

june



# Frank

NINA sees the man first. It's a warm summer day, the kind where, when I was alive, you'd have found me down the creek. Fishing, I'd have said if anyone asked, though the only thing worth catching there was a long, cool breeze.

There's no such breeze in the attic today—not even the ghost of one. A dry heat radiates from the wooden beams above me, although the floor itself is cool, squeaking slightly under the movement of my rocking chair. The wide, solid boards, the angular shape of the room, the boxes and trunks that fill the dark corners, all put me in mind of a ship, as if I'm taking some kind of voyage up here instead of just passing time.

Beside me, Nina lifts her head, and her ears prick forward.

“What is it, girl?” I ask. She looks at me mournfully. Nina

wishes she could speak. Instead, she barks once and glances at the window.

A swatch of lace curtain blocks our view. In our forty years together, Clara tatted enough lace to cover every window in the house. If she'd lived, I would have had a lace-lined coffin. But of course Clara passed before me.

Nina barks again, impatient. Through the patterns in the lace I see something moving. "All right," I say. "Hold your horses." I think of the breeze down the creek, and the curtain flaps sideways and stays there.

The fellow's young. I see that right away. He parks his red truck on the side of the lawn and steps out wearing faded jeans, hiking boots, and a white T-shirt. He stands in the drive, shades his eyes, and gazes up at the house.

Even if I close my eyes, I can still see the place the way he does: the arbor to the right of the house, plump Concord grapes ripening in the sun; the fieldstone steps, laid by my grandfather and carved with his initials; the shady patio, where Clara used to bring me lemonade. And the house itself, rising out of the Connecticut ground at the edge of the woods, its white facade peeling a little but still proud after two hundred years. There's plenty that he doesn't see, too, and keeping it safe is what concerns me.

The boy—for that's what he truly is—passes a hand along his jaw. He stands still, taking in the house and the valley spread below. I look at Nina.

"Doesn't look like a thief," I say, and she whines in agreement.

"Still, best to make sure." Nina stands, shakes herself,

and trots toward the door, where she sits and looks back at me.

“I’m coming, I’m coming.” These days, it’s easier for me just to think of the place I’m going and find myself there, but Nina finds it disconcerting, and so, I suppose, do I. Instead I raise myself from the chair and follow along behind her, and the two of us make our way downstairs.

At the front door, she sits and barks once, a command of sorts. I stop and remember the feel of the wood, the coolness of the brass handle, and the door swings open. Not very much, but enough for Nina to wriggle through. She bounds down the steps, barking and growling, a black and tan bundle of uncontained fury.

The boy takes a step back. “Whoa. Easy, there.” He puts one hand out, slowly, then stays very still. A good idea. Nina may be a mutt, but her broad head and mouthful of white teeth are pure shepherd. Her body’s something else—maybe Rottie—but all told she’s a solid one hundred pounds of pissed-off dog, and the boy’s got the message. He doesn’t seem afraid, though; just cautious. He keeps his voice low and calm. “You’re telling me this is your place, huh? I hear you.”

He waits until the dog settles a bit, then cups his hands around his mouth and hollers toward the door. “Hello? Anybody home?” No answer comes from the empty house.

“How’d you get out? You do that by yourself?” he asks the dog. She’s still barking, random woofs of warning, but it’s halfhearted now, and at his tone she tentatively wags her bushy tail. He extends his hand again, and this time she sniffs it.

“You’re a smart one, aren’t you?” he says, and rubs behind her ears. She groans in pleasure, thumps her tail on the ground, and leans into him so that when he shifts, she topples over, pink belly exposed and legs in the air.

The boy laughs. He bends over and scratches her stomach, making her writhe with delight.

“Some watchdog,” I say from the door. Nina rolls a sheepish brown eye in my direction, but doesn’t get up.

The boy stands, giving Nina a last scratch, and she scrambles to her feet behind him. He pushes the front door so that it’s fully open and calls inside.

“Hello? Anybody there?”

He takes one step over the threshold, hesitates, and shivers. Perhaps he senses me, floating just where the door’s shadow pools into midday darkness. Perhaps it is simply that he’s been raised with better manners than to wander around a strange house when nobody’s home. Whatever the reason, he turns and heads outside.

He’s standing on the rise, looking toward the old north pasture, when I hear them coming through the woods. There’s two of them, about the same size, but it’s not until they’re almost through to the clearing that I realize one of them is Gert.

Nina is standing by the boy’s side, still a little excited from her efforts to chase him off. She hears them just after I do, and gives a low warning bark. The boy spins around just in time to see them step into the sunlight.

“Quiet, fool,” I say to the dog, and she grumbles her way into silence. Gert’s moving at a quick pace, faster than I’ve

seen in some time. A few wisps of hair have escaped her braid, and they float about her face like strands of silver, as thin and fine in the morning air as spider webbing. As she strides toward us, her energy comes in waves. Touch her and she'd shoot sparks.

"Un-oh," I say to the boy. "You might want to leave now." But of course he doesn't hear me. Instead, he comes down off the rise, crossing the lawn to meet them. He's got a hand raised in greeting, but at the look on Gert's face, he lets it drop limply to his side. Nina, quite sensibly, is covering behind his leg.

"Um, good morning?" the boy says. Gert's about to speak, but it's the other woman who answers first.

"Try something else," she says. "Like who are you, and what are you doing here?" She's dressed simply, in denim shorts and a man's white shirt tied at the waist, long brown hair pinned up in a knot. I should know her, I know, but she's so young, has so much energy, it's hard to keep her in focus. She strides up to within spitting distance of the boy, and for a second I think that's exactly what she's going to do. He's staring at her openmouthed, and in disgust she turns from him to Gert. Just before she speaks, the boy finds his voice.

"Andie? Andie Murphy?"

And like that, her molecules click into place for me, like the piece of a puzzle that makes the whole recognizable. It's my niece Andie, child of my heart, fully grown.

"Who the hell else would I be?" she's saying. "Do I know you?"

“You probably don’t remember, but you used to babysit me sometimes. We used to catch frogs down the creek,” he adds lamely. There’s just the faintest flush of red around his collarbone.

“Oh my God,” she says. “Little Cortie McCallister. All grown up!”

His flush deepens, but he manages a grin. “Over six feet. Taller than you, finally.”

“Let’s see, you’re what, twenty-two now?”

“Um, no. Twenty-three.”

“Great. Make me feel old.”

She smiles, and for the first time I catch a glimpse of the little girl I knew, the one who spent summers running wild on this farm. She’s got Murphy written all over her; Gert’s strong jaw, softened by Clara’s eyes and her daddy’s—their brother’s—wide, easy smile.

She turns to Gert. “Aunt Gert, you remember Cort, don’t you?”

“I do indeed,” she says, and at her tone Cort shifts uncomfortably. “But that doesn’t explain what he’s doing up here today.”

It’s an excellent question, and we all turn to look at him. “I, ah, I heard Evenfall might be for sale,” he says. “I wanted to take a look before it got bought up, so I just took a ride out here. I’m sorry if I caused any trouble, Miss Gert.”

“There’s a modern device called the telephone,” Gert informs him. “Old-fashioned as some people may think I am, I happen to have one. Next time, try using it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”



Andie crouches down and holds her hand out to the dog, who comes out from behind Cort, wagging her tail. “Cute pup you’ve got here—what’s its name?”

“I dunno. I thought she was yours—I mean, Miss Gert’s.”

“Certainly not,” Gert says. “You mean the mangy animal doesn’t belong to you?”

“Nope. It looked like she came out of the house.”

“That’s impossible.” Gert’s clear gray eyes flick to the door, and I catch myself stepping back, although there’s no way she can see me. “And I’d swear that door was locked tight when I left last time.”

He shrugs. “Well, it’s open today.”

“It certainly is.” She looks at him. “Andrea, excuse me. I think I’ll check the house. And while I’m at it I might as well call the pound. I’ve seen this animal running loose before, and it’s high time someone took responsibility for it.”

“Sure, Aunt Gert.”

I’ve been watching Gert so intently that I’m not prepared when she steps into the house. There’s no time to move, no time to even think about moving. She steps firmly across the threshold and into me.

I feel her warmth first, just as she must feel the coolness of the air where I am. Her hands come up as if she’s blind and bumped into a wall. They reach just to my shoulders, the way she used to hold them when we danced. With all my might I think of those days and whisper her name.

She sighs and stands still. Her long gray hair is pulled back in a loose braid and she grasps the end, a nervous habit I recognize from her youth.

I reach out to stroke her cheek, but before I can touch her, I hear Andie's voice.

"Everything okay, Aunt Gert?"

Gert drops her braid, startled, and the connection is gone. "Just waiting for my eyes to adjust," she calls, then strides off toward the kitchen and the phone.

For a second I debate going after her. But even if she can sense me, it doesn't mean she'll listen. It's not as if she ever has before. And besides, Andie's here, for the first time in I can't remember how long. My funeral doesn't count, of course. So I stay and watch.

She looks good. She's thinner than I remember, and there's a look in her eyes I don't like, as if she's seen plenty of what the world has to offer and is tired of most of it. But she's still a beauty, with that same wide-open face she had as a little girl. She could never hide when something was wrong, and she always gave me way too much credit for being able to read her mind. It was all right there, for anyone who cared to look.

"Sorry to hear about Frank," Cort's saying. He bends down to pet Nina, sprawled at his feet.

"Thanks. Frank and Clara really felt like my folks, you know?" She's quiet a moment, then turns and looks at the farm, waves a hand to take it all in. "This place hasn't changed much. It looks exactly like it did when I was a kid."

"You think?" He turns and looks with her. "It must seem like the ass end of nowhere to you. I heard you've been living overseas."

She laughs. “Henry still reading the mail down at the post office?”

He smiles back. “Just the return addresses. Anything else would be a federal offense. He told me the stamps were pretty, though. You were in Italy, right?”

“Yep. I finished my doctorate in art history this week, then hopped the first plane home to give Aunt Gert a hand. We were behind you on the road, coming in from the airport, when we saw you pull in here.”

“My lucky day,” he says.

They talk about Andie’s flight, about the two-week camping trip the boy just took, and then the people they both know who are still in Hartman. All the while I’m seeing the place the way it must look to Andie. Ass end of nowhere, indeed. There are weeds sprouting through the gravel driveway and the lawn is almost knee high, sure, but it’s nothing a few afternoons of hard work can’t fix. Finally the boy circles back to the part that interests me.

“So you’re really going to sell it?”

She nods. “You know how hot the market is right now. A couple of developers are already pretty eager. Aunt Gert thought you were another one poking around up here without permission. She’s kind of had it—she was ready to call the police on you.”

“She did seem pretty ticked,” the boy says, and I snort. If Gert’s worst threat is calling the police, she’s mellowed considerably.

“She wants to get the house cleaned up and painted

before she calls an assessor in,” Andie says. “I keep telling her, once it’s sold, the house will probably be gone, but she doesn’t want to hear it. You know how she is.”

I’m still chewing over that one when the boy asks if the whole parcel is for sale.

“Aunt Gert will probably keep the cottage and an acre or two, but that’s it. She can’t handle more. That’s why she’s putting it on the market in the first place.”

“Huh. What about you?”

“Me?” Andie says. “Right. There are still skid marks on the road, I left town so fast. I’m here to help out, nothing more. Then I’m out of here and back to civilization.”

Her words remind me that Gert’s still inside, trying to find somebody to collar my dog. *You*, I say to Nina. *You need to go hide*. She’s sprawled in front of Andie, happily panting, and makes no move to get up. *Shoo*, I say. *Shoo. Quickly now*. I think of the pound, all concrete and chain link, and she reluctantly shakes herself to her feet. But still she doesn’t run. Instead, she stands in front of the boy and gives two sharp, commanding barks. My niece jumps, but the boy doesn’t flinch.

“Hey there, easy,” he says. “What’s the problem?”

She looks at me, and I could swear there’s an apology there somewhere. Then she runs to his truck, stands there for a second, and runs back.

“I think she’s telling you it’s time to go,” Andie says.

“I think she’s saying she wants to come with me,” he says. “How mad will your aunt be if I take off with the dog?”

Andie considers. “It’s hard to say.”

“Well, live dangerously. That’s my motto,” he says, squatting and looking Nina in the face. “Come on, girl. We’d best organize a breakout for you now, before Gert comes back with the law.” He stands and stretches. “It was nice seeing you again. How long are you staying?”

“I’m not sure yet. Awhile—there’s a lot to do.”

“Well, if I can give you a hand at all, just holler. I’ll be around.” He starts toward the truck, Nina following. He opens the cab door and she leaps inside, moving over to make room for him and to claim the passenger window.

Cort turns the truck around, then brakes near Andie. He’s grinning.

“Hey, tell Miss Gert I said good-bye—and thanks for not pressing charges.” Before she can reply, the truck is rolling down the driveway, stirring up little clouds of sand-colored dust. Nina leans out the window and barks once. Andie and I watch them go.