

Trouble came to Alastair Luce like a nasty slap of a wave at high tide, one wave after another. He'd been happy at times, but happiness was a breaker and it crashed and broke on the hard rock of the unexpected. Sorrow was no different. He wondered if it had been his fate to live by water so that he would cling to nothing at all.

Yet he didn't love the sea and its moodiness. He'd worked as a house painter, and he'd brought to this meticulous task his care for all that was solid and enduring. From high on his ladder, he'd view the street where he and Nora lived once, and he'd imagine its rooftops and turrets, newel posts and cornices painted in the brilliance of his inner seeing, of his vivid dreams at night. It never troubled him that he'd had to paint in the modest hues that his customers preferred. It made no difference. Colour smouldered inside his fingers and he could feel the force of it, electric under the stillness of everything he touched. A patient man, he knew that this extraordinary power would bide its time as a shoot did in a humble bulb, waiting for sunlight to prod it into bloom. On his canvases at home, he'd try to paint the ineffable light that hovered under the surface of his life. He'd drink, but only when his suffering became too great, his sorrow that he couldn't capture much of anything.

Which was why trouble came, he told himself years later.

Yet his hope was as tough as a weed in rock, as mindless as a fist in a bully's face. He'd come to feel that hope was part of the packaging of skin and muscle, nerve and

bone, a thing you strengthened as you bore the weight of living. This was why he'd shown up for Lyle Miller's funeral. He'd hoped to see his own daughter, longing to assure her that nothing lasts, including grief.

"You're my dad, not him," said Grace when he called. She didn't ask about Nora.

"If you come, we'll have a chance to talk," said Alastair.

"I'll come," she answered.

Alastair forgave her, that she lived outside the constraints of time. Her *I'll come* was about as punctual as a tiny stream finding its way to the sea. He could peer through Grace and see cities rising along the banks of her mind, long-hidden streets where she'd wandered since childhood. He hoped she'd forgiven him the years when they might have been closer to each other. Seventy-eight years old he was, and time was no longer his friend. Neither was the man who'd died.

*Gracie, how I wish you'd come*, but he understood. How many miles was Toronto from here? Five hundred or so? Grace couldn't drive, wouldn't fly.

Had she come, she'd be seated next to Nora in the front row, but he was imagining his own death, as if he and Nora and Grace were still a family, and they were mourning him. It had been a while since he'd seen his former wife, ill herself with a bad heart, and he noticed that Nora's warm-ember hair had become a snowdrift. How thin she was, her gentle plumpness gone, as if in the anguish of Lyle's dying, each passing day had carved off some of the meat of her life, trimming it away from the solid bone of her marriage. Years ago, he'd suffered these same wounds when she left him.

Thirteen years he'd spent with Nora.

*Lyle Miller leaves his wife of forty years, said the obit. His children, Grace and John.*

Alastair had pulled the single page from the paper, bunched it up and thrown it in the garbage. With it went a residue of bitterness, and in its place, he felt grief and a stirring of compassion. He couldn't watch sorrow crush Nora as it had done with him. How grateful he was for a heart that spoke before his lips could mutter *serves you right*.

*Nora, I know how you feel, I know.*

Behind Nora sat Claire Bernard, married to Lyle's nephew, a lawyer who kept toying with his cell phone as if he meant to use it in church. Time pitched Alastair backwards like salt tossed for good luck, but it was bitter salt from the ebb tide of his marriage when he'd fallen into young Claire's life. He watched her greet John Miller who could have been Lyle as a young man with his unruly wheat-sheaf of hair and narrow face, his eyes the soft and faded blue of an old, comfortable shirt. John's gaze was more wary, less guileless than his dad's. Long ago, when Alastair was still married to Nora, he'd let his hand rest on her stomach, knowing she was pregnant with John. Only it wasn't his child.

Alastair had found a measure of peace since then.

And yet.

*Forgiveness takes your whole life.* After the service he went up to Nora.

"My condolences," he said.

"Thank you," she replied.

"I hope you'll get some rest," he told her.

Nora smoothed a stray hair back from her forehead. "I saw you looking for Grace," she said. Her tone had a laser precision that didn't invite rebuttal. *Nora, is it anything to*

*you?* How it hurt him, that years after their marriage ended, she'd observe him with such telling insight, letting him know how astute she was with her eyes, if not her heart.

*She's upset, Alastair thought. Not herself.*

She introduced her son who shook his hand, and he recalled Lyle's first son Todd, his lost boy. *Todd would have grown up to look like John*, he thought. The young man seemed bereft, yet he could feel the quickness of his eyes as if they were Todd's eyes playing with the world. He saw in them a hint of the dead boy's prescience, the same edge of contempt that troubled him once in a child so young. It haunted him still, that Todd might have glimpsed how his life would end, how an inattentive man would kill him. *All your life you'll carry the weight of what you did*, the judge said.

He'd wanted so much for Lyle to have another son.

"I didn't catch your name," said John.

"Al Luce."

John turned his back to him, took Nora's elbow, and walked with her to the waiting limousine.