can't. Not really. Not even when the hometown is named after your family. And especially not if that town is Martinville, Iowa.

Chapter 1

"Owen, dude, people move *to* California, not *away* from it," Kevin informed me over pizza and beer.

He, like everyone I told, couldn't understand why anyone would want to leave California.

"Where exactly is Iowa, anyway?" he asked. "And what do they do there besides pick potatoes?"

"That's Idaho, idiot," I said. "Iowa is corn."

He waved me off. "Whatever, man. The point is, what is there in Iowa? Just a bunch of land."

"You act like I'll be living in the Australian Outback."

"Now *that* would be cool," he said through a mouthful of pizza.

How could I explain that I wasn't looking for cool? California offered plenty of that. There was wave after wave of new fads to catch; people rode the crest of one until it flattened out and then they caught the next one. Well, I couldn't surf, and I was tired

of swimming against the tide. After 15 years on the West Coast, the corners of my squareness were still sharply evident. I needed Iowa: that body of gently rolling farmland, where the only waves were in the rows of crops stirred by the wind. Where everyone's feet were firmly planted on the ground.

I didn't come to this decision lightly. It was preceded by several events, though they all occurred in one singular, clarity-producing kind of day:

1. My dog farted up my nose. I had fallen asleep with my bulldog puppy, Stella, and sometime during the night she shifted position — a fact I became instantly aware of when silent-but-deadly gases traveled into my nose without dispersing into the atmosphere, shooting me awake like some sick form of smelling salts. Here's the significance: This was what my personal life had come to. The only female in my bed was my dog. And I'd been spooning with her.
2. I was fired from my job. Being a meteorologist in San Diego is sort of an oxymoron. It's always 75 and sunny (the windshield wipers on my truck were broken for a year before it became an issue). So I like to mix it up a bit, show the viewers what real weather is. That Saturday morning, I clicked the map over to the Midwest to highlight the snow that Santa had brought the kids. Kevin, who is the cameraman at the station, tried to warn me that Wiley was in the control booth. Wiley is of the firm opinion that people who live in paradise only want the weather for paradise. So I didn't get the promotion to the nightly news slot. Instead, he flung his clipboard at me, called me farmboy and told me to go back to

EastBumFuck, Ohio (people in paradise are always confusing Iowa with Idaho or Ohio).

3. I had another blind date (courtesy of Kevin, as usual). It had sounded promising when she suggested we meet at some diner called Blue Plate. I'd grown up in diners. Burgers with the guys after basketball games, Saturday morning pancakes and coffee — plain old coffee, not this five-buck grandefrapalattechino crap. But Blue Plate turned out to be a new bistro with a retro theme, decked out with booths and fixtures from various real diners that had closed because they weren't hip enough. The meatloaf special was caramelized tofu with cilantro mashed potatoes, the tuna melt was seared Ahi on flatbread with a dollop of goat cheese. And my date. The only thing natural about Sienna was her organic-no-processed-carbs diet. Teeth Chiclets-perfect and bleached blue-white. Breasts ballooning out of her tank top. Voice like, *so* affected. These kinds of dates are why I ended up getting a dog (see Item 1, above).

4. My mother got engaged. In fact, she tracked me down at the “diner” to tell me. And because I refuse to carry the cell phone she gave me for Christmas, I had to have the entire “Arthur will never replace your father” conversation at the hostess stand (I rolled my eyes at the hostess as if to say “Mothers, right?” but apparently she didn't have one). Since my dad died when I was 16 and I was now 32, Mom remarrying honestly wasn't an issue. I was happy for her. What was an issue, for the purposes of my moving-back-to-Iowa explanation, was that my mother didn't

need me in California anymore. She probably never did. If I was a square-peg in a round hole, she was a perfect fit. She was open to change and embraced everything new age the coast had to offer — from trying the Goddess Workout (“You belly dance with bright sashes to unleash your feminine empowerment”) to learning Reiki healing (“Let me lay my hands on you”). While she’d felt suffocated in Iowa after Dad died, assigned the role of Bill Martin’s widow, she blossomed after she moved us to California. Why could she adjust and not me? As she so succinctly put it: “Sweetheart, I’m *from* the Midwest. You *are* the Midwest.”

5. My mother called Uncle Phil in Iowa. We’d fallen out of touch with my dad’s brother over the years, but mom felt he deserved to know about her impending nuptials and so she called him after she hung up with me at the “diner.” And then she called me back (once again I had to report to the hostess stand) to tell me this: Uncle Phil and Aunt Esther wanted to sell grandmother Martin’s farmhouse. They could no longer find renters and the place was sitting empty. They had their own house in town and my cousin Lisa lived up in Des Moines (with another baby on the way, Aunt Esther made sure Mom knew). They needed Mom’s and my agreement to sell. Not the entire farm, they explained, just the homestead. Well, that was the best part. A yellow clapboard with a deep wraparound porch, a storm cellar and a pump in the yard. The kind of house you’d never find in San Diego. If it ever had existed, it would have been bulldozed decades ago to build a development: a sea of identical stucco townhouses. Like the one I lived in. I couldn’t take the news of the farmhouse being sold. It was the only thing left from

the only place I'd ever belonged. And what was keeping me here now anyway? It occurred to me that I was the sole Martin male left to carry on the name, and at the rate I was going it would die with me. In frickin'75-and-sunny San Diego.

I left for Iowa the first of February, boxes in the back of the truck, the dog in the front, and the windows cracked to counteract her SBDs. Kevin moved into my condo for the time being — he'd been grumbling for months about his roommate's girlfriend being a permanent fixture at his place — and I left most of my furnishings for him.

I didn't have a job lined up or any real prospects for that matter. But I had saved a good chunk of money and could live off that for a while until I figured something out. The cost of living was a lot lower in the Midwest. And Uncle Phil and Aunt Esther would let me stay in the farmhouse rent-free for a while.

After four days of driving I entered Nebraska. Dark, dormant farmland waited to be brightened by a new batch of snow, due in the area in a couple of days according to the local station I tuned in. The land stretched endlessly on either side of the highway, cornstalks picked clean and cut down. I stopped for lunch at a diner with no name and ate a hot roast beef sandwich with gravy and fries, and a slice of banana cream pie. I had officially arrived in the Midwest.

When I crossed into Iowa on day five, I gassed up at an old station that actually had a bell that ding-dinged when I pulled in. The station had a service bay instead of a convenience store, and "pay at the pump" meant the attendant in greasy overalls took my money.

"Nice truck," the old man said.

"Thanks." I was surprised to draw a compliment on an eight-year-old Ford.

"No, thank *you* for buying American," he said.

In California I'd felt like a hick. Here, I felt like a hero.

I rolled into Martinville on a half-tank of gas and an empty stomach. I slowed the truck at the stoplight where the highway turned into Main Street, one of the two main roads in town. On the right was the IGA grocery store. Across from it sat the McDonald's. When the Golden Arches came to town the summer I was 16, it was a huge deal: Martinville's first national fast-food chain. (Until then, there had been only Scotty's, whose mascot was a red-haired character with a tam o'shanter and plaid scarf.)

I was hungry, but I wasn't about to settle for fast food when Aunt Esther would have at least a plate of leftovers waiting for me at the farmhouse. I'd called her from the road earlier and she had been over to the house to clean and stock the kitchen for me, and leave a key under the milk box. She and Uncle Phil had a choir concert tonight or they'd have invited me to eat at their house.

Aunt Esther had doted on me since I was young. She marveled to my mom at how much of her pot roast and pies I could eat. "Marlene, don't you feed this boy?" I always knew Aunt Esther was showing Mom up, but hey, food was food. Now I was looking forward to more of her home cooking, even if it was leftovers.

But then I remembered that Martinville had a delicacy you couldn't find outside of the Midwest: the Maid-Rite sandwich. Like a sloppy Joe without the tomato sauce, a Maid-Rite was just salty browned beef on a bun — but its greasy simplicity was delicious. Now it felt like I'd been craving a Maid-Rite for the last 15 years. I came up

on the block, just before Town Square, where the eatery was. I couldn't help myself. I had to stop.

I slowed the truck, trying to remember exactly where the restaurant was. I inched along, mouth watering, eyes scanning the storefronts. There, I recognized the big front window, the way it angled in to the door. But instead of the simple red block lettering on the glass, there was this loopy purple script: “The Healthy Hearth.” And beneath that, words that made my mouth go dry: “A Vegetarian café.”

A vegetarian restaurant in the middle of Iowa? This was a state where the ad slogan “Beef: It’s what’s for dinner” was taken as gospel. No wonder the sign on the door was flipped to CLOSED.

I must have the wrong building, I thought, and I gently pushed my foot on the gas as I continued to watch for the Maid-Rite.

“Watch it!” someone yelled.

I looked forward to see a body in front of my truck. I slammed my foot on the break, sending Stella tumbling to the floor of the cab.

A kid in a pink jacket with short spiky hair banged her hand against the hood of the truck. I threw the gearshift into PARK and hopped out.

“Are you all right?” I rushed around to the right front bumper.

“You almost ran me over!”

She flattened her free hand to her chest and I noticed two things beneath her unzipped jacket: First, she was wearing a nametag. Second, she had boobs (okay, so I guess that makes *three* things). She wasn’t a kid, I realized, but a petite woman, lithe, like a ballerina.

“I’m really sorry —” I glanced at the name on the tag, “Trisha.” I looked to her face and was met with green eyes nearly the color of spring grass.

“It’s Trish-na, with an N.” She tapped her nametag then raised an eyebrow. “Maybe that’s the problem: you need glasses.” Her tone was somewhere between a barb and a tease.

“Sorry. Trishna.”

I bent down to retrieve the shoulder bag she’d dropped. As I stood, I surveyed her body, looking for injuries, I told myself. She wore some sort of tights that showed off her toned legs, and a clingy top that wrapped around a slim waist. She was waif-like and sexy at the same time — the opposite of the sporty buff babes in California.

“Are you sure you’re not hurt?” I asked as I handed her the bag.

“Are you sure you’re licensed to drive?” she quipped.

“I guess I deserve that. I wasn’t watching the road.”

“Well,” she bit her lip, “since we’re being honest, neither was I. I was running late. *Am* running late.” She started walking backwards. “I’m *always* running late.”

She was smiling now, and I smiled back at her.

“I was looking for the Maid-Rite,” I said. “Did it move?”

She stopped and her smile vanished. She looked at me as if I’d asked where to find a slaughterhouse. “That place was gross. Thank goodness it’s gone.” She scrunched her nose up as if the smell still lingered.

“I happen to love the Maid-Rite,” I said. “Everyone does.” I didn’t know why I felt the need to defend myself. She put her hands on her hips. “Obviously not everyone, or you wouldn’t find a vegetarian restaurant in its place, would you?”

"Well, if you don't mind my saying," I nodded toward the building, "this place doesn't seem to be doing much business."

She rolled her eyes. "We close from five to seven." She zipped up her coat and started across the street. "Come back later and you'll see how busy it is."

"No thanks," I told her. "I think I'll stick with meat."

"Try a tofu burger," she called from the far curb. "You'll live longer."

I opened the truck door and Stella, who had scrambled back onto the seat, barked at the woman.

"You tell her, girl." But I saw the dog's nub-tail wiggle like crazy as she stared after her.

"She's not for us, Stella." I climbed in the truck and slammed the door. "Even if she is kind of cute." I shifted into DRIVE. "I've had enough of anything that resembles California — including vegetarians."

Dusk settled as I continued down the street. I could still make out the white bandstand in the middle of Town Square, where a carousel of Santa and his reindeer had circled during the Christmas season when I was a boy. Further down Main Street I passed the old Dickson mansion, where I suffered through years of piano lessons, its lavender-painted turrets now nearly covered by the treetops.

I continued past the shaded houses that lined Main Street, past the wooded park where Dad took us to roast wieners and marshmallows in the fall, past the ball field where I played Little League. Then I turned right at the old roller rink. Soon the paved road gave way to gravel.

"Almost home, girl," I told Stella, and she pressed her face against the side window. I cracked it so she could get a whiff of her new surroundings. The air was crisp and cold and seemed to tease us forward. A log fire burned somewhere in the distance and its smoky scent mixed with the sweet wool fibers of my father's jacket that I'd pulled from storage.

I turned into the gravel drive of my grandmother's house. The porch light glowed, and through the kitchen window I could see Aunt Esther had left the light on above the stove.

I stood by the truck, stretching my shoulders while I let the dog wander, sniff and do her business. The house was as I remembered; a little smaller, perhaps, and the porch a bit saggy, but still the same welcoming yellow, soft and warm like sun through an old garage window.

I took in a deep breath. Though cold filled my lungs, the February air was still heavy with the richness of Iowa soil and trees and all things deeply rooted.

I'd come home.

Westerly Winds

Most weather systems travel from west to east over the United States. The reason for this is the westerly winds — one of several fairly constant winds circulating the upper atmosphere of the Earth as nature tries to equalize air pressure. The warm air at the equator rises. The cold air at the poles falls. If the Earth stood still, the upper air would travel toward the poles and the surface air would travel toward the Equator. But the Earth is spinning, and the force of the rotation bends the wind to the right. So whatever is brewing in the west travels east.

Chapter 2

I dished up the pot roast and potatoes that Aunt Esther had left in the fridge. There was no microwave (I hoped the wiring wasn't too old to support one), so I had to heat my plate of food in the oven.

While I waited, I began unloading the truck. Stella stayed at my heels the first couple of trips until she surmised I wasn't going anywhere and watched me from the warmth — and tantalizing smells — of the kitchen. Every time I walked back in the door the aroma of home cooking enveloped me. When it was finally reheated, I ate every last bite and debated whether I should allow Stella to lick the plate clean or do it myself. As if reading my mind, she let out a groan of agony. I relented.

I felt my eyes pulling closed with exhaustion. I left the rest of the boxes in the back of the truck and we headed off to bed. We climbed the steep, narrow steps to the second floor. Poor Stella was panting by the time she reached the top, and I was no better off.

Aunt Esther had made up the front bedroom for me. This was the room I'd always stayed in whenever I slept at my grandmother's. It was situated in the northeast corner, where the sunrise would help warm it up on winter mornings, and come summer it wouldn't get the hot afternoon sun.

I threw a blanket on the floor and patted it. "Come on, Stella, here's your bed." I had this idea that I'd put an end to our bunkmate relationship. A new environment, a fresh start.

She looked at me quizzically then put her front paws on the bed frame and grunted her command. I sighed. I was too tired to put up with the whining I'd have to endure to break her of the habit. Besides, the hardwood floor was pretty cold and drafty. Up in the bed she went. She tucked herself between my arm and side, rested her floppy-jowled mug on my shoulder and let out a huge sigh. Even she seemed to know she was home.

In the morning, I headed downstairs to use the bathroom and was halfway down the steps when I realized Stella wasn't following me.

"Come on, girl," I coaxed.

She tentatively lowered her big front paws down one step, then froze and whimpered. Her head and chest were so much bigger than her back half that she seemed about to teeter down the steep stairs.

I carried her down. "You'll have to get used to them sometime, you know."

When I let her outside I glanced at the truck and my heart sank: my boxes were gone. Then I saw they'd been stacked on the porch. A note sat on top:

Told Esther I'd give you a hand but didn't want to wake you.

Welcome back.

— *Delbert*

I should have known it was kindness, not a crime. Delbert Fulton had run the Martin farm ever since my grandfather died, which was before I could remember. Dad and Uncle Phil certainly had farming experience, but they had gone to college and pursued different careers. Dad became a pharmacist and opened Martin Drug. Uncle Phil was a geologist and taught soil conservation at the local college. It pleased my grandmother to no end that her boys weren't engaged in such hard labor. But it didn't help my father. His heart had failed before he turned 45.

I hauled the boxes into the house while the coffee brewed. Aunt Esther had left me a long list of instructions, including that I was to be at her house for Sunday dinner. I smiled, remembering that "dinner" meant lunchtime (and "supper" meant dinnertime). But before dinner, her note said, she'd see me at church. I was to be on the front steps of First United Presbyterian at 10:45.

Except for weddings and an occasional Christmas Eve service, I hadn't been to church in more than 10 years. Most of the churches in San Diego were nondenominational, and enough little things were done differently that I could never really feel at home. I'd find myself standing when no one else did. When everyone else stopped the Lord's Prayer at "the power and the glory," I would keep going with "forever and ever."

But back in Martinville, in my old church, it was like I had never left. When I turned to the people behind us to shake hands and say, "Peace be with you," an older woman said, "Why, you're Bill Martin's boy!"

The church hadn't changed, and neither had my aunt and uncle. Aunt Esther still wore her hair and dress June Cleaver-style. Uncle Phil was gray at the temples and then some, but still sported a full head of hair. Now more than ever he reminded me of Fred MacMurray on *My Three Sons*, cardigan and all.

After church I stopped to pick up Stella — I didn't want to leave her in new surroundings by herself too long. By the time we made it to Aunt Esther's house I was starving. The smell of ham and scalloped potatoes greeted me at the door.

"You can get the butter out of the cupboard over the toaster," my aunt said.

This was the only helping she would allow me to do. I set the butter dish on the table next to the plate of white bread. It was the little things like this — bread and butter at every meal, the butter stored at room temperature to keep it soft — that I hadn't realized I'd missed.

It was a dinner scene I had often participated in as a boy. We passed the peas and swapped stories. Said we couldn't eat another bite and then polished off the second helping my aunt heaped on our plates. I pictured looking in on this scene from outside through the window: the warmly lit room, the family gathered around the table. It was a Norman Rockwell painting, and I was a part of it.

And then, over chocolate cake, the paint began to chip. Uncle Phil asked me what I hoped to do for work in Martinville.

I'd already been asked this question several times outside church that morning. I wished I had a better answer than the truth: I wasn't sure.

"Well, it'd be a shame to waste your education in meteorology," my aunt said. "I do hope you'll find something in your field."

"If not, maybe it's time to try something else," I said. "Maybe I'll go back to school, take a couple classes."

I noticed a glance between my aunt and uncle. "What?" I asked.

"You mean classes at Roo U?" Aunt Esther said.

"Esther, now, that's none of our business," my uncle said.

"Well, he brought it up! Everyone has been avoiding the subject and I think we should go ahead and get it out in the open."

"Get what out in the open?" I said.

"Did you move to Martinville to become a Roo?" Aunt Esther said.

"What's a Roo?"

"You know, a guru, a Maharishi follower. A TMer."

Uncle Phil saw my confusion. "She means a Transcendental Meditator. TMer for short." He turned to my aunt. "See? He doesn't know about it. How could he? You never told Marlene."

"It's not the kind of news one likes to tell the world, Phil." My aunt pursed her lips.

An uneasy feeling crept over me. "Could we back up a minute? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Well then," Uncle Phil said. He wiped his mouth with his napkin then carefully smoothed the cloth on his lap.

"A few years after your mother and you moved from Martinville, Dillard College closed."

I was stunned. "Why?"

"Bent on increasing enrollment, the dean relaxed standards, and the college lost its accreditation. It went bankrupt and closed its doors."

"Why didn't you tell us?" I'm sure my mother never knew; she would have told me.

"It was quite an embarrassment, as you can imagine," Uncle Phil said, looking down at his lap. "For the citizens of Martinville, as well as the faculty."

Aunt Esther touched his arm. "*You* have nothing to be ashamed of, Phil. You always held your students to high standards."

"But if you haven't been teaching at Dillard, what have you been doing since then?" I asked.

"Well, we hated to relocate," my uncle said.

"The Martins *founded* this town," Aunt Esther chimed in, as if I didn't know. "Our entire lives are here."

"So, I've been teaching classes at the community college in Carver. It's not a bad drive."

I felt horrible that Uncle Phil and Aunt Esther had felt the need to keep this secret from Mom and me. And yet, they'd welcomed me back with open arms — their long-lost nephew who hadn't even bothered to write regularly.

“What about the Maharishi?” I asked. “What’s he got to do with this?”

The Maharishi Mahesh Yogi — the one the Beatles hung out with back in the 1960s — purchased the entire campus, lock, stock and barrel. He opened the Maharishi University, or "Roo U" as the locals call it.

"Why would he choose the middle of Iowa?" I said.

"He got a complete college campus for four cents on the dollar," Uncle Phil said.

"And a place to do his brainwashing where it wouldn't get national attention," Aunt Esther added.

"Now Esther," Uncle Phil said. "Brainwashing is a pretty harsh word."

"People actually come to Martinville to go to the school?" I asked.

"Oh, they flock here," Aunt Esther said. "Not just students, either."

"Martinville has become a kind of Mecca for the meditators," Uncle Phil said. "Even after the Maharishi's death — maybe more so."

"They're trying to take over our town, that's what they're doing," Aunt Esther said. "They've bought up the best homes along Main Street — you'll see what they've done to them. And they run retail shops on the square! Selling 'healing crystals' and hemp this-and-that — I think they smoke that stuff, because a lot of them look very spaced-out."

"Esther," my uncle chided her again.

As she cleared the table, he turned to me and lowered his voice. "She's still a little bitter about Dillard College closing and seems to take it out on the meditating community."

From the kitchen, Aunt Esther shouted. “And oh! The traffic every morning and evening!”

Traffic? In Martinville?

“All of them rushing to get to those two hideous golden domes they built to meditate in.”

Gold domes?

“Why, some of them say they can *levitate*, do you believe that?”

Back at the farmhouse that night, in my squeaky old bed tucked under a handmade quilt, I couldn't sleep. Stella dozed soundly, her snores grinded like a semi-truck downshifting on the highway. I stared at the room's sloped ceiling. Its downward slant seemed to reflect the turn my perfect plan had taken.

I'd thought I'd left all the new-age nonsense back on the West Coast. I thought I'd moved to normal old Martinville, the way it always was.

But I was mistaken.

I'd moved to Maharishiville.

Chapter 3

A delivery truck for the Everything Hemp store blocked the back service alley, so Trishna Wallace had to park the van just off the town square on Hegner Way. She set the parking brake — with her short legs she barely managed to push it to the floor — and slid down out of the driver's seat into the wet snow. She tramped through the slush and unlocked the side door of The Healthy Hearth.

It was 9:30 in the morning. She had exactly half an hour to unload the supplies from the co-op and get to the yoga studio. She had a private session at 10:00 before teaching class at 11:00. She hefted the sack of organic wheat flour from the back of the van, swung around and smacked into her father.

"Trishna," he said, one eyebrow raised.

Darn, she thought. If only she'd been able to park in the back, undetected.

"Good morning, Daddy," she chirped.

He took the sack of flour out of her hands. "I didn't see your van when I came out of the dome. Did you skip morning Sidhi?"

"Of course not." She grabbed a jug of honey and carried it inside, her father following behind with the flour. She knew what was coming.

"I didn't think so," he said. Back outside, he put his hands in the pockets of his cashmere topcoat. "But tell me you didn't skip shivasana afterward."

"I didn't skip shivasana." She grabbed a box from the van. He grabbed a crate of produce and followed her into the café again.

"But you cut it short," he said behind her.

"Only by a few minutes. I had to pick up supplies and get to the studio early — Lindsay Evans needs some work on her back." *And I needed the money.*

Trishna motioned for her father to set the crate on the counter while she took the box into the walk-in cooler and slid it onto a metal shelf. It was dark and quiet in the giant refrigerator, and she paused and leaned back against the metal door. If only she could stay in here and avoid him. But any moment he'd probably barge in to rescue her from hypothermia. Besides, she had to keep on schedule. She took a deep breath and shoved the massive door with her hip and shoulder to break the seal. As she stumbled out, her father continued the conversation where he'd left off.

"Trishna, you know you shouldn't cut shivasana short. There's a reason the rest period exists." She stepped around him and he followed her back out to the van. "You need to come out of your meditation slowly, reconnect with your surroundings before you go driving off."

"Daddy, I'm fine." She started to heft the last box but her father stepped in and grabbed it.

She led him inside and scratched a quick note for Dale: *Sorry I didn't unpack — running late. See you at 1:30.*

"Trisha," her father started up again when they were back outside. "I already get at least one call a week from a citizen blaming a fender-bender on 'some Roo acting spacey' — that's on top of the complaints about the dome traffic. The last thing I need is to have my daughter hit another vehicle because she didn't take the time to refocus."

"Me? Two days ago some guy — most definitely *not* a meditator — almost ran me over with his truck." The van's back doors squeaked as she closed them.

"Where? Were you hurt?" His hands flew to her shoulders and his eyes scanned her frame.

"No, Daddy, I'm fine. I promise you I'm fine. And I wouldn't think of causing embarrassment to Martinville's first 'Meditating Mayor.'" She stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "Now I have to go."

As she turned on her heel he tugged on her scarf. "Hey." She turned. "It's not about you embarrassing me, peanut." His voice softened. "I'm worried about you. You're holding down two jobs, running back and forth all day long between the restaurant and the yoga studio."

"You have two jobs, too," she pointed out. She didn't understand why he wanted to be mayor when he already ran a successful software company.

"Yes, well, I want to help my community. You, on the other hand, work two jobs simply to pay rent on that ramshackle house you share."

“Here we go again.” She shoved both hands into her coat pockets.

“I’m merely pointing out,” he continued, “that it would make more sense to give up the restaurant job and the rental, and move back home with me. I have that huge house all to myself.”

She tilted her head patiently. “Daddy, I like living on my own. I’m twenty-four, I *should* be living on my own.”

She knew he was lonely without her. All these years since her mother had left, it’d been the two of them. But she needed some space, her own life. She had plans.

“Look, I really have to go.”

“I know, I know.” He adjusted the scarf around her neck. It irritated her and made her heart ache at the same time.

“Why don’t you come by here for dinner after evening Sidhi?” she asked. She was working two shifts today, before and after evening Sidhi.

He smiled and agreed.

“Good. I work seven-thirty to eleven.” She really started at 7:00, but she couldn’t let him know she’d be leaving Sidhi early again.

Chapter 4

I quickly learned that Martinville had become a town of polar opposites. Townies and Roos, old fashioned and new age. Both factions existed side by side, though they kept mostly to themselves. Which was fine with me. I certainly had no reason to interact with the Roos. I didn't know any of them and they didn't know me.

But Martinville is a small town. Uncle Phil had mentioned my moving back to the teller at his bank, who told one of her friends, who told her boyfriend, who told his sister, who happened to be the secretary for the principal of Maharishi High School.

Yes, there was a Roo high school on the campus of Roo U. More surprising, the school had a girls' basketball team, and they were about to lose their coach, who was relocating out of state for her husband's job. I learned all this when the principal called me.

"I understand you were quite the basketball player in high school," he said.

"Have you ever coached?"

"YMCA youth teams in California," I said. It had been a pitiful league, actually. We'd barely had enough players for six teams. Why do California kids only want to play soccer?

“We were hoping you’d consider stepping in as interim coach,” he said, “to see the team through the remainder of the season.”

I didn’t want to interact with the Roos, but this was *basketball*. Next to playing for a pro team, coaching was my dream job. Granted, I’d rather it be at a regular high school, but at least the team was having a winning season — the girls must not be too spaced out. Still, the prospect of interacting on a daily basis with meditators caused me to backpedal. Not to mention the job prerequisite that the principal mentioned.

“Think about it,” he told me before I could say no.

I decided the decision required careful deliberation and trusted counsel: beers with Smitty at the Do Drop Inn.

Smitty was the only friend I had left in Martinville. We hadn’t spoken in nearly a decade before I moved back, but as soon as I got here it was like I’d never left. I guess that’s how it is when you’ve known someone since the third grade. We built tree houses together. Stole our first kiss from the same girl (Missy Daniels, fifth grade). Rode our bikes all over town in middle school, then rode the bench together our freshman year of basketball. Then we both shot up several inches and made starting positions our sophomore years, he as guard, me as forward.

Now Smitty ran a construction company, getting plenty of residential work from the Roos remodeling old homes and building new ones to conform to a Maharishi version of feng shui he said they called Sthapatya Veda design.

“It’s some strange shit, O,” he told me at the bar. Smitty always called me by my first initial. "A beam of light needs to be able to pass from one end of the house to

the other. I've built houses with glass block in closets and staircases so the light energy could flow through."

In the mayor's home, Smitty's guys had to work in their stocking feet and weren't allowed to bring their lunches inside if they contained any meat.

"The Roos are different, but they're all right." He took another swig of Millstream Ale.

"Yeah, but do I want to be coaching Roo basketball players?" I asked.

"They've got a hell of a good team, I'll say that for them. Martinville High's girls rarely beat them. I say go for it. What do you care what they do off the court? As long as they come to practice and play hard."

He had a point. Besides, I really missed basketball. It'd be great to get involved in coaching, if only for part of a season. Even though it didn't pay much.

"There's just one catch," I said, looking into my mug as if I'd never seen carbonation before.

"What," Smitty said. "You gotta practice in the domes?"

We laughed. "No," I answered, then turned my head to him and squinted my eyes against the realization of what I was about to say. "I have to take an intro course in TM. It's required for all staff."

Smitty snorted a laugh, almost shooting beer out his nose. "No way! That's hilarious."

"Glad you think it's funny." I spun my stool around and leaned back against the bar. "I don't know, this might be a deal-breaker." I would have to sit through a two-hour lecture, and then a few days of learning the technique, an hour each day.

“Ah, come on, O. It’s a formality. The principal knows you’re no Roo. Did he say you have to meditate every day during the season or anything?”

“No.” I tried to reach behind my back for my beer but my arm gave a funny pinch. I spun my stool back around and grasped the mug.

Smitty reached past me for the bowl of peanuts. “Then take the course, go through the motions, and forget about it.”

“You don’t think they’ll try to brainwash me or something?” I asked.

“If they do I’ll hire a deprogrammer, like with the Moonies. I got your back.”

I must have looked worried because Smitty laughed again. “I’m kidding. Honestly, I don’t think they operate that way.”

“They do seem pretty harmless,” I said. I put the cool mug to my mouth and swallowed. “So you really think I should take it?”

“Worst case scenario, you got some great stories to tell the grandkids. Besides, what the hell else you got going on?”

Chapter 5

The way Mayor Corbin Wallace saw it, the very thing most people loved about a small town — the fact that nothing changes — is what doomed it to extinction.

"Innovate or evaporate, folks," he told the council members. He'd learned that rule running his software company, and he knew the same rule applied to running Martinville. "If we don't find something to attract visitors, this town is going to be passed by, quite literally."

The Highway 15 bypass would be completed by the end of next year. Traffic would no longer come right through the middle of town.

"This bypass will be the beginning of the end, if we don't create some kind of attraction that makes Martinville a destination."

"You mean like how Kalona has the Amish?" Stan Keen asked.

Paul Chillings raised his hand and said he had an idea. "My wife and I were in Kansas visiting her family and we drove through Cawker City and saw the world's

biggest ball of twine. It was really quite amazing. It's more than 11 feet high. Maybe we could create our own big something."

Mayor Wallace rolled his eyes. Before he could stop them, the council was brainstorming Guinness World Record gimmicks, including the world's largest collection of hubcaps. According to Stan, he already had a sizable assortment.

"Folks, folks, *please* stop!" Mayor Wallace pulled an issue of a software magazine out of a folder. "See this article? Central Iowa is being touted as 'Silicorn Valley' because of the number of high-tech companies there. *That's* the direction Martinville should be headed. High-tech, not Hee-Haw. Now, we already have a bit of high-tech going on — my software company, for one — but we need more. We've got to build jobs *and* attract tourists."

"Too bad the Maharishi college isn't pulling in people like we were led to believe it would," Wes Hurley from the bank said.

"Wes, I think we'd all have to agree the college has done its part. But you can't expect it to balance out the closing of the glove factory and the machining plant."

"High-tech, that sounds so cold," Vera Wagner said. She lifted her shoulders and crossed her arms as if a draft had snuck into the room. "As head of the Visitors' Bureau, I want people to come to Martinville for the friendly people and quaint atmosphere — and let me tell you, quaint hasn't been easy to keep going with these Roo stores selling incense and such."

The mayor cringed at the slang term. How could these people not realize that "Roo" was a derogatory name? "Let me remind you, Vera," he said, "that the *TM*

community created the few jobs we've added to the area." He adjusted his pin-striped tie.

"And let me remind *you*, Mayor," Wes Hurley pointed at him, "that these ventures seem to vanish as quickly as they appear."

The mayor sighed. These people didn't understand entrepreneurialism, he realized. The majority of start-ups anywhere didn't make it to five years. It wasn't because "kooky meditators" started them.

The mayor pointed out that his company, AgriBiz, had been here 10 years and had experienced continual growth. He didn't mention that it was growing so strong that it looked attractive to major software players out West. When he sold out, the town would no doubt be up in arms. But what he planned to do with the capital would really put Martinville on the map. Only the citizens were nowhere near ready for *that* idea.

If only he could get more of his supporters — more meditators — on the council. His power as mayor was limited without council support. But until the next council election, all he could do was try to convince the current council that the TM movement was a benefit to everyone in town, not only those who meditated.

"Look, no one likes to admit it, but meditators are doing their part to spur Martinville's economy." He began ticking things off on his fingers. "The Vedic Spa north of town. The co-op market. The health food store. The conference the college held on organic farming. And the Heaven on Earth Festival that's coming up over Memorial Weekend. These things are unique to Martinville. Unique things draw visitors. Give the meditating community some credit."

"I give them credit for creating rush-hour traffic as they head to those domes every morning and evening," Ted Robbins said, drawing laughs from the group.

"Thank you, Ted," the mayor said. "Really, because traffic is a good sign. As long as we have traffic we know we are not evaporating into a ghost town like Armorville."

He let that thought settle in their brains while the clock on the wall ticked. For several seconds it was the only sound in the room. Mayor Wallace put his elbows on the table and leaned toward the group.

"We're on the same team here. Meditators and nonmeditators. You've got to start realizing that. We are all citizens of Martinville and we all want to keep this town thriving."

The fact that Mayor Wallace had been elected should have meant that the factions in Martinville were coming together. Only 30% of the townspeople meditated, and yet he'd won 54% of the votes. Obviously there were nonmeditators who recognized that he was more than a meditator, that he had a good head for business.

Yet now that he was in office, he was having trouble identifying these supporters. It was as if no one wanted to admit they had voted for him. The editorials in the paper speculated that he had only won due to low voter turnout among nonmeditators. The townspeople had thought there was no way he could win against Mayor Thompson — he'd been the mayor for 20 years.

But he had won. And if he couldn't say he *only* wanted what was best for the town, there was no question that what was good for him was also good for Martinville. Sooner or later, he reasoned, the citizens would have to come to terms with the fact that

TM was Martinville's future. That he himself stood to benefit tremendously from it made it so much the better.

Chapter 6

I called the principal and took the job. I told my aunt and uncle I was doing it for the money — they couldn't argue with the common sense of that — and I didn't mention a word about the required TM course. But now, driving to the lecture, I felt nervous. Like I should have told someone to send a search party if I wasn't back by dinner.

I turned the car between two stone pillars at the main entrance of campus. To my left were the golden domes my aunt had lamented. The low round structures with shallow domed roofs sat like two giant cymbals reflecting the sun. At least my class wasn't held in one of them. I'd been told they were reserved for advanced meditators.

But other than the domes — that was a big “but,” I admit — the campus didn't look all that different from any other small college. There were a lot of old brick buildings, a couple of modern glass-and-angles structures, some ugly dorms.

I was pleased to see that nestled under the trees to the right of the drive, Lenhelm Chapel still stood. One of the stained glass windows had been broken and covered with plywood, and the bushes lining the steps needed trimmed. But the Gothic stone structure remained stoic. I wondered if people still got married there, like my parents had.

I parked in the first lot I came to and walked down the sidewalk that curved through campus toward the student union. There were a few students walking between classes. They were clean cut and several wore suits. I couldn't find a white robe, long hair or beard among them. I tried to detect a blank look in their eyes, like the Harikrishnas at the airport in Los Angeles, but the eyes that met mine were only tired from a day of classes.

The basement of the student union was set up for a lecture, though only a few of the seats were taken. There was a middle-aged woman, an older guy in chinos and a plaid shirt, a couple of younger people in jeans and T-shirts. I took a seat in the back.

After a few minutes, an awkward-looking guy in a cheap tan suit stood and introduced himself as Jeff. He described Transcendental Meditation as a simple, natural technique utilized for 20 minutes each morning and afternoon. It was brought forth in the 1950s by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Jeff pronounced Maharishi as “Ma-HAR-shi.”

“TM raises our consciousness and brings us to a state of awareness of enlightenment. There are four benefits to TM: the development of our full mental potential, perfect health, ideal social behavior and world peace.”

And I thought I was just going to learn how to relax and lower my blood pressure.

The next two hours were filled with more kinds of idealistic statements, backed by assurances that everything had been scientifically proven: TM increases IQ. TM reverses biological aging. Group practice of TM reverses negative trends in society. TM can provide invincibility to our nation.

He used phrases like “pure happiness and bliss” and kept saying that TM is very innocent, charming and simple.

“It’s like brushing your teeth. Anyone can do it.”

Jeff described transcending as an inward dive. As we think on a mantra, the mind is naturally drawn to the quiet TM state, which is charming to the mind. If I kept practicing, according to Jeff, TM would eventually take me into deeper and subtler levels of consciousness until I reached unity consciousness, where all desires are spontaneously fulfilled. Right now, what I desired was for Jeff to stop lecturing.

When he finally finished, he said in order for us to learn TM firsthand he would need to conduct a brief personal interview. Then we would return tomorrow for our personal instruction in the TM technique, followed by three subsequent days of verification and validation.

The fee, by the way, was \$2,500. I was floored. Shouldn’t enlightenment be free?

“Don’t worry, Owen,” Jeff said before my personal interview. “Your fee is being waived by the school, as part of your compensation for coaching.”

The personal interview was nothing more than asking if I was on any prescription drugs, had I ever been in psychological counseling and did I have any health issues? No to all. Now that I wasn’t so nervous I grew bored. I lifted my arm to

rub the back of my neck, and felt a pang stab my upper arm. *I must be stiff from sitting.* If TM was the cure-all this guy said it was, it'd better be able to alleviate muscle aches.

Jeff told me that when I returned the next day I should bring a couple of pieces of fruit, a white handkerchief and some flowers. I didn't ask why. I just wanted to get this whole thing over and get on to coaching.

I grabbed my jacket and he walked me to the hallway. He called to someone passing by, someone with a tattoo on the back of her neck.

"Hey, come meet the new girls' basketball coach," Jeff said to her.

Dangly earrings brushed against her neck as she pivoted and stepped toward us, smile broadening, ready to welcome. Then, just as quickly, she looked dubious.

She dropped her hand to her hip. "*You're* the new basketball coach?"

The scene reminded me of meeting my college girlfriend's father and realizing he was the guy I'd snaked a parking spot from minutes earlier. Because here, standing in front of me, was the girl I'd almost hit with my truck.

"Have you two met before?" Jeff asked.

"Not officially," I said. "I'm Owen Martin." I stuck out my hand. She reluctantly shook it, her delicate fingers surprisingly firm in my grasp.

"Trishna, right?" I asked her. "I remembered the N."

What, did I want brownie points for getting it right? Actually, yes, I did. For some reason I wanted Trishna to like me. I told myself it was because of the coaching job. Could she ruin it for me somehow? *Because I'm not a vegetarian?* That was stupid.

"Trishna and I are roommates," Jeff told me. Then to Trishna, "Owen starts the TM course tomorrow."

“That’s good.” She nodded. Was that a smile or a smirk? “He could use a little mind-opening.”

The next day, Jeff and I entered a little room, dimly lit by a single candle sitting on a low table. He signaled me to take a seat on one of the two bolsters positioned in front of the table. He sat on the other one.

I looked at the table and realized it was set up like an altar. A piece of orange fabric covered the top of it. On it sat the candle and various little metal pots of incense and herbs. He motioned for me to place my flowers on the table, along with my oranges tied in the handkerchief. Leaning against the wall was a large painting of a man sitting, enveloped by his robes and long hair. Next to it was a smaller picture of a man I recognized as the Maharishi. Had I just made an offering to these guys?

“I’m going to introduce you to an appropriate sound, or mantra,” Jeff said, “and then instruct you in the technique to use the sound to go to a quieter place. It is very simple. You need to follow the instruction in a calm and innocent way, with no effort.”

I nodded. I was all for applying no effort to TM.

“I have chosen a mantra for you, to help you focus your attention away from random thoughts. It is, *sharim*.”

I repeated it.

“Correct. But recite the word in your head, not out loud.”

He told me to make sure I was seated comfortably. Since my knees were up to my ears sitting on the little ottoman, he suggested I move to a folding chair, with my feet flat on the floor, my back against the back of the chair.

“Relax and remain calm and innocent,” he said.

There was that word again: innocent. I willed myself to be innocent and avoid thoughts of pornography, drugs or crime.

“The instructions you have to follow are very simple.”

Again with the simple. Did he think I was stupid?

“You’ll close your eyes and repeat the mantra for twenty minutes.”

He would let me know when the time was up. I was not to worry about how I felt or if I was doing it right.

“Okay, you are ready. Close your eyes.”

I did and Jeff said *sharim* over and over, rather quickly. After a bit he said it more softly and more softly until he stopped. “Go on thinking it by yourself,” he whispered.

Sharim, sharim, sharim. I thought to myself. It rhymed with Kareem, as in Kareem Abdul-Jabar, and my thoughts jumped to basketball. With some effort, I brought them back to sharim. *Sharim. Sharim. Sharim.*

I went on like this. Mind focused, then wandering, then refocused on *sharim*. Sometimes I pictured the word flying toward me as I thought it. Once in a while I’d have this sense that I lost time — like when you drift asleep and something wakes you up and you’re not sure whether you’ve been out for a minute or an hour.

“All right,” Jeff’s voice drifted in. “You can stop.”

“Already?”

He had me rest for a few minutes, sitting quietly, not thinking the mantra. He said this was very important. Otherwise I might feel nervous or too excited. Some people got headaches if they didn't rest.

Don't think shirim, I told myself, which of course was the same as thinking the word. *Shit. Think about something else – the first thing to come to mind.* Trishna. Jeff had said they lived together. What would she see in this dork? Wait, he'd said they were "roommates." If they were together he would have introduced her as his girlfriend. So they weren't a couple. *But Jeff probably wants to be. Sneaky bastard.* Wait, what did I care? Trishna wasn't my type. The girl had a tattoo. *Kind of kinky.* She was cocky. *And cute.* She's a meditator. *Oh yeah, that.*

After the rest, Jeff asked me questions. How did I feel? Fine. Was there any moment of unpleasantness? No. Did I feel sleepy during the meditation or now? Nope. Did thoughts disturb me? *Only the ones about Trishna.* I guess I could say meditating had been peaceful, but other than that, I hadn't felt anything. I told Jeff this.

"Many people say that at first. Don't worry. Whether you feel relaxed or nervous or nothing at all, it does not matter. It is still working."

The rest of the sessions that week were held in the outer room. No altar. Four of us students sat in chairs to meditate. After each period of meditation, we discussed how we felt. One woman didn't feel anything. An older man said he felt strange and didn't like it. He took the course as a way to connect with his son, who he said was very into the "movement." Two of us said we had very brief periods of time where we felt a sense of becoming very light, almost lifting.

“Everyone has the potential to discover the inner field of Pure Being, which is Pure Bliss,” Jeff said. “The mind flows to ever more refined levels of thought, until it becomes completely silent and at rest, yet fully awake inside. The mind makes direct contact with Being. This is Transcendental Consciousness and can happen several times during a 20-minute meditation. The mind comes out enlivened with the bliss and peace and energy of Pure Being. And you’ll carry this bliss into your daily living.”

The soft, cheerful way he said this made it all sound so idyllic. A little naïve, perhaps, but certainly harmless. I doubted I’d ever meditate again — it was more useless new-age fluff — but if other people wanted to spend their time and money on TM, it was of no concern to me. I’d done my required course and now I could get on with coaching.

Chapter 7

We were two-thirds through basketball season, with 25 wins and four losses. I wasn't sure if it was the TM or not, but the Roo girls — I mean the meditators (I'd realized that calling them Roos wasn't very nice) — were really focused. They caught on to new plays quickly and worked hard, though practice could never run late because they had to get to their evening meditation.

While my Friday nights were booked with basketball games, my Saturday nights were generally free. Unfortunately. All the girls I knew from high school had either moved away or married. Or both, which was the case with Connie Kerchief. Not that I'd actually expected to rekindle that romance coming back to town — we'd broken up at the beginning of junior year. Though if I was honest, a part of me had hoped to at least run into her if not get another shot.

Tonight's big plans consisted of tacking up weatherproofing plastic on the inside of my bedroom windows. The old windows in the farmhouse were single-paned glass; the plastic would act as a second pane.

Stella lay on the bed chewing on her rubber Kong toy, watching me as if I was the entertainment.

"Damn!" I'd missed the tack and hammered my thumb. I should have splurged and bought a staple gun.

Downstairs the phone rang. I shuffled to the steps in my socks and heard the bed squeak as Stella jumped down from it. Her nails click-clicked across the wood floor. I wondered if she would overcome her fear of the steep steps and follow me down. I hoped so; having to carry her was getting old. At six months old she now weighed 50 pounds. Of course, she didn't have any fear about going *up* the stairs, and so throughout the course of the day if I spent too long upstairs, up she'd trudge.

Downstairs, I trotted through the dining room and grabbed the phone on the kitchen wall.

"Owen, Dear, I haven't heard from you in over two weeks!"

"Hi, Mom. You can call me, too, you know."

"This two-hour time difference is hard to get used to — when I get settled after dinner and ready to call you I realize you've probably gone to bed! I thought you might be up tonight, it being the weekend."

"You didn't think I might be out?"

I heard Stella give a little whine from the top of the stairs, no doubt wondering when I was coming back up.

"Out doing what?" Mom laughed. "You're in Martinville, Dear."

"Funny, Mom."

"Unless... have you met someone? A meditator maybe?"

Mom was disappointed that I hadn't embraced TM now that I was coaching the Maharishi basketball team. She was absolutely thrilled the movement had set up a college in Martinville.

"The Ladies Auxiliary — including your Aunt Esther — must be in a constant tizzy. If I had known, I would have come back to visit ages ago."

Which may have been a contributing factor to Aunt Esther's silence on the matter to Mom. Aunt Esther was a happy homemaker, and my mother's lack of appreciation for domesticity baffled her. With Mom's "creative bent," as Ester referred to it, it was no wonder she ended up in California. The fact that I'd grown to be "such a nice young man" appears to have been largely due to my aunt's early influence and her continued prayers to God.

Stella whined. I covered the phone and shouted up to her, "Come here, girl, come on down."

"Can I assume that's the dog you're talking to?" Mom said.

I needed to get off the subject of women before I got a lecture about how all the girls my age in Iowa were long married and how I should have stayed in San Diego. So I asked Mom what was new with her wedding plans, and off she went.

"You have it marked on your calendar, right? The Saturday of Memorial Day weekend." She rattled off the details for perhaps the fifth time: Sunrise ceremony in Palm Springs at the Vista Mirage Resort. Brunch reception. Honeymoon on an Alaska cruise. Back to Palm Springs to settle into their new "active adult" retirement community.

"Speaking of settling in," she said. "How are you doing in that old farmhouse?"

"Fine. But I've tried to bring up the subject of buying it to Uncle Phil and he always says, 'There's no rush, we'll figure something out.' Do you think he doesn't want to sell it to me?"

I didn't really have any idea how much it would cost, but I assumed I'd have enough money to cover it if I sold my townhouse in San Diego. With housing prices inflated out West, I'd probably end up with money left over. Which was good; coaching didn't pay squat. I planned on touching base with TV station in Carver, the county seat, on the chance they were looking for another weatherman. This Rusty Vane they had on air sucked. Maybe Uncle Phil was stalling for my benefit, until I got another job.

"You know Midwesterners and money," Mom said. "the two are seldom in a conversation together. Phil is so uncomfortable talking about it that we never sorted out the estate after your dad died. Your father's half of the estate went to me. I think Phil figures we'll simply avoid it until he and Esther and I kick the bucket, and you and Lisa can sort it out."

"He won't let me pay any rent — nothing but utilities. I feel like a freeloader."

"Honey, you're *family*. Your uncle doesn't need you to pay rent. He's happy to have someone in that old house to keep an eye on things."

"That's what he tells me."

Stella upgraded her whines to barks, letting me know she expected a lift down the stairs. I really needed to get a cordless phone. "Mom, hold on a sec while I go get the dog — she still won't come down on her own."

"Listen, I've got to go anyway. Arthur and I are going out to dinner at HooRaw — it's a new raw restaurant, where nothing they serve is cooked!"

"Sounds...crunchy."

"You'll have to try it when you come home."

"Mom," I reminded her, "I *am* home."

It took me another weekend to finish weatherproofing all the windows. Then by the following Tuesday, as if Mother Nature had been waiting for me, we got the first big storm of the season. Stella and I hunkered down and enjoyed being snowbound for a couple days. School was cancelled, as was basketball practice.

By Thursday morning I had cabin fever. I needed some human contact and was glad when I spotted Delbert's truck by the barn. I headed over, Stella trailing behind me. The snow was higher than her back and she had to hop through the drifts like a rabbit. So far she wasn't thrilled with the concept of snow, but she wasn't about to be left in the house.

I pushed on the end of the barn door until the massive wooden wall slid open a foot. Stella and I slipped in with the wind and snow. I yanked the door closed, slowly cutting off the flurries, and turned to look for Delbert. He waved at me from the workbench.

"Hi, Delbert, how goes it?"

"Fine, fine. A little stir-crazy."

"I know what you mean."

“Lin used to shoo me out of the house with a broom in weather like this — said my cabin fever always ended with me fixin' somethin' that didn't need fixed.” He grabbed a wrench from the workbench and headed over to the combine.

Delbert's wife had been bedridden for years before she died, yet he always made her sound like she'd been a spitfire.

"So you came over here to fix the combine?"

"Thought I'd check under the hood, tighten things up. Spring will be here before you know it."

I laughed. "Need a hand?"

Now he laughed, or rather stifled a laugh. I'd helped with the fall harvest as a teen, driving the grain truck, but the combine was a \$250,000 piece of farm machinery. You didn't start tinkering unless you knew what you were doing. Which we both knew I did not.

"I can handle it, thanks," he said.

I wandered through the barn, watching Stella poke around, making sure she didn't get into rat poison or some other danger. I felt awkward not being able to help Delbert. But the farm was his turf, even if he didn't own it.

Delbert Fulton's farm was adjacent to the Martin farm, and Delbert had run both for years. The relationship had started with Delbert helping out after my grandfather died. But at some point, faced with mounting medical bills for his wife, Delbert had sold his farm to Uncle Phil. I wasn't exactly sure what the arrangement was, but it was a delicate situation that no one seemed to talk about. Silence was sometimes the best way to keep a man's pride intact.

I heard rubber skittering across cement and turned to see Stella rolling a basketball across the floor.

Delbert chuckled. "Guess we're all getting stir crazy. You should pump some air into the ball and shoot some hoops, keep me company."

I found the tire pump and cleared a spot in front of the old hoop hanging on the wall. Delbert chatted off and on, his voice floating out from inside the combine bin, while I shot and let Stella chase down the ball. It felt great to get my body moving and stretching.

"Your shoulder sore?" Delbert climbed down the combine's metal ladder.

I hadn't realized I'd been rolling it back and forth.

"My arm, really. I guess from tacking up all that weatherproofing."

Although, now that I thought about it, it had started hurting before then. I'd felt a pinch midway down my outer triceps muscle during basketball practice. And when I was learning TM. And at the bar with Smitty. Now, every time I lifted my arm to shoot a basket I felt a little jab.

"You should get that looked at." He pulled a rag out of his coveralls and wiped his hands.

"I'm sure it'll work itself out."

I didn't want Delbert to think I was a wuss. In his 60s, he was still lean and sinewy. He was probably in better shape than I was.

"Some physical therapy might help."

It surprised me that Delbert would be familiar with physical therapy, until I remembered about his wife. I wondered what exactly had been wrong with her. Aunt Esther had said it had something to do with her lymphatic system.

"You should go see Trishna Wallace. She really helped Lin before things got bad."

"Trishna?" The same Trishna? Could there be more than one?

"Corbin Wallace's daughter."

"Ah, the meditating mayor." Then she must really be into TM. She was probably raised on it. Maybe she didn't know anything else. Maybe she'd been brainwashed as a child, like those crazy religious groups in Utah. "What's their story, anyway?"

"I'm sure your aunt could tell you all the gossip," Delbert said.

"I don't want to get her started. She'll never stop." Aunt Ester loved to read the riot act *about* the meditators — she'd never gotten close enough to read it *to* one.

"The mother left, is what I gather. When Trishna was a teen. Get the feeling they don't have contact with her at all."

"That can't be easy for a girl, not having a mother." I was mimicking what people said about me not having a father, but it was true. I used to pop in to see my dad at his drugstore after school, have a cherry cola at the soda fountain. After he died, I never went in there again. The store still stands on the west side of the square. But I can't step foot in there.

"At least she had one good parent," Delbert said. "That's more than some kids get. Mayor Wallace raised her well. Hard worker. Real bright, too."

“She’s a physical therapist?” I thought she only worked at that cafe.

"Na. Trishna teaches yoga. Classes, but individual therapeutic sessions, too."

"Yoga helped your wife?"

"Helped me, too. Had a problem with my hip last winter."

I shot the ball and winced as the pain shot down my arm.

“Give her a call. She teaches at Yoga on Main.”

If Delbert was comfortable with this girl, she must not be too wacky. But yoga?

I didn’t need another new-age experience in my life. I was still trying to forget my meditation class.