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Seating Arrangements

Written by Maggie Shipstead

Published by Blue Door

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Seating Arrangements

Maggie Shipstead



blue door

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1

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To my parents, Patrick and Susan,
pillars of everything

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.
And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors;
Departed, have left no addresses.

T. S. ELIOT, *The Waste Land*

Contents

Thursday

One · The Castle of the Maidens 3
Two · The Water Bearer 20
Three · Seating Arrangements 46
Four · Twenty Lobsters 62
Five · The White Stone House 73
Six · Your Shadow at Evening 95
Seven · The Serpent in the Laundry 113
Eight · A Party Ends 142

Friday

Nine · Snakes and Ladders 163
Ten · More than One Fish, More than One Sea 181
Eleven · Flesh Wounds 194
Twelve · Fortunate Son 209
Thirteen · A Centaur 222
Fourteen · The Sun Goes over the Yardarm 238
Fifteen · Raise Your Glass 255
Sixteen · A Weather Vane 271
Seventeen · The Maimed King 287

Saturday

Eighteen · The Ouroboros 297

Thursday

One · The Castle of the Maidens

By Sunday the wedding would be over, and for that Winn Van Meter was grateful. It was Thursday. He woke early, alone in his Connecticut house, a few late stars still burning above the treetops. His wife and two daughters were already on Waskeke, in the island house, and as he came swimming up out of sleep, he thought of them in their beds there: Biddy keeping to her side, his daughters' hair fanned over their pillows. But first he thought of a different girl (or barely thought of her—she was a bubble bursting on the surface of a dream) who was also asleep on Waskeke. She would be in one of the brass guest beds up on the third floor, under the eaves; she was one of his daughter's bridesmaids.

Most mornings, Winn's entries into the waking world were prompt, his torso canting up from the sheets like the mast of a righted sailboat, but on this day he turned off his alarm clock before it could ring and stretched his limbs out to the bed's four corners. The room was silent, purple, and dim. By nature, he disapproved of lying around. Lost time could not be regained nor missed mornings stored up for later use. Each day was a platform for accomplishment. Up with the sun, he had told his daughters when they were children, whipping off their covers with a flourish and exposing them lying curled like shrimp on their mattresses. Now Daphne was a bride (a pregnant bride, no point in pretending otherwise) and Livia, her younger sister, the maid of honor. The girls and their mother were spending the whole week on the island with an ever-multiplying bunch of bridesmaids and rela-

tives and future in-laws, but he had decided he could not manage so much time away from work. Which was true enough. A whole week on the matrimonial front lines would be intolerable, and furthermore, he had no wish to confirm that the bank would rumble on without him, his absence scarcely noticed except by the pin-striped young sharks who had begun circling his desk with growing determination.

He switched on the lamp. The windows went black, the room yellow. His jaundiced reflection erased the stars and trees, and he felt a twinge of regret at how lamplight obliterated the predawn world, turning it not into day but night. Still, he prided himself on being a practical person, not a poetic soul vulnerable to starlight and sleep fuzz, and he reached for his glasses and swung his feet to the floor. Before going to bed he had laid out his traveling clothes, and when he emerged from the shower, freshly shaven and smelling of bay rum, he dressed efficiently and trotted downstairs, flipping on more lights as he went. He had packed Biddy's Grand Cherokee the night before, fitting everything together with geometric precision: all the items forgotten and requested by the women, plus bags and boxes of groceries, clothes for himself, and sundry wedding odds and ends. While the coffee brewed, he went outside with the inventory he was keeping on a yellow legal pad and began his final check. He rifled through a row of grocery bags in the backseat and opened the driver's door to check for his phone charger, his road atlas—even though he could drive the route with his eyes closed—and a roll of quarters, crossing each off the list in turn. Garment bags and duffels stuffed to fatness made a bulwark in the back, and he had to stand on tiptoe and lean into the narrow pocket of air between them and the roof to confirm the presence in the middle of it all of a glossy white box the size of a child's coffin that held Daphne's wedding dress.

"Don't forget the dress, Daddy," the answering machine had warned in his daughter's voice the previous night. "Here, Mom wants to say something."

"Don't forget the dress, Winn," said Biddy.

"I won't forget the damn dress," Winn had told the plastic box.

He crossed "Dress" off the list and slammed the back hatch. Birds

were calling, and yellow light bled through the morning haze, touching the grassy undulations and low stone wall of his neighbor's estate. Strolling down the driveway to retrieve his newspaper from a puddle, he noticed a few stones that had fallen from the wall onto the shoulder of the road, and he crossed over to restore them, shaking droplets from the *Journal*'s plastic sack as he went. The hollow sound of stone on stone was pleasant, and when the repair was done, he stood for a minute stretching his back and admiring the neat Yankee face of his house. Nothing flashy and new would ever tempt him away from this quiet neighborhood inhabited by quality people; the houses might be large, but they were tastefully shrouded by trees, and many, like his, were full of thin carpets and creaking, aristocratic floors.

His Connecticut house was home, and his house on Waskeke was also home but a home that was familiar without losing its novelty, the way he imagined he might feel about a long-term mistress. Waskeke was the great refuge of his life, where his family was most sturdy and harmonious. To have all these people, these wedding guests, invading his private domain rankled him, though he could scarcely have forbidden Daphne from marrying on the island. She would have argued that the island was her island, too, and she would have said Waskeke's pleasures should be shared. He wished that the ferry could take him back into a world where the girls were still children and just the four of them would be on Waskeke. The problem was not that he wasn't pleased for Daphne (he was) or that he did not appreciate the ceremonial importance of handing her into another man's keeping (he did). He would carry out his role gladly, but the weekend, now surveyed from its near edge, felt daunting, not a straightforward exercise in familial peacekeeping and obligatory cheer but a treacherous puzzle, full of opportunities for the wrong thing to be said or done.

HE DROVE NORTH along leafy roads, past brick and clapboard towns stacked on hillsides above crowded harbors. The morning was bright and yellow, the car scented with coffee and a trace of Biddy's perfume. Freight trains slid across trestle bridges; distant jetties

reached like arms into the sea. Pale rainbows of sunlight turned circles across the windshield. For Winn, the difficulty of reaching Waskeke was part of its appeal. Unless forced by pressures of time or family, he never flew. The slowness of the drive and ferry crossing made the journey more meaningful, the island more remote. Back when the girls were young and querulous and prone to carsickness, the drive was an annual catastrophe, beset by traffic jams, mix-ups about ferry reservations, malevolent highway patrolmen, and Biddy's inevitable realization after hours on the road that she had forgotten the keys to the house or medication for one of the girls or Winn's tennis racquet. Winn had glowered and barked and driven with the grim urgency of a mad coachman galloping them all to hell, all the while knowing that the misery of the trip would sweeten the moment of arrival, that when he crossed the threshold of his house, he would be as grateful as a pilgrim passing through the gates of the Celestial City.

Arriving at the ferry dock an hour early, exactly as planned, he waited in a line of cars at a gangway that led to nothing: open water and Waskeke somewhere over the horizon. Idly, he rolled down the window and watched gulls promenade on the wharves. The harbor had a carnival smell of popcorn and fried clams. When he was a child, for a week in the summer his father would leave the chauffeur at home in Boston and drive Winn down to the Cape himself (such a novelty to see his father behind the wheel of a car). The ferry back then was the old-fashioned, open-decked kind that you had to drive onto backward, and Winn had thrilled at the precarious process even though his father, who might have played up the drama, reversed the car up the narrow ramp with indifferent expertise. They had owned a small place on Waskeke, nothing grand like the Boston house, just a cottage on the edge of a marsh where the fishing was good. But the cottage had been sold when Winn was at Harvard and torn down sometime later to make room for a big new house that belonged to someone else.

The ferry docked with loud clanging and winching and off-loaded a flood of people and vehicles. Some were islanders on mainland shopping expeditions, but most were tourists headed home. Winn was

pleased to see them go even if more were always arriving. A worker in navy blue coveralls waved him up the gangway into the briny, iron-smelling hold, and another pointed him into a narrow alley between two lumber trucks. He checked twice to be sure the Cherokee was locked and then climbed to the top deck to observe the leaving, which was as it always was—first the ship's whistle and then the slow recession of the harbor's jumbled, shingled buildings and the boat basin's forest of naked masts. Birds and their shadows skimmed the whitecaps. Though he never wished to indulge in nostalgia, Winn would not have been surprised to see shades of himself stretching down the railing: the boy beside his father, the collegian nipping from a flask passed among his friends, the bachelor with a series of dimly recalled women, the honeymooner, the young father holding one small girl and then two. He had been eight when his father first brought him across, and now he was fifty-nine. A phantom armada of memory ships chugged around him, crewed by his outgrown selves. But the water, as he stared down over the rail, looked like all other water; he might have been anywhere, on the Bering Strait or the river Styx. Without fail, every time he was out on the ocean, the same vision came to him: of himself lost overboard, floundering at the top of that unholy depth.

As the crossing always had the same beginning, so, after two hours, it always had the same end—a gray strip of land separating the blue from the blue, then lighthouses, steeples, docks, jetties reaching for their mainland twins. There was a little lighthouse at the mouth of the harbor where by tradition passengers on outbound ferries tossed pennies off the side. Livia had said as a child that the sea floor there must look like the scales of a fish, and, ever since, the same thought had come to Winn as he passed the lighthouse: a huge copper fish slumbering below, one bulbous eye opening to follow the ferry's turning propellers. They docked, and as he drove down the ramp into the bustling maze of narrow streets that led out of Waskeke Town, he hummed to himself, relishing solid land.

• • •

A BATTERED MAILBOX labeled "VAN METER" with adhesive letters stood at the entrance to his driveway. The narrow dirt track was edged by tall evergreen trees, and he drove up it with mounting excitement, the trees waving him on until he emerged into sunlight. Atop a grassy lump, not quite a hill, that rose like a monk's tonsure from an encirclement of trees, the house stood tall and narrow, its gray shingles and simple facade speaking of modesty, comfort, and Waskeke's Quaker past. Above the red front door a carved quarterboard read "PROPER DEWS," the name he had given the house upon its purchase. The pun was labored, he knew, but it had been the best he could come up with, and he had needed to replace the board left by the previous owner—"SANDS OF THYME"—a name Winn disdained as nonsensical, given that no herb garden had existed on the property before he planted one. The house had been his for twenty years, since Livia was a baby, and over those twenty summers, time and repetition had elevated it from a simple dwelling to something more, a sacred monolith over which his summer sky somersaulted again and again. He parked the car near the back door and gazed up at the neat procession of windows, their panes black with reflected trees.

Something about the place seemed different. He could not have said what. The gutters, shutters, and gables were all intact, all trimmed with fresh white paint. The hydrangeas were not yet flowering but the peonies were, fat blooms of pink and white. He suspected he was projecting some strange aura onto the house because he knew Biddy, Daphne, and Livia were inside with all the bridesmaids and God only knew what other vestal keepers of the wedding flame. As he sat there, listening to the engine tick its way to quiet, a shard of his nearly forgotten dream punctured the pleasure of his arrival. He might have been in the car, or he might have been back in his bed, or he might have been running one finger down a woman's spine. He tried to push the dream away, but it would not go. He wiped his glasses with his shirt and flipped down the rearview mirror to look at himself. The sight of his face was a comfort, even the chin someone had once called weak. He arranged his features into an expression of

patriarchal calm and tried to memorize how it felt—this was how he wanted to look for the next three days. Extracting the dress box and leaving the rest, Winn went around to the side door and let himself in, almost tripping over an explosion of tropical flowers that erupted from a crystal vase on the floor just across the threshold.

"Biddy," he called into the quiet, "can we find a better place for these flowers?"

"Oh," came his wife's voice from somewhere above. "Hi. No, leave them there."

He let the screen door slam behind him—even though, years before, he had affixed a now-yellowed card to the door that said "do NOT slam"—and stepped around the flowers. He set the dress box down on the floor and grimaced at a pile of sandy and unfamiliar shoes. He matched them in pairs and lined them up along the baseboard. Down the hallway of white wainscoting was a bright rectangle of kitchen light. To his right, the back stairs bent tightly upward, and to his left was a coat closet. Inside he found the usual reassuring line of raincoats and jumble of tennis racquets and beach sandals, but on the top shelf, shoved in with a faded collection of baseball caps and canvas fishing hats, a cluster of gift bags overflowed with tissue paper and ribbon.

"Biddy! What are all these bags in the closet here?"

Again Biddy's voice floated down from on high. "Bridesmaids' gifts. Leave them alone, Winn."

"But let me look first," said someone close behind and just above him. "Daphne said they're good."

Winn turned around, unprepared to see her so soon. "Hello, Agatha!" he said, sounding too jovial.

Agatha came down a few steps and leaned to kiss his proffered cheek. Her collarbones and dark nook of cleavage dipped down and floated back up again. He caught a musky scent, heavy like a man's cologne, and underneath it the smell of cigarette smoke. She always smelled like smoke even though he had never seen her in the act. She must still sneak around like a teenager, sitting on windowsills, dangling her cigarettes out pushed-back screens. Winn had known

few women he would describe as bombshells, but from the undulant contours of her body to her air of careless, practiced dishevelment, Agatha was an authentic specimen. She wore assemblages of thin garments that might have been nightclothes—lace-edged dresses with torn hems, drawstring pants that sat below her hipbones, flimsy cotton shorts—clothing that answered the requirements of decency while still conveying an impression of nakedness. She piled up her hair with bobby pins and odd pieces of ribbon or elastic, and she was always rooting through her purse for something or other and tossing out an alluring potpourri of lipsticks, lighters, crumpled receipts, and bits of broken jewelry.

"How are you?" she asked in her slow way, sounding like she had just woken up. She was wearing a short dress of gauzy white layers that he found oddly bridal. "Welcome to the madhouse."

"I'm very well." Winn took a step backward, and something poked his thigh. A bird of paradise from the flower arrangement. "Is it a madhouse?"

"It's fun—if you like girls. You're outnumbered." She counted on her fingers. "Three bridesmaids including me. Plus Daphne and Livia. Your wife and her sister. Am I missing anyone? No. That makes it seven to one."

"Celeste is staying here?"

"Biddy didn't tell you?"

"Maybe she did and I forgot."

"Sorry, Charlie. Plus the coordinator is in and out all the time. We did a dry run with the hairstylist this morning. Daphne wants everything kept simple, thank God. One time I was in a wedding where they did our hair with tendrils dangling down everywhere like dead vines. Makeup practice is tomorrow, and what else? Manicures? There's something with the dress, too, making room for baby probably. I'm sure I'm forgetting something. Anyway, lucky you."

"Lucky me," Winn said. He rubbed his chin and wondered how much all that was costing him. He wondered, too, how she could be so calm while he felt jumpy as a marionette. She, after all, had been the one to take his hand at Daphne's engagement party, and he had

been struggling to keep her from his thoughts ever since. Truthfully, he had been struggling to keep her from his thoughts for years, but the party was the first time she had shown any interest. He didn't flatter himself—he had seen her around enough men to know flirtation was, for her, an impersonal reflex, and sex appeal was something she rained down on the world indiscriminately, like a leaflet campaign. And nothing had happened. Not really. Only an interlocking of fingers under the privacy of the tablecloth, but still the touch had shocked him. And she had been the one to take the seat next to him, to find his hand where it was resting on his knee and pull it toward her.

Agatha gazed down at him, her head tilted to one side, almost to her shoulder. "Anyway, I've been sent to get the dress."

"Right!" He pivoted to pick up the white box and held it out. "All yours."

She hefted it. "It's heavier than I expected."

"I'm told a pregnant bride requires scaffolding."

She laughed, a single syllable that stuck in her throat, less an expression of mirth than a bit of punctuation, a flattering sort of ellipsis. She hitched her chin and rolled her eyes up toward the second floor. "I should take this to Daphne."

He said Okay! and Bye! as though ending a telephone call and watched her disappear around the bend of the stairs. He'd known Agatha since she was fourteen and Daphne's first roommate at Deerfield, and though she must be twenty-seven now, he couldn't shake his idea of her as a Lolita. His attraction still embarrassed him as much as when it had revolved around her field hockey skirt. She had been a lackluster athlete; probably she had played only because she knew she looked spectacular in skirt and kneesocks, loping down the field with her hair in two messy braids. Did she even remember taking his hand? She had been tipsy at the party, everyone had been, and at the time he had panicked because, after all these years, she *knew,* perhaps had always known. But, that night, lying awake and thinking of her bare knee under the back of his hand, her palm against his, he found he was relieved; now the chips would fall where they may.

Stepping around the flowers, he shut the coat closet and walked down the hall to the kitchen. As children, Winn's daughters had run through the house upon first arrival each summer to remind themselves of all its singularities and unearth relics of their own brief pasts. They made joyful reunions with the canvas sofas, the insides of closets, the views from all the windows, the books on fish and plants and birds, the bowls of sea glass, the wooden whale sending up its flat, wooden spout on the wall above Winn and Biddy's bed, the flower patch where the sundial lay half concealed beneath black-eyed Susans, the splintery planks of the outdoor shower. The kitchen cupboards were thrown open so the cutting boards and bottles of olive oil might be greeted and the enormous black lobster pot marveled over. The hammock was swung in and the garage door heaved up to reveal, through cirrus whirls of dust, an upside-down canoe on sawhorses and the ancient Land Rover they kept on the island. The girls would converge on Winn and clamor at him until he unbolted and pulled open the hatch to the widow's walk so they could stand on top of the house and look out over the island.

But sometime during their teens, they had stopped caring whether everything was as they remembered and moved swiftly and directly to their rooms to arrange their clothes and toiletries. Little blasts of squabbling percussed the walls as they vied for territory in their shared bathroom. Winn had taken up the job of walking around the house to inspect all the nooks and crannies. He breathed lungfuls of salt and mildew and tipped frames back to center with one finger. He opened all the closets. He tested the hammock. He walked blindly through the spiderwebs in the dark garage.

This time on his rounds downstairs he found that everywhere he looked there were more *things* than there should have been, more *stuff,* and yet for all the women in the house and all their feminine appurtenances, no one came down to greet him. He went out to the car and brought in the luggage and groceries. Leaving the duffels at the foot of the back stairs, he carried the groceries into the kitchen and pushed aside a layer of magazines to make room on the counter. Makeup pencils and brushes were everywhere, abandoned helter-

skelter as though by the fleeing beauticians of Pompeii. He walked around collecting them and then set them upright in an empty coffee mug. He straightened the magazines into piles. From the sink he extracted an object his daughters had taught him was an eyelash curler. A round brass ship's clock ticked at the top of a bookshelf, its arrow-tipped hands and Roman numerals insisting it was four thirty. He looked at his watch. Not yet one. He pressed his fingers into a puddle of face powder spilled on the dining table and walked them across the varnished top, leaving a trail of flesh-colored prints that he immediately wiped up with a sponge. Even in his study, his cloister of masculine peace and quiet, he found a nail file and the top half of a bikini on his desk.

He was holding the bikini top by its strings and examining it (it was white with red polka dots, the fabric worn thin, the straps looped in a messy knot instead of a bow; he wondered if Agatha's were the breasts that had last filled its cups and if she could have left it on purpose) when a movement out the window caught his eye. From the side of the house a slope of grass rambled down to the trees, interrupted here by a pair of stray pines with a hammock strung between them and there by a badminton net and there by his vegetable garden, wrapped in flimsy green fencing to deter the deer. After years of taking a bearable tribute from around the edges, the deer seemed to have grown in numbers or appetite, and the previous summer, the family had arrived to find all Winn's herbs and vegetables eaten down to nubs. He had gone out at once and bought a roll of green plastic mesh and strung it savagely around his plants. The fence was unsightly—Livia said the garden looked like a duck blind—and still the yield was a disappointment. Some condition of soil or climate had stunted the plants into spindly bearers of flaccid leaves and runty fruit. Biddy had broken the news to him over the phone, bridesmaids squealing in the background. "I'm afraid you don't have much of a harvest," she said.

"Is it the deer?" he had asked.

"No, everything's just a little on the sickly side."

"Why?"

"Oh, Winn, I'm not a botanist," she had said, sighing.

Livia was lying in the hammock. Blue shade fell over her bare legs and arms, and she had twisted her hair into a dark rope and pulled it around her head and across her neck. A book lay open on her stomach, the breeze ruffling the pages. Her hands were pressed flat against her face. That was the motion that had attracted his attention: the lifting of her hands from the book. She was very still; he did not think she was crying. After a long time she dropped her hands to her clavicle and stared up into the branches. Winn's softer emotions came upon him rarely, as unexpected visitations from a place he could not guess at. He reached out and touched the window. Flat on her back in the cool shadows, Livia looked like a funeral statue. He knuckled three quick beats on the window and then again, harder, but she didn't turn her head. His powdery fingerprints ghosted the glass. He wiped them away. He thought he would go out and see her, but a stampeding sound came from above, and when he emerged, it was to a kitchen full of women.

"Hello, dear," he said, pecking Biddy on the cheek.

"I want to leave those flowers there so I don't forget to take them to the Duffs' hotel later," she said.

"I don't know how you'd forget them. I thought I was in the Amazon."

"After the wedding I'll remember things again. Until then you'll have to step around the flowers."

He went around stamping cheeks with his businesslike kisses: first Daphne and then Biddy's sister Celeste where she stood beside the refrigerator fishing an olive out of a jar with her index finger. Agatha and the other bridesmaids were lolling against the counter, and he kissed each of them, saying, "Agatha, hello again, Piper, Dominique."

"How was the trip?" asked Biddy.

"Easy. I got an early start. The crossing was smooth."

Celeste thrust a half-filled tumbler into his hand and clinked it with her own. Three olives drifted around the bottom. "You don't have any martini glasses," she said. "Other than that, everything has been fabulous."

Setting the glass on a stack of magazines, he said, "Is the sun over the yardarm already?" He seldom drank hard liquor anymore, especially not in the middle of the day, but if he reminded Celeste of this, she would want to know for the umpteenth time why not, and he was in no mood to explain that it had to do with his headaches and not at all with any judgment of those who daily embalmed their innards from the moment the sun inched past its apex to the hour when their feet tipped them onto whatever couch or bed was handiest.

"Depends on where you keep your yardarm," she said. Her smile was localized to her lips and their immediate region. Biddy had explained that Celeste had gotten carried away with wrinkle injections, but the effect was still eerie.

Winn frowned and turned to the bridesmaids. "Having a good time, girls?"

"Yes," came the chorus from the bridesmaids, who had settled with Daphne in a languid clump against the sink. Like Daphne, Agatha and Piper were blond and short. Dominique was tall and dark, a menhir looming over them. She was the child of two Coptic doctors from Cairo and had spent most of her breaks from Deerfield with the Van Meters. Her face was symmetrical but severe, a smooth half dome of forehead descending to steeply arched eyebrows, a nose with a bump in its middle, and a wide mouth that drooped slightly at the corners in an expression of not unattractive mournfulness. Muscle left over from her days as a swimmer armored her shoulders and back. Her hair, which was not quite crimped and African but also not smooth in the way of some Arabs', was cut very short. He hadn't seen her for a few years. After college in Michigan she had flown off to Europe (France? Belgium?) to become a chef. He liked Dominique; he respected her physical strength and her skill with food, but he had never understood her friendship with Daphne, who took no interest in sports or cooking and who seemed diaphanous and flighty beside her.

Dominique pointed one long finger out the window. "Your garden is looking a little peaky," she said.

"So Biddy told me. I haven't gone out to take a look at it yet."

"Were you having problems with the deer?"

"Terrible. They're glorified goats, those things. But Biddy doesn't think they're the culprit this time."

"Yeah, I didn't see much nibbling, except around the edges. And I looked for aphid holes and that sort of thing but didn't see enough to explain why it all looks so sad. Maybe the soil is too acidic."

"Could be."

"Did you do the planting?"

"The first time, eight or nine years ago, but a local couple does the basic caretaking when we're not here. Maybe they tried something different. I hope if they wanted to experiment they wouldn't do it in my garden."

Dominique nodded and looked away as though concealing disdain for people who did not tend their own vegetable gardens.

"I'm so psyched for the wedding," Piper announced out of the blue and in a high chirp, which was her way. She and Daphne had met at Princeton, and Winn knew her less well than the others. Always in motion, propelled along by a brittle, birdlike pep, she seemed a tireless font of chipper enthusiasm. She was pale as bone and dwelt beneath a voluminous haystack of white blond hair, her glacial eyes and red-lipsticked lips adrift in all the whiteness like a face drawn by a child. Her eyebrows were barely discernible, her nose small and sharp. Some men found her powerfully attractive, Winn knew, but she left him cold. Her looks were ethereal and a little strange, but Agatha's were concrete, radiant, tactile; her limbs could almost be felt just by looking at them. Daphne fell somewhere in the middle. They were three shades of woman arrayed side by side like the bewildering, smiling boxes of hair dye in the supermarket.

"It's beautiful here," Agatha said, letting her head fall onto Piper's shoulder. A male friend of Daphne's had, years ago, in a moment of drunken gossip, implied that Agatha was a closeted prude—*There's no engine,* he'd said. *You hit the gas and nothing happens*—but Winn had trouble believing something so disappointing could be true.

"Thanks for bringing my dress, Daddy," Daphne said.

"Yes," he said to Agatha. "Waskeke is the way the world should be."

He was staring at her too intently and looked away, at Biddy, who was rummaging through the grocery bags. With a grunt, Daphne pushed off from the sink, waddled across the kitchen, and plopped into a Windsor chair behind Winn. "Daphne," he said, turning, "are you feeling all right?"

"I feel fine," she said.

"Why did you make that noise?"

"Because I'm seven months pregnant, Daddy."

He asked for and received a full briefing on the status of the weekend. Where was Greyson? At the hotel with his groomsmen, Daphne said. His parents? They would be arriving around five. The head count for that night's party, a dinner Winn would be preparing, was seventeen. The get-together would be a casual thing, with lobsters, a chance for everyone to enjoy the island before they had to get serious about matrimony, a sort of pre-rehearsal-dinner dinner. Had Biddy confirmed the lobsters? She had.

Winn nodded. "All right," he said. "Well, then good."

"By the way," Daphne said, "Mr. Duff is allergic to shellfish."

Winn fixed her with a look. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"It's no big deal. Just buy a tuna steak, too."

"Are you going to call him Mr. Duff after you're married?" asked Celeste.

"I have a hard time addressing him as Dicky," said Daphne gravely. "He says to call him Dad, but most of the time I don't call him anything."

Biddy said, "Everyone calls him Dicky. It's his name. He won't think it's odd for you to call him by his name. You're being ridiculous."

"Re-dicky-ulous," said Dominique, and the women laughed.

"Where's Livia?" Winn asked, even though he knew.

"Around here somewhere," said Daphne. "Hating me. You know, I really think her dress is pretty. I really do. I wanted to set her off from the other bridesmaids, which is a nice thing, isn't it? She's just being contrary. It's a green dress. That's all. She says it's the exact shade of envy and everyone already thinks she's jealous even though she's not, but it's not the color of envy. It's more of a viridian."

"Too late to change it," said Biddy.

The moment of welcome faded into a lull. The staring half circle of female faces made Winn uneasy. With a loud, contented sigh, he turned to look out the window. Daphne held her hands out to Dominique and was heaved to her feet. "Ladies," she said, beckoning to her bridesmaids. They wandered off, their voices drifting through the house like the calls of distant birds.

"Nice trip?" Celeste asked, having lost track of the earlier part of the conversation.

"Couldn't have been smoother," he said.

"You must have gotten up at the crack of dawn."

"Just before."

"Drink up there, Winnifred." She picked up his glass and handed it to him again with a wink. "You deserve it."

"If you insist." He touched his lips to the liquid. Gin.

The house was L shaped, with a planked deck filling the crook and extending out over the grass. Through the kitchen's French doors, Winn saw Livia walk up the lawn and onto the deck. She wore an old pair of gray shorts, and her legs were thinner than he had ever seen them. When she came through the doors and into the kitchen, a push of salt air came with her.

"Oh, Dad," she said. "Hi."

She made no move to embrace or kiss him. In the hammock, she had appeared sepulchral and blue, but that must have been a trick of the shade because she looked fine now, a bit pale but fine. She turned away, chewing the side of her thumbnail.

"Hi, roomie," Celeste said.

"You two are bunking together?" Winn said. Biddy must have sprung the arrangement on Livia, otherwise he would have already gotten an earful.

"Yes," said Livia in a neutral voice, inspecting her hand. The nails were bitten to nothing, and the flesh around them was torn and raw.

Celeste jiggled her glass enticingly. "Can I get you a drink?"

"No, thanks."

"Moral support for Daphne?" Celeste asked. "Poor thing not hav-

ing a drink at her own wedding. I don't know what I would have done without a drink or two during my weddings."

"Let alone your marriages," Biddy said.

"Only you," Celeste said, swatting Biddy's flat backside, "could say to that to me."

"Daphne can have a glass of champagne," Livia said. "She's seven months. It's fine."

Celeste sipped. "Is it? Shows what I know."

"Maybe I will have a drink," Livia said. "I'll get it myself."

"How is Cooper?" Winn asked Celeste. "Still in the picture?" He reached out to touch Livia's hair as she moved away.

"He's fine. He's sailing in the Seychelles. He wanted to come but he couldn't."

Livia took a bottle of wine from the refrigerator and picked at the foil. "Do you think he'll be number five?"

"I'm getting out of the marriage business." Celeste raised her glass as though someone had made a toast. "Though I'll admit all this is making me sentimental. Nothing beats being a bride. Oh well. Days gone by. I'll have to live vicariously through my nieces."

Livia threw the foil into the garbage. "Don't look at me."

"Oh, sweetheart, it was his loss. There are so many fish in the sea. You're only nineteen."

"I'm twenty-one."

"You are? Well, then, you're an old maid."

Livia put a corkscrew to the bottle and twisted it. Winn watched the curl of silver disappear. Her fingers wrapped so tightly around the bottle that her bones stood out under her skin. Winn wanted to tell her she didn't need to squeeze so hard, wringing the bottle's neck like she was. He remembered once watching her shatter an ice cream cone in her hand, crying out in surprise at the cold shards of waffle. "I forgot I was holding it," she had said. "I was thinking of something else." Why Livia always had to be so forceful, straining when she didn't need to, was beyond him, but he held his tongue. She clamped the bottle between her knees and pulled until it exclaimed over the loss of its cork.