

CHAPTER ONE

It was late in the day, summer's last. Erik Lehmann stood at the edge of the town pool, keeping guard over his two young sons even though there were four lifeguards on duty, whistles quelled. The pool would close, for the 1972 summer season, in an hour. His children didn't need to be watched; he just wasn't good at lounging.

Erik curled his toes over the concrete edge; he could feel the exact line where the rough concrete met the smooth blue painted gutter. The town pool. It sounded public, but it wasn't. He'd worked here during high school, at season's end only, hauling and stacking lawn chairs, breaking down ping-pong tables, tarping. He knew this place better empty than peopled.

He heard his name, or part of it, behind him. It was two women talking; he didn't turn.

"..the cute cop? His older brother. Moved back! That white house, the big Colonial, where Grove ends? He's got two boys, Tory and Gunnar, I saw him with them today. I've seen those boys here all summer with their mother, I didn't make the connection. The red head?"

"She's beautiful."

Slowly, Erik bit back a smile. He couldn't disagree.

"Moved from where?"

"City."

"I love that house."

"I had the biggest crush on him in high school. On Erik, that's his name. He was older, a senior...Seniors didn't date freshman and now that I have my own girls....I'd stare at him, in the cafeteria, in the halls... We all did. He had this girlfriend... It didn't matter, we'd stare at both of them. They were gold."

"That house! It's...I heard they used silk on the walls."

Erik nodded, but thought: only in the dining room...

"What's he do?"

"City. Downtown. Trader? I don't know: something that makes money."

Erik snickered silently. Lots and lots of money.

"His girlfriend, Laurie Hildebrand?"

"Hildebrand? Like, the brand?"

"It used to be. I think her father is a lawyer. She'd have us over, for sleepovers, all the cheerleaders, didn't matter we were freshman. I wanted to hate her! She had Erik, and then the hair and nails and frosted pink lipstick. But she was sooo...nice. And I'm not saying that because now she's dead."

Erik felt a small wet hand slap his foot. "Dad!" Erik leaned over, grateful for the interruption. He didn't want to think about Laurie, falling to her death, left to be pecked by gulls and nibbled by rodents, to rot by the river's edge.

"The papers said it was an accident, that she slipped, but her husband went to jail. He was cute, too. Otherworldly, like one

of those people who looks like their dogs. Ice blue eyes."

Erik's other boy swam to him, paddling in place. "Wanna come in? Dad, come in!" Erik shook his head but with his fingers flicked some water playfully at his boys. He stood up, and glanced back at the talking women. Bodies in bikinis, like every other mother...He didn't recognize either one.

"He joined the army."

Marines, Erik corrected silently. Special Forces.

"Joined?"

"I know. But it was the beginning of the war. When it seemed like a good idea to fight communism. He won all sorts of medals, for bravery...It was in the papers."

"Nixon went to China. That has to mean something."

"I don't know, I just want it to be over. I can't watch the news."

"The red head. Think it's real?"

"Yes. Very little body hair. I sat next to her at Parents Council. We met the new first grade teacher. British, cute. Her husband works for one the car companies north of here. What is going on?"

Like the women, Erik turned to the pool's entrance, and kept his eyes fixed on the unusual group walking towards the pool. To the minister leading them, Erik nodded his greeting.

"I wouldn't do that to my kids," one of the women said. "I wouldn't be the only blacks in town."

"I think it was bold of the minister. 'For those who have much, much is expected.'"

"I agree. I'm saying I wouldn't do that to my kids."

Over the loud speaker came the dreaded 4:30 announcement: "Adults only, 15 minute swim." Children groaned and moaned but did not tarry; they knew they would be benched -- kept out of the water even longer -- if they didn't leave the pool promptly and completely. Erik's two boys lifted themselves from the water and darted to the Nok-Hockey boards. He turned to follow them but turned back at the shriek of whistles, all four lifeguards bearing down simultaneously.

"Out of the pool!" one called. "Adults only!"

Like crows on a line, the four black children hung at the pool's side. "Stay there," their father instructed. He swam over to one of the guards. "We just got here, and the pool's gonna close at five."

"Adults only, sir."

"They won't get a chance to swim!"

"Those are the rules, sir."

Sensing an opportunity, other kids edged closer. "Let us in!" they yelled. "It's the last day!"

The guards' whistles shrieked again, ricocheting children back to the grass. That was the pool rule: during adult swim, kids waited on the grass, not on the concrete apron. Their last-day-of-summer rebellion had been quickly quashed -- but the black kids were still in the water.

"There's eight minutes left," the guard pointed out. "Get your children out of the pool, onto the grass. Just like all the other kids."

The black father shook his head, but finally agreed.

"C'mon," he said, lifting each of his children out of the water. "Get yourselves to the green." They did as he said, then he turned and dolphin kicked strongly into the water, moving like a targeted missile.

"I forgot! The end of my story. When I saw him today, when I realized it was Erik, my dream date, my jock, my gilded high school..."

"Is he bald?"

"No! No," she squealed. "He looks exactly like every other man around here who commutes into the city and sits behind a desk..."

Erik's boys brushed by him. "Everybody in the pool!"

The women giggled. "He's got love handles!"

Charly met him at the door, taking from Erik's hands their wet towels and bathing suits. She leaned in and kissed him lightly. "Thank you for taking them. Gave me a chance to make dinner."

She turned to leave but Erik pulled her to him, sliding his hands behind and under her cutoff jeans. He breathed her in: cigarettes, cookie dough, burgers on the grill. Above the shorts she was wearing a sleeveless blouse, tied high, showing off her taut freckled belly. Charly smiled, her eyes wide. She leaned into him. "Can this wait 'til the boys are in bed?"

"You are beautiful."

She turned away, with the wet laundry. "Dinner is almost ready. The boys showered?"

Erik walked farther into his house, the big white house at the Grove Street "T" that other people wanted and he now owned. He, Erik Lehmann, had a beautiful wife -- a genuine red head! -- two solid boys who'd spent their summer days at the town pool, their nights chasing fireflies. He, Erik, had a job that paid him well, very well, and an Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight that still smelled new and of leather, which took him into and out of the city to the job that paid him well enough that he could buy the house that other people wanted. He didn't have to take the bus, or the train, or the ferry. He could take himself.

Erik stepped through the kitchen's French doors to the wide-as-the-house deck he'd spent all summer building. He could afford to hire a crew but he had built it himself, along with his father, brother, and his nephew, each of them working on it when they could. It was no one's job, not even his nephew Brendan, who was strong enough to hoist lumber and drive nails but had credits to make up during summer school and, beginning in August, football practice.

Erik and his brother Gerd -- the cute cop -- sealed the deck two weeks ago. Since then, he and Charly and their sons had used the high-off-the-ground outdoor space, and its new furnishings, day and night. They took particular pleasure in the double chaise and its plump cushions, a gift from Charly's parents. All four of them could fit on it, and he often found Charly lounging, with a

smatter of books, one or both boys reading with or to her.

He looked out at the woods and marshy ponds that spread before him; he owned those, too. Charly had worried about leaving the city, but not Erik, he had no regrets. In a city apartment, their boys could not be contained.

Erik dried his hands with a damp dishtowel and joined Charly on the deck. She was smoking, but that didn't stop him from wrapping her in his arms, settling his body into hers.

"Dinner was good."

"You didn't eat dessert." She turned, and when she kissed him, slipped her tongue into his mouth. Teasing him, she pulled back, and studied him. "You looked...troubled...when you came home from the pool." She dragged on her cigarette.

Erik was weakened by her kiss; he couldn't explain. He let his head fall into her hair.

Charly exhaled. "I'm nervous."

"For the boys?"

"For me." She ground out her cigarette in a metal plate, and turned to face him, lifting herself onto the deck's deep railing, crossing her legs around him. "What will I do with myself all day? With both boys in school? I don't remember me before them."

Erik unbuttoned most of her blouse. "I do." He forgot where they were living, but he remembered the crisp hem of her tennis skirt, how it ended high on her thighs.

Charly turned her attention to the window above them. "You need to be in bed."

"It's not dark."

Now there were two boys at the window. "I'm scared about tomorrow."

"You get your own desk in 1st grade," Charly pointed out.

"Tory said I have to sit at it," he said sadly.

Erik muffled a laugh.

"Dad went to the same school."

"What was your favorite subject?"

"Recess," Erik said.

"Go back to bed," she said gently.

They didn't move; she could see their bobble-heads but not their faces at the dark screened window.

Erik let his head fall back. "Bed!"

They scurried away. Charly reached for her pack of cigarettes, and lighter. "They're afraid of you."

"Good."

Charly lit a cigarette, turning her face to blow its smoke away from him.

Erik looked back at the window and, seeing it emptied, busied himself anew, undressing her, beginning now with the five metal buttons of her cutoff jeans. "You can't smoke while you're having sex," he whined.

"I thought we were talking."

He abandoned the buttons, scooping her up and carrying her the few steps to the double chaise, her cigarette still in hand.

He set her there, then reached for and pulled around them a soft red-checked blanket.

She exhaled, and ran her free hand through his pool-parched hair as he undid every grommet, button, elastic, and hook that kept her from him. "You don't want to go inside?" she asked. "I've already got mosquito bites on my..."

"I do not," he said. He took the cigarette from her, and mashed it out in the chaise's cast iron.

They'd been having sex outdoors every night since the sharp smell of the deck's sealant went away. The arrival of the chaise made it more comfortable, but no less intoxicating: the evening's cool air bathing their skin, the stars pricking the coming night sky, the noisy rustle of trees at their fullest. In that chaise, they'd fall asleep in each other's arms, sleeping through a bull frog's throaty grrrrump, the close-in drone of crickets, the flap flap flap of bats. One of them would wake, eventually, around midnight, and urge the other upstairs to their wide soft pillowed bed. But not tonight. Erik sat up, naked, sated. "I'm going for a run."

Erik plotted a five-mile course in his head, all within the confines of town. He could easily reach any one of the four towns

that bordered his, or he could run straight to the river's cliffs...but not tonight, tonight he wanted to stay close, he wanted to ring his home, where the girl he'd wed and the sturdy boys they'd created, slept.

He set off, in running shorts and a gray "t" left over from service, up the paved hill whose base began at his home. He crossed a rock-faced bridge; the stream it canopied and the swamps that fed that stream created the privacy of his yard and the woods beyond. Laughter and splashes came from the old rock pool, hidden by the woods, accessed by only a few families and with a key. Farther up, at the top of the hill, stood a half dozen houses, the Newmann's wide Cape Cod, the Duggan's low-slung modern. These were families he'd known growing up. But now, with the litter of baseball bats and toy baby carriages on their lawns, he didn't know who lived there.

Erik ducked under a split-rail fence, picking up a gravel path that led to a foot bridge -- water, water, everywhere! -- and then a plank bridge, wide enough to carry a car. After that, the road was hard sand and pebbles; regardless, he was sweating now. Up ahead he could hear a Labor Day party still in swing, cars beached on either side of a long drive. He ran through a cloud of marijuana, which made him grin. He kept running: he set his head down and picked up his pace, pretending that he was back in service, his body beyond fit, every day lifting, stretching, punching, drilling.

At the road's end, Erik stopped. Before him stood the Osterhoudt's high-walled land, which stretched to the four-lane

highway that Erik drove every weekday, in and out of the city. On one side of that highway was civilization, his home, his children's school, their church; the other was wooded parkland so flat it seemed endless but fell off abruptly, its cliffs standing high over a wide river. The cliffs were public land, bought and donated by a philanthropist who lived on the river's other side, who didn't want his view to change.

The Osterhoudts, like all the early Dutch families, sold their cliffs and river rights years before the philanthropist was buying. Today the high cliffs' city view and zig-zag road to the river seemed impossibly luxurious, but back then, such land had no use for the area's farmers. The cliffs were too high and its paths too narrow and steep for commerce.

Erik had run this way earlier in the summer, passing without stopping because it was always the same: an old Dutch house, set sideways to the road, behind a gated wall. Tonight was different: the place seemed lit from within. At its open gates, clusters of yellow balloons swayed in the night's slight breeze. He could hear a Clapton song, layers of laughter, and a screen door's repeated slam. Someone had come home. But who?

Erik continued on, running again along the southern edge of their land, past an out-of-use barn and fields now planted with grass. He spied a croquet set's multicolored stake, but it was too dark to make out the wickets. It was a big party: he continued to pass parked cars, beached by their wall. He slowed himself and leaned over to look in the window of an orange Karmann Ghia. Yup, his cousin Lena's car, he could tell by the text books piled in

the passenger seat. She'd been best friends with Laurie, who'd married Jan Osterhoudt.

He winced, and picked up his speed, remembering the news clippings of Laurie's death reaching him in Singapore, along with a letter from his mother describing the high church funeral, so filled with mourners they'd overflowed on to the church lawn, a fresh spring day, O Radiant Light O Sun Divine, a hymn she'd loved but hadn't heard for years. His mother had wept hot tears; the phrase stayed with Erik still. Hot tears she'd wept for a girl he'd loved and might have married, for the child who would never know his spirited mother.

Erik pushed a tear from his own face, and dodged an oncoming car, catching his shirt and skin on a bush with brambles. He freed himself and took to the road again, checking his green-glowing watch for the time, pushing Laurie back where she belonged, in a recess of his mind. He had a mile to go before he'd reach home, into a cooling shower, and then to the bed that held the girl he had married -- he leapt over a fallen branch -- happily! A true beauty who'd become a loving, loyal wife, an attentive and patient mother. Though tonight he knew Charly would sleep poorly, she would murmur and sigh, worrying ahead of the new day.

CHAPTER TWO

With the small click of her tiny heel, Esther Lyne took her first step to her first day teaching American school children. She lift her chin, hoping to disconnect from the dread in her stomach. Feeling queasy: it was so unfair! Her love-y husband had made for her a full-on English breakfast, but she couldn't look at it, let alone consume it.

Betrayed by her own small body! She swallowed several times rapidly, and steadied herself against a mailbox: she would not

throw up. Not today! She'd been looking forward to this day all summer: she'd met with administrators, signed contracts, swore she wasn't pregnant and not planning to become so during the school year like their last first grade teacher, studied American slang with her husband, joined the union, took an el-o-cution course, met the Parent Council, memorized the Pledge, stapled the alphabet above the chalkboard and taped each of her student's first names to their desks. Too, she'd taken it upon herself to sand, with her nail file, the carving of a woman's breast from the wooden top of one of her student's desks. She pretended to be shocked when she'd first noticed it, but it was a skillful representation, and there was very little that could shock Esther: she'd grown up in Brixton.

Esther click click clicked down the town's one commercial street -- a butcher, a hairdresser, the post, a candy store -- breathing in the sweet American air. That part of London she certainly didn't miss! Everything in the states was clean and new, even the "old" buildings. She crossed the street, then stepped over the rail road tracks -- even those seemed to shine -- setting herself on tip toes so she wouldn't catch her heels in the tracks' loose gravel, now sodden. It had rained some time in the night; the air was still damp with it, even though the sun beat down hot.

Esther held out her hand, steadying herself, then noticed the diamonds in her wedding band, their sparkle in the sun. The band's straight line of stones reminded her of their every achievement in a new and better country: nothing would stop her today.

She held that thought, and grinned as she step step stepped

up to the school's front doors, even though her stomach felt worse, like a sack of butterflies, twisted. Poor little things...

Esther stopped herself when a big man stepped from behind a column.

"My kids," he said. "My kids starts school today." He held out his hands, beseeching her. "I want...I want them to be okay."

Principal Torrance and a teacher she didn't know burst through the doors. "What's going on?"

The man turned to them. "My son starts school here today."

"Sir?"

"I want an assurance," he looked at all three of them, one by one. "I want to be sure he's okay today." He blinked. "Today and every day."

"This is a public school!" Principal Torrance stomped his laced dress shoe. "What makes you think your child needs or deserves special attention?"

"Have you ever had black children?"

"How the hell would I know!?"

"We had a Japanese girl," the teacher said. "Two years ago. A darling..."

"We don't educate by color!"

The black man hung his head, then raised it. "I have to be sure."

Esther's stomach unwound; it and she were calmed. She thought of her old home, of London, the world's melting pot, of her Carib, African, Paki mates. They had traveled there...and she had traveled here, to America! To the home of the free and the brave.

She set her small white manicured hand lightly on the black man's broad arm, and turned him from the steps. "Your son will be safe, sir," she said thickly, forgetting all of her elocution lessons.

Gerd Lehmann stood half-dressed in his hot kitchen rinsing his cereal bowl. He'd slept badly; the a.c. in his bedroom was broken, and he couldn't afford to buy a new one. Or maybe he could: it was the end of the season. If any store still stocked them, he could get one on sale. Or he could buy one used...he tried to think of someone moving, who'd sell him...but all he could come up with was families moving in, not out, an increasingly passionate subject.

On the one hand, he'd been delighted to see his brother Erik move back to town. What a summer they'd spent together! Building something big and then sealing it, grilling sausage from the German butcher, downing crisp cold beers. And winter would be even better, with the swamp turned to ice, for skating, and hockey. Too, it was good to have little boys around again, to think and laugh like they did. Gerd had taught his nephews to throw a snake, to wait and watch patiently for a tadpole to turn into a frog, to pee in a high arc off that new deck. He laughed to himself, remembering Charly's displeasure.

The newly arrived black family, on the other hand, presented only trouble. Gerd was not a racist: he didn't care if the new family was green, purple, yellow or pink tie-dyed. They were

trouble because they had caused him trouble, which was logged, in ink, at the station house. Not trouble: time. Wasted time listening to, then calming, residents. You'd think Martians were landing instead of a black man and his children, sponsored by the town's Lutheran Church and its progressive minister.

Was this a good idea? For his church to house an unemployed black man and his four motherless children? In the abstract, of course. But Gerd didn't live in an abstraction, he lived in a small town beside a big city, a town settled by the Dutch, then peopled by Germans, Irish, Italians, some French Jews. Who would want to be the only "one" of any kind? It reminded him of when he'd walk in on his mother's bridge night, sixteen women at four card tables drinking coffee from tea cups, the living room thick with cigarette smoke. The women would stop talking and smoking and sipping; they'd look up from their cards until his mother would notice and say, "That one's Gerd...you're right, he is...Erik is at sea." He is what?

The screen door opened with a bang. "She here?" It was Brendan, his 15-year-old son, pack on his back, heading for school.

"Hello to you, too."

"Oh sorry Dad hi." Brendan looked past him, to the front door and the living room's largest piece of furniture, a long couch. "I was supposed to meet Gigi, but it's Tuesday! I thought it was Monday." Brendan shifted his pack. "I have A through C block free Mondays but not Tuesdays I have Bio. If she comes by tell her okay?"

Brendan left; through the window Gerd watched him walk off, leaning forward because of the pack. Gerd pressed his hands together in mock prayer, hoping that Brendan, this year, would hit the books. Gerd didn't have money for an a.c., but he did have money set aside and growing, more added weekly, overtime accepted and worked gladly, so that Brendan would have the means to go to college. Their mother had done that for him and Erik, tutoring in the evenings, but when she went to withdraw the money, it was nearly gone. Their father had pissed it away.

Gerd dried the bowl, then the spoon, and wondered if Brendan's mother was saving for him, too. It seemed like something she would do. Gerd turned at the sound of the front door opening.

"Bren?" Like his son, the girl looked past him, around the living room, down the hall.

"He left for school."

The girl stepped inside and walked into the kitchen, setting her book bag by the screen door. "I was 'sposed to meet him." She set a pack of cigarettes, a green lighter, and a square of sugarless bubble gum on the counter. "I'm free 'til noon."

Gerd eyed her; he knew who she was, at least, whose kid she was...but he didn't know her. "You are...?"

She was chewing gum. "We were supposed to hang. I'm Gigi. At his mom's house. Giselle Davie, but everyone calls me Gigi."

"How old are you?"

"18." She blew a fragile bubble. "I know Bren's younger than me."

"Than I."

"Than who?"

"My mother taught grammar."

"Bren's mom and my mom? They're friends."

"I know."

Gerd boosted himself up on to his kitchen counter, closer to the open window, which provided air on his bare back but not much of a breeze. He was wearing cutoff painter's pants; his tanned calves and bare feet swung slightly. "Thinking of college?"

"I take the SAT's next month." She chewed. "I'm good at math."

"You should study pronouns."

"You should get off my back." She lit a cigarette and stepped away, into the living room. "Hot in here." She turned to him. "My first class is at noon. Can I stay here, I don't want to walk all the way back home."

Gigi stepped back into the kitchen and set her cigarette in a tray by the sink. Without looking at him, she pulled off her t, let her skirt fall, stepped out of and unsnapped her plain white underwear. Naked, she set herself on his kitchen table, her slender body completely browned save for a strip of white around her hips.

"Where do you get that tan?"

"Dede says that's what makes it private, a pool in your own backyard. The town pool is private..."

"But there you have to keep your suit on." He took a drag from, then passed her the cigarette.

"It's private but they let niggers in, that's what my dad

says." She took a drag. "Ray's not happy about 'those Negroes'. And the Osterhoudt guy, out of prison? We're neighbors. Dad's not happy about that either."

"Ray Davie is not a happy man."

"But he's still my Dad," she said, blowing another bubble.

"Mom says there's no trading him in."

Gerd half-smiled, knowingly...

"What do you think, about the blacks?"

"Everyone has the right to a better life," Gerd said, "if it comes along."

"Brendan said you'd say that." She was still chewing gum, and smoking. "You have any condoms?"

"I do," he said, indicating the cabinet behind him.

"You have sex in the kitchen?"

"It's a small house."

She looked around it again, then eyed the holstered gun hanging from the back door. "My dad has one of those."

"I need mine for work."

Gerd liked the idea of a naked teenage girl sitting on his kitchen table, but the reality of it, and the particular girl, kept him thinking instead of doing...

"Me and my friends saw that new movie? Rated X. 'Last Tango in Paris'. Saturday."

"How'd you get in?"

"I'm 18," she reminded him. "They had sex...everywhere...in the hall, on the floor, in the kitchen."

"In Paris," he pointed out.

"You look like him."

"Marlon Brando?"

"Only not so old."

Gerd let himself down from the counter. First he took the cigarette from her, and set it, still burning, on the tray. Then he held out his cupped hand, for her gum.

With her boys tucked away at school, Charly felt like she was walking around with phantom limbs. When she crossed any street she held out both hands, and looked both ways twice...but then she dropped her hands, realizing there was no one beside her to protect, to guide. A construction vehicle lumbered by; if her boys were with her they would know, and tell her, that it was a back hoe loader and not a tractor with a dozer blade. To Charly, it was just big and yellow.

So much of the town was wasted on her! It was a place made for children, who delighted in its unbroken and unpeopled sidewalks, its grassy playing fields, its just-out-the door same-age friends. Her boys had so many friends, next door and across the street, up and down, children in every house. Charly was still hoping to make a friend; she'd met lots of women, mothers, but they all seemed to have known each other forever, or certainly since high school. Or, like Brendan's mother, they were away during the day just like men, working. Charly had moved often as a child, and her mother always said -- correctly -- that once she'd

made a friend, it only took one, she'd be happy.

Charly wasn't unhappy: she had her boys and Erik, and Erik's family, and the house.... She stood at a quiet intersection. Which way should she go? Without her boys, her ballast on both hands, she felt unmoored.

Gerd lived on the next street, and beyond him Big Carl. She decided to start her day, again, with them. She'd stop at Gerd's first so they could go together to Big Carl's. It was safer that way.

On the walkway that led to Gerd's kitchen, Charly lowered herself properly and picked up a newspaper he hadn't, her jade beads skimming the concrete. She eyed the rest of his yard, which needed its beds raked and its lawn plumped with fertilizer. The grass was so thin it looked like her father's balding head. Perhaps she would study that: local shrubbery, and lawn care. Also paint, and window replacement....was that chimney crumbling? She shook her head and stepped down the short path; the door was open, she breathed in the welcome smell of a cigarette burning. Coffee, too? She hoped so, even though the temperature called for tea, iced.

Charly opened the door, stepped inside, and tried to make sense of what she was seeing, a puzzle of shapes and colors: Gerd's neon-white ass, his paint-splattered shorts at his ankles, a girl beneath him, her brown legs dangling on either side of him, atop the speckled linoleum table. The girls' eyes, big and brown, were open, she looked blankly at Charly, then closed them, in pleasure.

She heard Gerd grunt; Charly looked away, and spotted Gerd's gun in its sling, hung on the back door's hook, then down, where she studied the town's Falcon Crest on a pink book bag. She set the paper on the counter, turned and stepped outside. She tugged on her beads; where would she go now?

At the end of Gerd's short drive stood a slender well-dressed man who looked like a Lehmann. But he wasn't one of them, Charly could see, with his shaggy blonde hair and winter skin; the rest of them were browned from their summer outside, building the deck. Too, his car was dated. A Mustang convertible from the 60's, old but seemingly new, with that shine.

And as the man moved closer she saw that his eyes were the true and even blue you'd see on a color chart, instead of Erik's hazy gray.

The man nodded. "How do you do..."

Charly wasn't sure at all how she she was doing after walking in on...

"I'm Jan Osterhoudt." He wore a dress shirt open, without a tie, a blue blazer, loafers with no socks. To Charly, he didn't add up: the fine clothes, his too-long hair, the indoor skin.

"I'm Charlotte, Lehmann."

"Erik's wife." Jan extended his hand, but instead of shaking hers, he reached for and touched the thick beads of her necklace. "Pretty."

Charly took back her beads.

"I'm looking for Gerd."

"He's..." She turned halfway, to the house. "Busy."

"Or Big Carl," he continued. "He's the one with work. I'm looking for work. Where does he live now? I can introduce myself, I can handle a drunk."

Charly's face got hot. It was true, of course, about Big Carl. It was just difficult to hear.

Jan pointed to her beads. "Where'd you get those?"

"Erik bought them for me," she said, taking a half step backwards. "When we lived in Singapore."

"The color of your eyes."

"That's what he said."

Jan extended his hand; she had to shake it. "Pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Lehmann." He walked around her, and headed for Gerd's open door.

Charly rang the bell, then pulled at her sundress, trying to straighten it and herself. With the day already so hot and humid, she felt wilted.

She waited on the deep porch of the minister's house; like Gerd's, it needed a fresh coat of paint and for someone to turn out the yellow porch light. It was morning, after all, a fresh day, the first day of school, where there was an order to things, rules to follow, expectations.

The door flew open, but no one was there. "Mom!" a teenage girl called. "There's some lady here."

Marion James appeared behind the screen. "Charly! I'm just sorting and packing donations for the new family. You can help."

Charly stepped inside, unsure where to set her gaze. Marion's breasts hung freely beneath a thin white cotton blouse, crudely embroidered at its neck. Her cut-off jeans hung loosely at her hips; her feet were bare and dirty.

"I'll ice us some tea. Ginseng?"

Charly stayed put. She'd been to the minister's home before, for a new families luncheon, but that had been held on their lawn, when their rhododendrons and forsythia burst with blooms. (Marion was barefoot that day, too, Charly recalled, but otherwise she'd looked lovely, like a modern Eve, her braided hair entwined with flowers, her dress flowing but fitted.) Inside the minister's house, everything was brown: the wainscoted walls, the tweedy couches. Plus the clutter of grown children: text books and book bags, grayed sneakers, dusty flip-flops. Charly turned to the dining room, its brown walnut table clear save for a bowl of knitting supplies, its needles sticking out like a t.v. antenna. She stepped closer, to study the room's papered walls: she'd never seen anything like it! Justice for All, Peace Now!, Filmore East, Peace & Justice, Summer of Love, March on Washington, Free at Last, End the War, Albert Einstein, and a clipped, yellowed headline of the Rosenberg execution.

"Nice beads," a teenage girl said, passing her, then stopping short. "Really nice." The girl pushed back her long hair and faced

Charly, twisting the cheap beads around her own neck. "But they don't go with your dress."

Charly lifted her beads, and placed them on the girl.

"Wow! You're giving them to me? Cool! I'm Jessica. Or Jess. Don't call me Jessie."

"Do you have a cigarette?" Charly asked, inappropriately, she knew, but she really needed a smoke.

The girl reached, and took one from a pack sitting on a shelf. She lit it for Charly, who inhaled deeply.

"Are you in school?" Charly asked, exhaling, more relaxed instantly but still wondering about the late hour. It was past ten, and she'd already witnessed what at least one teenage girl was doing, in the morning, when she wasn't at school.

"It starts when I get there," Jessica said casually, a phrase that would rattle around Charly's head for weeks. "It's a school without walls. In the city. This month I'm studying animal husbandry at the zoo." Her eyes widened. "It's not what you think. Next month, the stock exchange. I'll run orders. After that I want to know how television works. Do you know anyone at NBC?"

Marion reappeared, holding the two ice teas to her cheeks.

Jessica gathered her bag. "Bye Mom!" Jessica called, stepping out the front door. "I'm staying at Tom's. Okay? See you!"

Marion stepped up beside Charly and watched her daughter flit down the steps, and walk skip to the sidewalk.

"Come with me to the back porch," Marion said. "It's cooler there."

Gerd wore only a bath towel when he stepped into his living room. At the screen door stood Jan Osterhoudt. "I'm looking for your father."

"Let me get some clothes on, I'll walk you over." Gerd stepped to the door, checked that his gun was in its holster, and latched the screen.

Jan snorted, and leaned against its frame. "Think a screen door could hold me back?"

"I'm not taking any chances."

"I have no quarrel with you," Jan said, leaning in, so he was eye to eye with Gerd, even if a metal mesh screen separated them. "My Laurie is dead, I served my time, my boy has no mother." He blinked. "I have trouble sleeping, but I have no quarrel with you, no sir." Jan looked beyond Gerd, to the counter, where the open box of condoms sat. He sniffed loudly, then smiled: sex! Sex was in the air. "Ran into your sister-in-law coming out of here."

"Charly?"

"She's bunny."

Gerd rubbed his wet hair with his free hand. "Dream on."

"Coffee?"

"It's hotter than a Methodist hell in here."

"Iced tea? You're not much of a host."

"I didn't invite you over." With his foot, Gerd pushed the girl's backpack out of sight, and eyed again his loaded, holstered gun. He looked again at Jan, and felt a sudden pang of sorrow.

Prison! Laurie...Laurie, dead. He softened his tone. "But my dad always has a pot of that cowboy joe on his stove."

Charly left the minister's house, pulling behind her a child's red wagon stacked with bedding for the new family. She felt silly, at first, leading a wagon without a child in it, but she passed no one -- not one person walking -- as she made her way from the minister's high on the hill house down to the town's main intersection then up past the Catholic church and its school, a thin strip of woods, and then the black man's shack, which, she'd been told, stood behind the mayor's grand Victorian. Not one person walking! She'd never lived in such a place! In the city, someone was always sweeping -- even though the sidewalks were never really clean -- and men stood on corners smoking, talking, conversing, exclaiming. Pushcarts full of flowers in Paris, street vendors in Singapore, its air curry-scented....

The sidewalks here, in town, were always clean; she'd never seen anyone sweeping. The air smelled of cut grass and the sweet exhaust of clothing dryers.

Charly stopped herself in front of the mayor's house, and let the wagon's handle fall. The mayor's was the prettiest house in town. Pale yellow with white trim, an Italianate Victorian, unlike any other around, tall instead of wide. Its slender windows glistened; even the lawn's green grass gave off that sparkle of wealth and well being. She didn't think she would want to live so

exposed, and beside the town's one busy street. But it was grand. She could see that a table under a pergola was set, with china, for lunch. The only mess was that of children: a hoola hoop set against the fence, a boy's blue Sting Ray left on its side.

"Mrs. Lehmann: a vision."

Charly turned, and saw the mayor approaching, his hand outstretched. He leaned easily over the fence and took her hand in his. He smelled, pleasingly, of after shave and the starch from his dress shirt. "What brings you and your little red wagon to our door?"

Mayor Metz held on to her hand, and unlike that man who'd touched her beads, Charly didn't mind. The mayor reminded her of her own father: at ease with his accomplishments. "I'm delivering donations to the new family."

He leaned in closely. "The 'Negroes'?" He laughed heartily. "I'm sorry. What do we call them? The dispossessed? The great unwashed?" The mayor unlatched the gate. "Please, park your wagon. Join us for lunch."

"Who's that?" the mayor's wife called out, approaching the gate, dressed for golf. "Oh, Charlotte!" She eyed the wagon. "What on earth are you hauling?"

The mayor was still holding Charly by the hand. "I insist she stay for lunch."

"Of course she'll stay to lunch, once we get rid of that wagon." Stephanie Metz stepped outside the gate; her husband let go of Charly's hand. "Let me walk with you. This town loves gossip."

The shaded pergola, the cucumber soup dilled and chilled, the crustless club sandwiches set on fine French china. Charly might as well have been dining with her parents, which comforted her. Charly missed them, and their way of life, her father dotting on her always. Of course, they would drive out for Erik's birthday this Sunday, for dinner, but she didn't see them as much as she'd like.

"This was just what I needed," Charly said, by way of thanks.

"Bill has to take lunch at home now that he's mayor," Stephanie explained. "He gets no peace."

"I can't eat!" He grinned, and filled his emptied plate with cookies. "A man's got to eat!"

They all heard a thud, and leaned out of the shade to find its source. Who would think a small, thin child could make such a sound?

The mayor stood. "Can I help you?"

The little boy picked himself up and took hold of the hoola hoop. He stepped into it, set it at his waist, and tried to spin it. The hoop fell straight to the ground.

"Son?"

The boy, one of the black man's children, didn't answer. He tried to hoola the hoop again.

"That's my son's."

"He here?"

"He's at school."

"Then I can use it."

The mayor considered this. "What if I fell over the fence into your yard and played with your toys without asking?"

"You too old."

Charly and Stephanie laughed, a little too loudly.

"You didn't ask."

The boy wiggled. "Can I?"

The mayor walked over to the hoola hoop, picked it up and stepped into it. "You may use it, young man, once you learn how to. Now, follow me..."

The Mayor left after he'd finished his lunch but not before Charly agreed to join the town council. Stephanie Metz had been the parent liaison, between the school and the town, but now that Bill was mayor...

Charly and Stephanie walked to and from the house, carrying in the china and glasses. "I wouldn't put you up to it if I didn't think you'd enjoy it," Stephanie said, of the council. "You'll meet people, and learn things...I learned how much road salt the town buys and uses and stores..." She could see that Charly wasn't interested. "I learned how much Gerd earns," Stephanie said, smiling, then added: "It's not enough, for what he does."

Both women turned at the bang and clank of an extension ladder. "Oh, there he is," Stephanie said cheerfully. "You never

know when Big Carl is going to start his day. Good afternoon Big Carl!" she called, then turned to Charly. "Exquisite, the work he does...when he does it."

Charly nodded, shamed anew.

Stephanie didn't notice; she had her eyes fixed on Big Carl. "The Lehmann men," she sighed. "Cut from marble...Hitler had a point about the Germans...Do you golf?"

Hitler? Charly flashed a weak smile, and felt for her jade beads. Gone! Given away... "Tennis."

"Then you'll want to join the Field Club. Let me introduce you to my other neighbor, she heads the committee."

Charly checked the time on her slender wristwatch. "Thank you, and for lunch." She turned back to her watch, and did some mental math. "I have to pick up Erik's shirts before school lets out."

"It won't take but a minute to meet her," Stephanie said, leading Charly by the hand. "It's the club for tennis. You can play year round."

Charly collected her older son Tory, but her first grader, she was informed, was being held in the principal's office. Tory wanted to go in the office with his mother, but he wasn't allowed, he had to sit outside, on a hard bench, his legs dangling.

When Charly entered the inner office, Gunnar made a bolt for her, and buried himself in her dress. "I didn't do it!"

"Sit down!" The principal barked. He softened his tone when he turned to Charly. "Mrs. Lehmann, let me introduce Mr. Osterhoudt."

"We've met," Charly said quietly, barely audible over the heavy hum from the window-unit air conditioner, the only cooled room in the school. Charly nodded "hello" to the first grade teacher, who held her head high but was nervously twisting her wedding band. Gunnar wouldn't let go of his mother. Charly tried to peel him from her, and when she had, she looked down and he looked up, his face streaked with tears. She bent over, and whispered to him softly but sternly: "Dry your face and stand with the other boy." Gunnar did as he was told; Charly thought her heart would burst...her good little soldier.

Jan caught her eye. He mouthed, "Where are your beads?"

"Mrs. Lehmann! Either your son or the Osterhoudt boy said a terrible thing in class today to the new...the new..."

"Black child," the teacher offered. "His name is Junior."

"To... at...Junior. I won't repeat it," the principal continued. "Both of them will be suspended until one of them confesses."

"Suspended!" Charly had never heard of such a thing, for a first grader.

"We won't tolerate racial..."

"...taunts," said the teacher.

Charly turned to the teacher. "You really don't know which one of the boys said it?"

The teacher let go of her ring and turned up her hands. "Look

at them, m'am: they could be twins."

CHAPTER THREE

Erik Lehmann didn't make a practice of picking up hitch hikers, but it was newly dark and the girl with her thumb out was the minister's daughter. He watched her run skip to his car, and

pull open the passenger seat door, her beads jangling as she slid in.

"Wow, thanks, I'm just going into town."

"I know where you live."

Jessica turned her head sideways, trying to see if she recognized this man in a suit. "Your car smells new."

"It's the leather. You should buckle up."

She righted herself. "Most guys who pick me up want to have sex."

Erik took his eyes from the road, and turned to her. That's when he noticed the beads. "Those jade beads..."

"It's like a trade."

Erik focused on the dark road again. "I'm just giving you a ride."

"Or a blow." She turned, and looked into the back seat. "You have no junk."

Erik turned on, then spun the radio's dial: news, opera, rock, news, baseball. Why she was wearing Charly's beads?

"The mayor has a new car," she offered. "Only his has more doors. They open backwards."

"Do you hitchhike often?"

"Never in the city," she explained, tugging on Charly's beads. "Too many weirdoes. But out here," she shrugged, and sighed, and let her body slink into the seat. "I just had sex, with my boyfriend. In the city. That's why I don't care." She sniffed, loudly. "It's more than the car. It smells -- exotic."

Erik eased to a stop at the light. He hadn't wanted to have

sex with the minister's daughter, and now she was offering sloppy seconds. He studied his hands on the wheel; they were scratched, cut up from a trip to the docks, which he loathed but which had to be done when one of their ships came in from the Far East. He had to go below...he couldn't just stand there on the docks, overseeing... Charly's father had, and the men mocked him.

"My parents don't mind. About my boyfriend. Usually I stay overnight but he's leaving on tour. He's a musician. He said I could come, he invited me..."

The light turned to green; Eric pulled the wheel to the right. He could smell it now, too: his sweat-soaked dress shirt, the curry that covered his hands when he slit open a lumpy sack.

"But I have this report, at school, about zoos?" She turned from the window, and brightened, eyeing his suit. "Do you know anyone at NBC?"

Gerd didn't want to, but he had to make a visit to Walter Gordon, the black man who had just moved his family to town. Following a teacher from school, hectoring her about a taunt -- that was not allowed. Gerd had begun his shift with a half hour phone conversation with the school's principal, calming him, and by the end, agreeing to talk to the parent.

When he parked his squad car, he could see the Mayor and his lovely missus appear at their magnificent windows. Gerd raised a hand, waving gently, to let them know all was well. But they waved

him in.

Gerd opened the latched gate, meeting the Mayor midway.

"I don't like what I'm seeing," the Mayor confided.

"What are you seeing?"

With his head the Mayor indicated the wooded median opposite Walter Gordon's house. "I see cars. Bikes. People. But only at night and never more than one."

Gerd nodded; it was both something and nothing to act on.

"When I come out, they're already gone."

"Don't come out," Gerd advised. "Call the station."

The Mayor nodded, then shook his head, suddenly weary. "I wish they'd go ahead and do it. Burn the crosses. Get it over with."

Gerd approached the big man's little house. The door opened before he reached it.

"You coming to tell me who did it? Who called my boy that... that." Walter Gordon stood outside his door, blocking Gerd.

"I came here to tell you that you can't harass your children's teachers."

"She told me!" Walter stomped his foot, which was bare. "She said he'd be safe!"

"Only you can safeguard them," Gerd advised. "That's your job."

"I know that, I know that, why do you think I moved them to

this town!"

Gerd set his large hand on the man's bare bicep, to calm him. "You followed your son's teacher to her home. That's not appropriate behavior in any town."

Walter Gordon held Gerd in his gaze. "She promised."

Gerd dropped his hand. "How's the job search?"

"Good," Walter answered. "Real good. Mayor talked to the mayor of the next town over. They got a job fixin' trucks."

Gerd nodded. "A car?"

"I pick it up tomorrow at the minister's. And the minister's lady, she runs a nursery school. My young ones can go there. Starts tomorrow."

Gerd nodded again, then held out his hand so they could shake. "We clear on the teacher? If you want to talk to her, you make an appointment."

"But she promised!"

Gerd took back his outstretched hand. "Good luck with that job."

Erik Lehmann stripped himself from his sweat-soaked shirt to his dusty socks in the laundry room of his home. Ugh! The hold of a container ship. Rats, alive and dead...snakes...spilled, mushy grain. Twice this year he'd discovered stowaways, so thin, so frightened. Drugs, gems, booze: illegal or legal, someone was always trying to sneak something, or someone, into the country.

That's why Erik -- a principal of the company -- had to inspect the hold. Port rules.

He stuffed his dress shirt, undershirt and boxers into the wash and set it. He wrapped himself in an oversized towel from yesterday's trip to the pool, then scooped up his suit and tie and shoes and headed upstairs, in the dark.

Why was the house dark? He could hear Charly and the boys; maybe the boys were in the bath. But what about dinner? That was a smell he'd come to expect: something on the stove or in the oven throwing off good smells. Besides her beauty, Charly was also a good and willing cook. (Almost as good as his own mother.) It didn't matter if she were preparing Chicken with Peaches or Beef Bourguignon, it all smelled the same to Erik: it smelled like home.

"Anyone around?" he called, but headed into the master bedroom so he could shower and put on shorts and a t-shirt for a run. He shook his head: love handles...

"We're in here!" one of his boys called, but Erik wasn't sure where "here" was. He stepped into the bathroom and picked up some of Charly's hand cream. He slathered it all over his scratched hands, even though he was getting into, and not out of, the shower.

Erik eased himself onto the foot of Gunnar's bed, the only unoccupied space. Both boys had bathed; they were in their pajamas

and ready for bed. He glanced at his watch. Of course! It was nearly nine o'clock. There was no dinner smell because it was long past dinner time. He'd have to forage, or drive over to the next town for a quick burger.

"How was your first day of first grade?"

Gunnar pulled the blankets over his head. Charly stood, and held out her hand to Tory. "You talk to him."

On his way out, Tory turned to his father. "He didn't do it, Dad! He doesn't even know those words!"

Erik made himself a thick sandwich and refilled his ice-filled glass, with water. He would rather drink a beer, but he also wanted to run.

Just as he sat down, alone, at the kitchen table, Charly came downstairs.

"Can I fix you a drink?" he asked, rising.

"With a twist, thank you."

She sat herself at the table, and let her head fall into her hands. When he brought her drink over, he leaned over and kissed the top of her head. She looked up at him, quizzically.

"Suspended?"

"First day. That's a Lehmann family record."

"Do you think he did it?"

"I'm with Tory," Erik said, between bites. "He's never heard those words."

Charly sipped her drink and dragged a pack of cigarettes closer. But she didn't light one. "What a day."

"Something good must have happened."

She shook her head. "I walked in on Gerd having sex with a teenager."

"What?" Erik put down his sandwich.

"I dropped the boys at school, I thought I'd have some coffee with Gerd, then he and I could check on your father. We did that all summer, the boys and I."

"A teenager?"

"I tripped over her Falcon Crest book bag." Charly lit a cigarette, and dragged from it. "Then I went to the minister's house and picked through donations..."

That answered part of his question about the beads...he wanted to ask her why she'd given them away, but he didn't want to tell her that he'd picked up a hitch hiker.

"People donate the oddest things: one sock, a bra missing a strap, a baby blanket with cigarette burns..." Charly put down her cigarette and straightened, suddenly refreshed. "I had lunch with the mayor and his wife."

"Nice..." Like his mother-in-law, Erik knew that Charly would be happier if she had even one friend. "I like Stephanie. I knew her in high school."

Charly grinned. "I like her, too. Already I'm in a tennis foursome, with her neighbor, and the mayor asked me to join the town council."

Erik weighed his mixed feelings: Stephanie, tennis, good.

Town Council? Charly had never been interested in politics, or procedure. And the mayor...what had that girl said, about his car doors?

"The council meeting is tomorrow evening. I called your cousin Lena; she'll watch the boys."

Erik took another bite, and emptied his water. He could hear the wash cycle end. "Did you pick up my shirts?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't."

"I wore my last clean one today."

She picked up her cigarette. "Bring it to me, I'll wash it and iron it in the morning."

"It's already in the wash. I sweated through it today."

She turned to him, and eyed his scratched hands.

"I was down at the docks."

Charly wasn't sure what that meant. "Is that why you were late?"

"I had to check a ship's hold."

"My father never does."

Erik bit back his reply. "Is it too much to ask to pick up my shirts and have a warm dinner waiting for me?"

Charly picked up her drink; he thought she would throw it at him. But she didn't. Still with a cigarette in her hand, she walked over to the sink, and emptied her glass in it. She stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray, and left.

He could hear her in the laundry room, moving his wet clothes to the dryer. He finished his sandwich and washed off his plate.

Gerd slowed his car to a stop. "Whatcha got there?"

"Clothes for the new family." The minister's daughter swung her long hair side to side, and bumped the wrapped package against her leg. "I have a report, for school, but I can't sit still."

"Mr. Gordon is a little hepped up."

Jessica leaned against the squad car. "Why?"

"I had to have a talk with him," Gerd explained.

"Town rules?" she asked, with a smirk.

Gerd chuckled. "Where'd you get those beads?"

"This nice lady."

"Charlotte?"

The girl shrugged, and tugged on the beads absently. "She's pretty, like in a magazine." She turned her eyes upward, thinking of the right phrase. "Put together."

Gerd smiled anew at the accurate description, but wondered why Charly would have given her necklace away; she'd said once that when she held those beads in her hands she could hear the street sounds of Singapore, smell the orchids of Hong Kong, feel the soft sand of Bali's beaches under her toes. Or something like that.

"How's the new school?"

The girl brightened. "Good! The report I have to do? I have to make a presentation on zoos and why they matter, pro vs. con? Do they harm animals or protect them?"

Gerd smiled. What a difference a school made! Last year she'd

wandered the town, or went into and out of the city, never showing up to the local high school.

"When I started I thought 'free the animals, let them roam!' But I learned so much, about care and conservation and..." Something caught her attention. "There's our wagon."

Gerd followed her eyes; a red wagon stood outside the small house. "I think you should turn around, let Mr. Gordon cool off."

Now the girl was biting her hair, her eyes set on the small house. "I see our wagon," she repeated, happily, and gathered her package. "I'll leave this, take the wagon and go straight home. Okay?"

"Deal." Gerd put his car into drive, but he didn't proceed: in his rearview mirror he checked first on the mayor's window. Emptied. Then he watched the minister's daughter run skip to Walter Gordon's door, the bulky package knock-knocking against the side of her flowing skirt. Gerd held on to that image, and her long hair flying behind her, her beads jangling, her sandals splashing the gravel. He would never see her again.

Erik chose a different route for his run, setting his course towards the middle of town, where he could loop the pond that once had been a lake large and clear enough to attract bathers from the city. These were travelers who had the means to take the train north for the day, or lodge at the hotel, since burned, its land sold to the Methodists for a church and its parking lot. Now the

lake had shrunk to a pond, and the train tracks carried freight instead of people. If Erik wanted to take a train to the city -- and he did not -- he would have to drive west, where the suburbs were more densely built, and board there.

He set his shoulders back, letting the sweat gather and fall from his head. What did it matter that some days his work was filthy, when he could transport himself to and from in a car that smelled new, and of leather? Better an afternoon at the docks, in the hold, than day after day, and evening, catching the 5:47 or the 6:13, sharing a seat with a banker, or a broker. He enjoyed the company of men; that wasn't the point. His sleek car, the big house, his beautiful wife -- even when he was disappointed in her -- set him apart in this town. He'd been like everyone else when he'd left, at 18, but he'd returned a different man, wealthier, and more worldly.

He wiped fresh sweat from his brow, and left the town's center behind him. Erik didn't like thinking about that time, even though he'd liked the Marines, its sensibility and rules. Too, he liked that he'd been quickly plucked out for special forces. But when he got homesick, and he had, he found that he didn't miss Gerd so much, or their parents. Instead, he ached for Laurie, her steady presence in his life. He could still hear her explosive laugh, picture her legs folded as they sat on a flat rock at the cliffs, where they'd sun and eat packed sandwiches and drink beer and, eventually, have sex, her straight blonde hair splayed on the rock like a false sun. Or Laurie beside him in his car, a '58 Beetle, tapping her long fingers, polished, on the door's thin

sill, heading for a movie, or a party, or one of Gerd's hockey tournaments, tap tap tapping her impatience. Wherever they were going, she already wanted to be there.

Leaving Laurie behind. He'd left her, Jan killed her. The one had nothing to do with the other, he knew: they were just bookends. Erik veered off the paved road into a wooded swath he'd known since he was a kid, a short cut from school to the town's north side, where the Mayor lived. He zig-zagged the worn path easily, even in the dark; like Laurie, the route was in him.

But the path's end was blocked by a parked Pontiac Ventura. Erik slowed himself, bent down and peered in to the car, instantly recognizing its driver.

"What are you doing?"

"Shh...lookout." Ray Davie held field glasses to his eyes. Erik spotted a 9 mm pistol strapped to Ray's pant leg, and saw now, in the dim light, that he'd painted his lean face in camouflage. He wore a mud-green sleeveless "t", and, as always, was still wearing his dog tags. A red gasoline can stood in the back seat.

Erik leaned into the open window and removed the gas can. "Our part in the war is over, my friend."

"The war at home never ends," Ray said.

Erik uncapped the gas tank and tilted it, letting the liquid soak into the ground. With his running shoe, he pushed some gravel and sand over the wetted earth.

"I'll just buy more," Ray said, and handed Erik the field glasses.

"What am I looking at?"

Ray snorted. "You'll see."

Erik raised the field glasses to his eyes.

"Other direction."

Erik surveyed the area: a pergola to the west, a weathered split-rail fence that divided the Mayor's home from the small dwellings behind it, leftover migrants' shacks from a time when the area held apple and pear and peach orchards.

"The bedroom," Ray instructed.

Erik narrowed the focus, and set the glasses to the open window, where the bare black body of Walter Gordon was moving, to and fro, to and fro, into ...

Erik fell back against the car.

"The minister's daughter." Ray cocked his ear. "I can hear the beads she's wearing...listen: clink...clink...clink." He looked up at Erik and grinned. "I can't burn a black man out of his house when he's gettin' it on with a white chick, now can I? And not any white girl, a girl bathed in beads, a teenie queenie, the minister's daughter. The minister's daughter!" Ray howled, and slapped the car's vinyl seat, setting off lights within the Mayor's house. "No, not tonight," he said, softly. "We'll leave the black man to hang for another day."