



Aware of the change of light in the window, Phyllis glances up from her knitting mid-row. A woman is standing on the steps to her front door. She looks lost or perhaps nervous, but then Phyllis recognizes her. She is Isabel Cortez, the artist who lives on the spring side of the lake. She knocks gently, tentatively, and then steps back into the shadows. Phyllis sets down her knitting, being careful not to lose her place, and locks a peg into the stitch counter. She hears the knock again, this time with determination.

Phyllis makes a dash on tiptoes to the bathroom off the foyer. She scrutinizes her reflection. Not satisfied, she runs a brush through her hair and pinches her cheeks till pink blossoms. In a burst of inspiration, she pulls a New Yorker from the bottom of a basket and sets it in plain view on the antique table just inside the door. On the table is the arrangement of snapdragons she'd picked this morning. Realizing her reading glasses are still draped around her neck, she quickly stuffs them into her vest pocket.

She is exotic even from behind; Phyllis thinks her skin, coco-creamy, is just as before. Phyllis sees her at the coffee shop in the afternoons when she stops for a chai latte. Phyllis feels envious of Isabel for her natural beauty and incredible poise.

'Hello,' Phyllis says to her back, but Isabel doesn't hear her. 'Hello!' she calls louder and the receding figure turns. 'I thought I heard someone at the door,' her voice is breathy, too eager, 'but you see I was in the back of the house.' A lie! I've done it already!

Isabel approaches. She looks distressed. Her gaze falls to the ground, searching for words.

'Isabel, is it?' Phyllis says. She suddenly feels empathy for the woman and wants to help anyway she can.

Isabel glances up and for a split second looks as if she'll lose her nerve and run. But then she says 'Yes, Isabel Cortez; and you are?'

'Phyllis, Phyllis Humphrey. Is there something wrong? May I help you?' Whatever is wrong she must find a way to assist.

'I have a purebred Vizsla and I'm looking for the dog that has bred her. I didn't know she was in heat and now I'm afraid she's pregnant. I need to know what kind of dog did it. She's small and I may need to abort the pups. Do you own a dog?'

'Well, no, sorry,' stutters Phyllis, scouring her mind as to 'Titus' whereabouts. She knows at once that Titus is guilty. He's a Newfoundland foisted upon her by a coworker. She'd planned to have him fixed, but he was a dog too big, and too unruly, to haul in her VW. 'Well, that's quite a problem. Quite a problem indeed.' Phyllis frosts each word with a layer of concern she hopes Isabel likes. She thinks Isabel will become her friend. 'If you'd like, I could try to help you figure out whose stud is on the prowl. I'm sure I know all the dogs in the neighborhood.' Phyllis laughs at her own joke hoping to expose the least trace of a smile on that coco-creamy face.

'No, I don't want to bother you.' Isabel begins to walk away. 'I'll just ask the others on this road.'

Phyllis steps outside her house onto the landing. 'Oh, no bother! Wait, you won't find many people at home this time of day. In fact, I believe I'm the only one in at this hour. The rest are working and won't be home for, let's see, an hour at least.' She touches her wrist though she doesn't wear a watch, hasn't since the day she settled the claim with her last employer.

'Do you actually know everyone on this road?' Isabel says with interest now. Her curiosity is genuine and Phyllis knows she has advanced a step in winning over her confidence.

'I'm afraid so!' Another chuckle and Phyllis closes the door on her chicly tattered house. 'I'll come with you. Let's figure out which naughty pooch is responsible. I'll give you the nickel tour.'

Phyllis crawls into Isabel's Miata, crushing a piece of paper on the seat. She pulls the paper from beneath her and reads a brochure featuring a show of prints by Isabel Cortez, artist in residence at the local college. The photo of Isabel is flattering, very much the sexy artist.

'Sorry,' Phyllis says, laughing as she smooths the paper. 'I didn't mean to crush you.'

But Isabel doesn't notice, she studies the gravel road as she maneuvers the close twists and turns, both hands clamped on the wheel. 'I so need to find that dog.'

Phyllis thinks there is only a slight chance Titus will show up before dark, but that rarely happens these long summer days. He likes to hunt small animals deep in the woods. She's regretted adopting Titus so often, now more than ever. Phyllis decides the risk of him showing up is small compared to the rewards. Isabel *wants* her help, no, *needs* her help.

'I take it you won't settle for just any puppies,' Phyllis says, attempting to understand the dog's predicament, but her mind suddenly veers off with a pang like hunger. She wishes she'd baked her lemon cookies earlier rather than starting a new knitting project. She could've invited Isabel in for coffee; her cookies were always a hit.

'When she's older I want to breed her to a registered champion.' Isabel divulges her plan though Phyllis is doubtful of her conviction. 'But not until she's fully matured and I know she'll be a good mother. At her young age it's very risky, and she may be ruined for motherhood if it goes badly.'

'Oh, well, yes, one wouldn't want to ruin a bitch too early.' Phyllis laughs loudly again; she can't help herself. The whole situation is beginning to sound like a farce. All the complications people have in their lives and now, it seemed, in their dogs' lives too. But why is this rare flower of a woman even in the business of breeding dogs?

'She's an expensive dog,' Isabel explains. 'I bought her as an investment on a recommendation. I'm sure it was a bad idea. I shouldn't have done it. Poor Frida.'

'I wouldn't worry about it too much. Dogs are expert survivors. Whatever happens.'

Isabel searches the swamp and woods on either side of the road. 'There's a cabin,' she says and hits the brakes.

Phyllis' head slams against the headrest. The seatbelt pins her motionless and for a moment she's unable to see where they've stopped, although she knows.

'Is there a dog at the cabin?'

A truer word is rarely spoken, thinks Phyllis, her mind jumping back to a night that left her feeling so humiliated. The memory of it still angers her though the embarrassment is faded and shadowy. It'd been the cruelest thing a man had ever done to her, taking her hand like that, leading her back to the road and then telling her not to come back.

Thinking it a joke she'd laughed, but he hadn't. From that point on the silence between them crystallized like a wall of salt. It would be unpleasant to see him again and she wasn't sure she had the courage, but it'd be a chance to get inside the cabin and see something of that private life he so coveted. Maybe even find out why he'd flat out refused her access to the lake. Isabel was her ticket in.

'Yes! Come to think of it there sure is,' Phyllis says, unbuckling her seatbelt. 'Shuman. He's a woodworker who has mysteriously come into that very cabin. He has a frisky bird dog of some sort. I think I saw his car go by last night. He might still be here. Pull over, we'll check.'

Shuman appears from behind a boathouse wielding a broken oar. He stops in his tracks as if facing a disaster when he spots the two women in the speckled light of the pinewoods. The oar in his hand sinks to his side. He cringes as the women climb through the thicket and onto the planks over the swamp to his cabin.

'Hello, Phyllis,' he says turning his attention to the stranger.

'Shuman,' Phyllis returns. His gaze fixes onto Isabel. Phyllis puts a hand on Isabel's arm protectively when she sees the way Shuman is disrobing her with his eyes. 'This is Isabel Cortez, she's our new neighbor. She has a question for you.'

Isabel sidesteps Phyllis and holds out her hand. Shuman grabs it with his free hand and a shock of thick wavy hair falls over his face, he reddens at the neck. To Phyllis, he looks younger than before.

'Nice to meet you,' Isabel says, avoiding the radiant brown eyes that are eating her up. 'I'm looking for the dog that's bred mine. You see, she's small, so I need to know whether she can handle the pups. Is your animal large and virile?'

Phyllis' eyes begin to flutter, blinking uncontrollably. Her hand goes to her throat. It's an unexplainable condition she's been plagued with since the fall. She's never understood why something so wacky and unrelated physically could be the result of a back injury. The doctor said the mind is a mysterious medical frontier and he a mere pioneer. Phyllis thinks nerves bring on the flutters. Isabel has surprised her with the blatant innuendo in her question.

Shuman glances at Phyllis then lets out a grunt-like chuckle. 'As a matter of fact -- I do have a pretty good-sized animal,' he says slowly, as if to keep them in suspense. 'A yellow lab.' He laughs a little more and runs a hand over his chin as if he is savoring the moment. 'As to his virility, well, he might be a contender for the crime, among other cocks in this neck of the woods.' His eyes flick for an instant to Phyllis, hitting her like a poison dart. Then he turns to Isabel with a rakish smile.

'Is he kenneled or loose?' Isabel meets his gaze and holds firm.

'Like most dogs around here,' he answers, being careful with his words, 'he is free as a bird to roam these woods. Us neighbors have an understanding about our animals, if nothing else.'

'I'd like to take a look at him,' Isabel says, her voice turning feminine and soft. 'If you don't mind.'

'Not at all. He's in the cabin. Come in and I'll find us a few cold beers.'

'No, thanks,' says Phyllis while at the same time Isabel answers, 'Sounds good.'

Isabel joins Shuman while Phyllis follows them up the path to the house. She hears Shuman say how his pooch is on the big side for a lab and if your dog's standard for a Vizsla, let's hope my boy's not the daddy. When Isabel trips over a tree root he takes hold of her arm. He holds onto her longer than is necessary. Phyllis thinks she is meant to notice this.

Nothing would ever have happened on that night if it hadn't been for Titus and his habit of trotting over to old Milt's cabin first thing in the morning and again in the evening for a little treat. Milt was sick and mostly kept to himself but he liked the dog and had told her so more than once. Titus was his old pal, his big teddy bear.

A couple of nights after Milt's death she'd expected to find Titus at the lake when she went for her daily swim, but he wasn't there. So she went to look for him and that's when she'd met Shuman at Milt's cabin. She'd been shocked to learn that he now owned it. And instead of asking her in like a good neighbor, he offered to escort her back to the road, saying he'd appreciate it if she'd stay off his property. Treating her like a trespasser, not allowing her to explain. She'd taken that path to the lake everyday in the summer for as long as she could remember. She'd loved swimming in the lake, now it was off limits.

Isabel gasps at something Shuman says, but Phyllis has missed it. Shuman glances back in her direction and she knows he's been talking about her. Isabel is talking to both of them now; she says she doesn't want her dog to have to suffer. Shuman touches her arm again and tells her to trust in nature.

Isabel waits for Phyllis at the cabin door while Shuman disappears inside.

'Is something wrong?' Phyllis asks, noticing the way Isabel appears to have something on her mind. Perhaps she is trying to decide on something. She is pondering like a painter before a canvass.

'No, I don't think so,' Isabel answers though her voice is playfully evasive.

Indoors, Shuman is holding three bottles of beer. 'I hope you like good beer. This comes from the monks over hill and dale. They used to sell this beer to the country folk around here then quit with prohibition, but are finally at it again. I, for one, am damn grateful someone at that monastery dusted off the recipe and got back in business!' Shuman takes a long pull on his beer, exhaling loudly.

Isabel raises the bottle to her mouth, puts her hand on her hip, and begins to drink. Phyllis puts her beer to her mouth too, but only wets her lips. She eyes Isabel who seems to be enjoying the beer with no inhibition, suddenly looking like a college girl showing off.

Shuman heads off to the back of the house. A door opens and a yellow lab races into the room and jumps up on the picture window ledge. His haunches are up, and he barks and whines at something outside.

'Down!' orders Shuman, returning to the room.

Isabel and Phyllis move to the window to see what all the fuss is about.

A bear-sized dog sniffs at a bush outside the window and then raises his massive leg. Shuman eyes Phyllis, driving in the poison dart of his disdain with self-satisfaction. He takes a pull of his beer.

'What is that?' Isabel asks, appalled by its brutishness. 'Some kind of wild dog?'

Shuman shakes his head and shrugs. Isabel turns back to the dog outside.

The lab barks and jumps in place. 'Settle down, Stringer,' orders Shuman, snapping his fingers. He sends another dart to Phyllis and almost laughs. 'No, the dog outside is not wild. He's a neighbor's Newfie.'

'Is it?' Isabel says curiously. She looks to Shuman then Phyllis. 'What neighbor?'

'He's completely harmless, just a big teddy bear,' Phyllis says brightly, dismissively. She forces a little laugh. 'He belongs to someone on the other side of the lake.' This was true to a certain degree, reasons Phyllis, suddenly sure she can work this to come out right yet. She can see now that Shuman's not going to spill the beans. He won't because he's getting too much enjoyment in making her squirm. She sees that he is the kind of man that profits from a weaker person's embarrassment. He has set her up, but she has her own ammo. Isabel won't find him quite so charming when she learns he's swindled an old man. He may win the contest with me, but if she has her way he'll lose his chances with Isabel. 'His name is Titus. Quite fitting, wouldn't you say?'

'Hell, he might be your daddy!' Shuman proffers as if the idea has just come to him. 'Considering the size of his balls, he might be daddy to a hell of a lot of pups and other small animals around here.'

'I see what you mean,' agrees Isabel fighting back a smile. Their eyes meet comfortably, like new, but lasting friends. Then she bursts out laughing. Shuman laughs too. They both give Phyllis big smiles she won't return.

'Titus used to come here to see the previous owner of this lovely cabin,' Phyllis says, turning away from them. 'He was very loyal to the old man. Came to see him everyday. Milton just loved him! And I'll tell you another thing -- he loved this cabin. Well, who wouldn't? All this great stonework and solid oak logs. I tried to buy this cabin, but Milt put me off every time I asked. Isn't Shuman awfully lucky to have come into such a great place?' She's enraged over the whole business and thinks she must confront the swindler but then can't; her eyes are drawn to a picture on the mantel. It is of a man and a woman in front of this very cabin. She hasn't seen the picture before, but immediately identifies Milton at a young age. 'Where'd you get that photo?'

Shuman turns to see what she is so taken with. 'Oh, that one? It's from my mother.'

Phyllis is at the mantel examining the people in the picture. His words don't immediately register. The surprise comes like an aftershock, with heightened anxiety.

'They were married for a time,' he says quietly, with an echo of sadness. 'It was taken when they built this place.'

'Built this place?' Phyllis says, her eyes fluttering. She lifts a hand to her throat.

Then Isabel asks the question Phyllis desperately wants the answer to. 'So was this man, Milton, your father?'

'Regrettably, no. They split up a couple of months after the cabin was completed. It was a case of the old adage about building a house and marriage -it will either make it or break it. After the divorce, my mom moved to Vancouver where she met my dad. Both dead now.'

'So how did you end up with this place?' Phyllis asks in a deferential tone. She feels she might owe him an apology and is embarrassed, but at the same time moved by his story. She feels something like concern for Shuman, though she is reluctant.

Shuman picks up the photo and wipes away a few specks of ash. 'My mother refused to sell him her half of the cabin. Before she died, she told me I needed to look up Milt and claim my inheritance. It was all she left me. So last year I showed up on his doorstep just like Titus out there, looking to stake my claim. But I found a nice old guy instead. Someone I wish I would've met long ago. He was one of a kind, wasn't he, Phyllis?'

Phyllis nods, unable to speak. There's a lump in her throat. She's not sure if it's humiliation or sadness welling inside her.

'He knew me right away,' Shuman says, apprehension crosses his face as he stares at Phyllis. 'He said I had my mother's dark eyes and her strong chin.'

Phyllis wants to ask him why he didn't just tell her about his mother and Milt that night, when they could've been friends. Why has he let her go on believing he was a Johnny-come-lately, her neighborhood opponent? She decides he has kept this information from her for just this kind of moment. He was that kind of a man. Unkind, thinks too highly of himself, and is selective in his friends at the expense of others. And now she knows enough. She doesn't care to know anything more about him.

They are all at the mantel now staring at the photo.

'Milt knew who people were, inside and out,' Phyllis finally says, feeling somewhat relieved and surprisingly, light-hearted. Shuman has had his little comeuppance, put her in her place; it'd given him some kind of satisfaction though she couldn't understand why. The thing was she didn't care anymore. He could have his privacy if being his friend meant being subjected to ridicule.

Isabel takes the photo from Phyllis and examines it closely. 'I'm sorry I never knew him. He must've been a great guy.'

Stringer whines loudly and then starts barking. He wants out.

'Listen, let's take the dogs down to the lake,' Shuman says. 'A swim will do them good.'

The lake is calm and flat. The big blue sky and tall pine trees reflect in its surface. Phyllis can almost feel the silky water on her skin, her arms ache for movement and her legs tremble. Shuman and Isabel have gone ahead. The dogs follow closely, watchful of the stick Shuman holds behind his back. The path diverges and they go toward the dock

and she continues on the old familiar path. Her feet keep moving, faster and faster, and in no time she is bounding over the fallen log that bridges the cattails to the shore. Her shoes and vest are off and she quickly wades in. The water is warm and softer than ever before. She takes a breath and goes under. The water knows her, energizes her every muscle and she glides through it, on top of it, and keeps going. She hears Isabel calling. Shuman whistles. Phyllis keeps swimming until she has reached the other side. There is nothing before her now but a curtain of cattails. A loon threads its way out and faces her, studying her, deciding if she is a danger. The bird floats by then flips on its side and does a crazy wing-dance across the water. Phyllis turns around and watches it. The dance is bizarre and fantastic and makes her laugh. When she returns to the shore, they are waiting for her. The dogs make a big splash when they jump in to meet her.

‘You okay?’ says Shuman.

‘That was a wild display!’ says Isabel.

Phyllis wrings out her shirt and carefully slips her shoes on. She makes a move to leave then turns back. ‘Titus, come.’

Titus comes to her and she takes him by the collar. They walk easily on the path through the woods, the water glistening in the sun behind them.