

A Winter Love Story

by

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The snow was falling in big full flakes, gripping and clinging and forming lasting fortresses on everything upon which it landed. A thick sheet of snow slid from a rooftop, and tiny sparrows flew away to take refuge amongst the barren branches of the big oak tree in the yard.

Heather entered the back door, stomped the fresh snow off her boots on the mat, and poked her head inside the kitchen door.

“Hi Grandma.”

“Hello dear. Well now, isn’t this a pleasant surprise? Come in, come in, and don’t mind the mess. You’re just in time to give me a hand here.”

Heather took off her boots, hung her coat on the rack, and stepped into the warm kitchen. Open boxes and cartons of food were scattered on the floor, counter, and table. A teakettle was warming on a burner, and a scent of cinnamon floated through the air.

Her grandmother hadn’t said or done anything significant, yet Heather already felt part of the weight in her heavy heart lift. In this house, replete with wonderful memories, she found comfort. Everything was as it should be.

The old woman looked at her and smiled a bright and youthful smile. Except for a few wiry grey strands of hair that stood up defiantly, she still had a full head of dark brown hair. She was a big-boned woman, strong and tall—larger than life, it had always seemed to Heather. She studied her grandmother’s face while she listened to her chatter about the holiday season and about Christmas being her favorite time of the year. Her crow’s feet were deep and long like rivers, flowing from the deep sea of her dark green eyes over the mounds of her smooth hilly cheeks. When Heather was a little girl, she loved to sit on her grandma’s lap and count them. Her nose was tiny, perhaps too small for her face; in fact, Grandpa teased her by calling “button-nose,” which always made Heather giggle. But it was the sparkle in her eyes when she laughed and her generous bosom that rose and fell like waves with each chuckle, that Heather loved most about her features.

“Place these gently in the box over by the heater, dear. Thank you,” she said, handing her two jars of marmalade.

“So, when are you and Grandpa heading out?” Heather placed the jars in the box.

“Well, tonight, honey—the twentieth of December, same as every year. We need to get the house ready by Christmas Eve for you and your mother and for anyone else who might show up,” she answered, surprised at her granddaughter’s question. She put the cans she was holding down on the counter, looked at Heather, and saw an unusual seriousness in her expression.

“What’s up, honey? Aren’t you coming to see us this year?”

“Grandma, haven’t you seen the weather report? It’s supposed to snow all night long. You and Grandpa should wait until tomorrow.”

“That’s why we plan on leaving this evening, to avoid the big snowfall later. If we don’t leave today, we risk being stuck here over the holidays. And if that happened . . .” She shook her head. “Well, that just won’t happen.”

“But what if something happens to you out there?” When her question was ignored, she continued, “What if you and Grandpa get stuck out in the snow and no one can reach you?”

“Oh, my, my, aren’t we tragic today?” The teakettle whistled, and Grandma filled two mugs with hot tea. “Come and sit down and have a cup of tea with me.”

Heather sat down at the table across from her grandmother. “I’m not tragic, I’m just being realistic.”

“Well, if that should happen, then I guess Grandpa and I will just pass on to another life,” the old woman said with a smile.

“How can you say that so matter-of-factly? Grandma, please,” she urged, “I don’t ever want to talk like that! What would I . . .” Her words paused in mid-air.

“For the moment, I have no plans on leaving you or this world, but,” she took a sip of her tea, “if we should die like that, it would be a dream come true.”

“A dream come true! How can you say that?”

Grandma chuckled. “Honey, if Grandpa and I are lucky enough to die in each other’s arms at the same time, it would be a blessing because we would die happily. And in any case, the ideal way to die is ready, and we would be.” She smiled.

“Well, yes, I guess so,” Heather answered, unconvinced. “But, Grandma ...”

The woman leaned forward and studied Heather’s face. After a moment, she said, “Something tells me you didn’t come here just to say hello. What little bee is stinging your heart today?”

Heather sighed heavily and picked at the nail she had chewed past the quick.

“Oh, my, my. This is serious business.”

“Grandma, how do you know ...” Heather cleared her throat and stared into her cup as if searching for a clue. “How do you really know if you’re in love?”

“That’s not such an easy question to answer—”

“I mean,” Heather interrupted, “isn’t love supposed to make you feel good and happy all the time, like nothing else in the world matters?”

“Oh, that’s what they say in the movies and in the fairy-tales—and it may be true in the end, but to find that happiness, sometimes you have to struggle, and during the struggle you have to be patient.”

Heather pouted and crossed her arms. “Patient! Yeah, he’s going away to study and I have to wait here patiently ... like an idiot.”

“Well, in the tarot cards, love is often depicted as the Fool, so in a way, you are right. He who falls in love, in some ways, loses his peace of mind. And no one likes that, believe me.”

“I hope I fall in love one day like you and Grandpa.”

“Like me and Grandpa.” Her eyes sparkled. “Of course you will, honey! Why wouldn’t love come and bless your heart as it did mine? I’m no more special than you or anyone else.”

Heather looked at her grandmother’s beatific face and couldn’t help but have her doubts. “I don’t think everyone is as blessed as you two are. In fact, I don’t know of anyone else who is happily married or in love like you and Grandpa.”

“That’s ridiculous! Misery loves company, as they say. You’re sad, so you only see sad people; you only register sad stories. But if you open your eyes and your heart, you’ll find the joy of love all around you.

“Come with me into the den. We’ll have ourselves another cup of tea in front of the fireplace and,” she glanced quickly at the clock on the wall, “I’ll tell you the story of Kora. Grandpa won’t be home until six o’clock, so we have plenty of time.”

“Kora? Who’s Kora?”

“Kora was a girl I knew a long time ago who was fortunate enough to fall in love with a very nice, young man named Ian. Theirs is a story that demonstrates the importance of faith, hope, patience, and courage, which are the pillars of love, the logs that keep the flame of love burning.”

Heather followed her grandmother into the den. The embers in the fireplace were glowing. She reached for a log and knelt down to place it on the hearth, then poked it and blew underneath it until tiny flames reemerged.

She stood up and turned around. Her grandmother was sitting down on her armchair. “Is this a real story, Grandma, or one of your story stories?”

“What do you mean one of my story stories? Every story I tell you, in some way or another, is based on a true story. What is truth anyway? Isn’t it just an interpretation of the moment? An evaluation that suits our need to believe in that truth? All stories and legends are based on fact, on someone’s real life experience. Anyway, what difference does it make? Come, sit down,” she said.

Heather sat down on the sofa and felt herself smiling inside. No problem was too large, no woe too unbearable while she was here, in this room, with her grandmother.

“So, let me see if I remember how it all got started ...”

Chapter One

It was late afternoon at the end of what had been a clear, crisp winter day. The mountains were casting a long shadow over the valley, and a crepuscular blanket was creeping over the tall conifers, turning their intense green to a somber shade. The pristine snow on the slopes had a warm golden glow from the twilight rays. A gust of cold wind from the north rolled over the highest peaks and down the mountainside, swallowing up the final puff of warm air in its path like a whale sucking up plankton in its monstrous mouth.

Dusk would soon turn into darkness.

Ian and his two best friends, Mike and Larry, had been the first skiers on the pistes, as was their routine. The latter two had removed their skis and propped them vertically in the snow, like swords in a rock, and plunked themselves down on the chaise lounges outside the mountain hut. Like contented lions in the grass, they lay supine soaking up the sun's rays. Ian, not one for lazing about in the sun, was partaking in his "daily ski ritual," as he called it. It had an uplifting—even spiritual—effect on him. After a near perfect day skiing—the off-piste conditions had been magazine material, up-to-the-knees powder with a warm sun shining overhead—he wanted a few moments to himself.

Ian stood alone on an immense snow cornice, leaning on his ski poles and gazing at the mountains before him. He had contemplated the panorama countless times before, yet the majestic mass still astounded him. He was certain that nothing would ever move him more than these quiet moments in the presence of such natural beauty. He felt like a king, as if this mountain range, the Santos Massif, belonged to him and he to it. He could name every peak and valley, col and saddle, for he had walked, skied, hiked, and climbed on or around all of them in every season of the year. Santos Ridge had been the first, and the climb had been all the more special because he had been with his dad. He was twelve years old and the two hundred and fifty meter crest had seemed monstrously high and long. The previous night, they had slept in Comet Hut and he had felt like a true explorer conquering the unknown.

The ridge soared up to the three Santos summits, peaks one, two, and three. The third was on the other side, hence it "belonged" to the Grand Valley people. The two valleys were still battling over which county had dibs on Red Ridge, whose peak sat smack dab in the middle of the two. The Marakum peak was visible to the left of Santos; you could reach it by passing over the saddle of the same name. It was a steep climb, and he remembered when he had paraglided down the col and his paraglider didn't open completely and he had almost broke a leg. He had never told his mother, or anyone for that matter, about it. When he was a child, he used to imagine that each ridge was a dinosaur's back that one day would rise to take command of the earth again.

A sparkle of purple light twinkled over the crown of pinnacles that an anonymous someone long ago had likened to needles, hence the name of his beloved town: Pointy Needles.

The late afternoon breeze tingled his cheeks. It was so quiet he could hear his own breath. He inhaled the fresh, cold air through wide-open nostrils; the coolness filled his lungs and expanded his ribcage like an accordion. He held his breath a moment, then slowly exhaled, growling in pleasure as the life flow entered and exited every pore. The fresh smell of snow was crisp and clean, and he grinned at the prickling sensation of frozen mucus in his nose.

The transformation from daylight to twilight to moonlight was quick in the wintertime, and Ian realized it was time to join his two buddies for the final descent of the day—one last run before the lifts closed, as was their habit: the first and last skiers on the slopes. The diehards.

One more moment of peace ...

The crunching sound of footsteps on the snow behind him jolted Ian out of his dreamlike state. He opened his eyes, but remained immobile, the expression on his face transforming quickly from serene to sour. He took a long, deep breath,

straightened his back, and turned around. When he found himself face-to-face with the stranger, he froze. A young woman stood before him, and although dark goggles and a thick headband hid half her face, he sensed a stunning beauty about her.

Her shoulders were rising and falling rhythmically with each heavy breath of air she took. She was wearing snowshoes and they were covered in fresh, powdery snow which meant she had walked up the mountain through the woods; this made him smile inwardly. She was a tourist—he was certain of that, for he knew every Pointy Needle resident. Roaming the mountains on one's own, especially for a tourist, was quite unusual around these parts. The majority were afraid to wander into the forests, feeling more at ease in town surrounded by throngs of people from whom they claimed to want to escape. Human nature had always intrigued him. He understood the common need to congregate in groups, to create societies, and to have structure, yet he wondered why city dwellers who strived to “get away from it all” inevitably threw themselves into the vacationing crowds, bombarded by the same noise and traffic. Nature was far from natural for many human beings. Most people would not think twice about walking across an empty parking lot in the middle of the night to get their car, but the idea of walking through the woods would scare the wits out of them.

Ian recalled a story a friend of his, a mountain guide, had told him about a man who had phoned the rescue team, frantic, begging to be rescued. He was on a hiking trail that a “huge, wild animal with horns” was now blocking, and he feared that if he ran, the animal would chase him. It turned out to be a cow. Ian had never laughed so hard in his life!

To be fair, and Ian was a fair man, he acknowledged that every person, like every animal, has his own habitat. If he were to spend time in an urban environment now, he would probably be jumping at every honk of a horn even though Ian was no stranger to city life, for he had been born in Manhattan, his mother's hometown. His father, on the other hand, was a purebred Pointy Needler, or Pointian as the locals called themselves. The two young people who were to become his parents had met one winter day on the slopes during the Christmas holidays, and it was not long before they wed. His father had been so in love, he had followed his mother to the city, but he had felt lost and unhappy there. So when his own father passed away and bequeathed him the hotel in Pointy, Ian's father jumped at the chance to return to his mountains and his people. Convincing Ian's mother was another story, for she could not imagine leaving the “real world for a tiny, insignificant dot on the map in the middle of nowhere.”

Their first year apart, his mother flew in every weekend and for the holidays. Gradually, a change came over her; leaving Pointy Needles and her husband became more and more difficult, so she began lengthening her stays until she never left. She added feminine touches to the rooms, fresh geraniums on the windowsills, curtains she embroidered herself, and she had each room painted with a different mountain theme. The individual trompe l'oeil led to baptizing each with a quaint name: the pine cone room, the mountain peak room, the fallen leaf, the sunset suite, the glacier tarn, etc.

When Ian turned five, and it was time for him to begin school, his mother's latent urbanite snobbery emerged. She could not bear the idea of him frequenting a school in the mountains where he might pick up some strange, appalling accent. Ignoring his father's disapproval and Ian's tear-filled contestations, she took him to New York where they moved in with her parents. However, by the time the winter season blew in, Ian's mother was pining for her husband, the hotel, and, much to her surprise, even the claustrophobic mountains. She returned to Pointy Needles with everything except her son, whom she left with her parents so he could finish his studies in a “proper” school. Years would pass before he forgave her for abandoning him in the city.

When he was twelve, a new school opened in Creekton, an hour and a half away from Pointy Needles, and he begged his mother to let him come back for good. That was the end of city life for Ian, but the experience had given him an advantage. He was just as at ease talking business and politics with city folks, exchanging

thoughts on music, art, and cinema with artists, and discussing books and philosophy with the intellectuals that passed through Pointy, as he was discussing the risk of an avalanche or which kind of mushroom was comestible with the locals. Ian could be social and outgoing, if he so desired; then, as if flipping a switch, he could disappear for days on end, a recluse inside his apartment with his books and his thoughts.

He was a loner, and today was one of those eremitic days—or so he had thought.

The girl took a deep breath, and he reeled back from where his mind had wandered.

How much time had elapsed?

He wanted to speak, but only vapor rose from his silly, parted lips, and he frowned as it dissolved silently into the nippy air. A bothersome cramp was taking root in his right thigh muscle from the awkward position he was standing in. His movement had halted in an indecipherable semi-action somewhere between going forward and balancing in place, as if contrasting forces were pulling his body. He slid his right ski back, parallel to the left one, and leaned forward on his poles.

She took a step closer, and through her goggles he could tell that she was staring directly at him. He opened his mouth again to speak, but it was her deep and sultry voice that broke the silence.

“It’s breathtaking, isn’t it?” she whispered.

He had never heard a voice quite like hers. It lingered in the air, soft and warm and sensual, and then floated into his ears and whirled inside him. His stomach knotted and an urge to flee swept over him and he was reminded of an episode from his youth that in another circumstance would have made him chuckle. He was only eight years old and his parents had sent him on his first camping trip with other boys and girls from the neighborhood. During one night of the adventurous journey, it began to rain, then pour, so the counselors decided to abandon their tents and take refuge in a nearby school that had kindly offered their facilities. Ian had gone to the lavatory, and when he returned, the other kids had already juxtaposed their sleeping bags. He discovered, to his dismay, that he was the last boy in the boy’s row, which meant he would be sleeping next to the first girl. It was a horrible plight for someone his age, and had he not been so embarrassed by the situation he certainly would have picked a row with the other boys who were giggling at his predicament. To make matters worse, the girl he was to sleep next to was Carolyn— blond and braided, blue-eyed Carolyn who filled him with an incomprehensible commingle of attraction, anger, and frustration. Although the thick sleeping bags amply separated them, it was impossible for him to sleep. The sweet purring of her tiny, girly breath made his heart pound furiously inside his temples. The next day, he treated her so meanly she cried and complained to the teacher. He had never felt so sorry about anything in his life. At the same time, her tears had triggered an anxious pang in his heart; the only remedy was to avoid her.

The young woman shuffled her snowshoes, and he wondered how long he had been staring in her direction like a fool.

She removed her goggles and headband and pulled her long hair out from beneath her jacket, then shook her head and fluffed her hair with a gloved hand. Ian had never seen a woman quite so beautiful in all of his life, he thought, as a rush of blood warmed his cheeks.

She turned her head and gazed at the mountains on the far side of the valley. She was admiring *his* mountains, *his* Santos Massif, and he swelled up with pride.

“It’s just breathtaking, isn’t it?” she whispered again, her voice velvety and clear like a cat’s purr.

“Yes, it is,” he answered, his eyes transfixed to her profile.

“Oh, so you do have a voice.” She smiled at him with her full sensuous lips, and he was surprised to see that she had dimples in her cheeks.

He glanced down at his ski boots that suddenly felt tight around his feet, as if they were giant claws squeezing the lifeblood out of him. He wriggled his toes and shifted his weight, observing her over the brim of his sunglasses. Her eyes were bright with a youthful sparkle, her skin was smooth and creamy, and her cheeks glowed bright red from the cold. There was a childlike innocence to her face in spite of its

womanly and feminine beauty. When she smiled, her face took on a girlish aspect that suggested tenderness to him. He also sensed an aura of sadness around her. He didn't know how he perceived this, but he knew it to be true, and no longer felt like running from her.

"Did you walk up from the valley?" he asked, louder than necessary, while drilling the tip of one of his poles into the snow and silently chastising himself for asking such a stupid question.

"Yes, I came up through the woods. I love walking in the mountains. It clears the clutter from my brain and," she added softly, "from my heart."

He flicked some snow with his pole and watched the flakes blow away in the wind, sparkling and twinkling in the pale sunlight. It was getting late, he knew.

She blew air out of an O-shaped mouth and stared at the light trail of white as it rose through the air and evaporated. Her snowshoes intermittently squeaked and hushed on the snow beneath her feet.

"Do you always go for walks in the woods alone like this?"

She grinned and her dimples deepened. His breath paused a moment, and he turned his face toward the mountains.

"I'm spending the winter up here alone because," she paused, "I lost my mother recently and I needed some time to myself."

He took off his sunglasses and for the first time looked directly at her.

"I'm so sorry. I really am."

"It's okay. I mean, it's not okay but ..." She blinked a few times, then said, "But that's how life goes." She looked back at the mountain range, gazing at it as if trying to memorize everything her eyes could take in. "She and I spent an incredible summer here when I was a kid, and I fell in love with this place. My best memories with her are here."

Ian zapped through his memory bank to see if he could connect her to anyone he knew, but he came up blank.

"That's why I came back up here. I guess it's my way of feeling close to her again and at the same time to say good-bye." She laughed lightly. "I can't believe I'm telling all of this to you. I don't even know your name."

He planted the tips of his ski poles in the snow, removed a glove, and extended his hand. "Ian."

"Hi, Ian."

He took her hand in his and warmth surged through his body. One of them was squeezing tightly, but he was not certain who.

"Kora, with a K."

"Hi Kora with a K. It's nice to meet you." A partial grin cracked his rugged, weatherworn face. His skin was tanned and sturdy, typical of those who spend a lot of time under the harsh mountain sun, and his eyes were vigorous, yet gentle. Their hands parted and their eyes locked for an instant before they simultaneously replaced their sunglasses for protection from something other than the sun, which was now waning.

Suddenly, Ian turned his head sharply and said in an excited voice, "Look! Can you see her?" His eyes were keen as he pointed to the spot where the tree line interrupted the mantle of snow.

"What is it?" She took a step closer to him and leaned her face over his extended arm that was aiming.

"There, just by the woods. It's a chamois," he whispered.

"Yes! Yes! I do see it. Oh, I wish I had a camera with me."

An instant later, the tiny, hook-horned animal sprang into the wooded darkness as quickly as a salamander slides into a crack.

The sides of Kora's mouth curled up in a grin while her gaze fixed on the spot where a moment ago the animal had stood. "My mother used to tell me that if we saw a wild animal while we were hiking, it meant that it would be a lucky day."

"Well, seeing a chamois at this time of the day is pretty unusual, so I guess that makes you one lucky lady."

"Yes, I know I am."

The buffeting wind rolled down the mountainside, and the powdery snow rose and danced in the fading amber sunlight. The sun was a small twinkle now, evanescent behind the highest peak in the distance. The twilight sky swirled in soft shades of red rust, and Venus sparkled, heralding the arrival of the moon. It may have been the cold or the poignant beauty before them, but the two strangers leaned ever so slightly nearer to each other as they stared ahead in silence.

The next chuff of wind sent a chill down Ian's spine. It was time to leave, but the thought of saying good-bye to her filled him with sorrow. It was as if he were living a perfect moment, but simultaneously missing it, reminiscing about it although it wasn't yet over. He was in the moment, but it was slipping away from him: the mountains, the silence, the twilight, this woman who had come from nowhere. What if this was all a dream? What if he turned his head or blinked too hard, and she disappeared—it all disappeared?

Two choughs flew by low, screeching and cawing, then dove into the woods. A dark shadow followed like a black cape, a harbinger of nightfall drawing near.

"I'd better run. It'll be dark soon," she said.

"Will you be all right walking back down through the woods by yourself?"

"Oh, I'll be fine. The trees will protect me. They owe me."

"They owe you?" He turned his head to face her.

"Sure. I liberate them," she said matter-of-factly.

"You liberate the trees?" he asked, amused.

"The poor things have their branches buried under the snow, and when I walk by, I hear them yell out to me, 'Help! Kora! Get us out of here! The snow is bending our backs!' So with my poles and my hands, I sweep the snow off until their branches bounce back to life and they are finally liberated from their burden."

"Well, just make sure you get out of the woods before it gets dark."

"All right, Daddy."

He shook his head and bit his lower lip. "I didn't mean it that way, but you know, the mountains can be dangerous."

"At this moment in my life, the woods are the safest place in the world to me. But you're right, it's better not to challenge Mother Nature." She took off her goggles, stuffed them inside her rucksack, then grabbed her poles and began walking away and down the slope. "Well, it was nice talking to you, Ian," she said over her shoulder.

He watched her head bobbing rhythmically as she made her way down the mountainside, and with each step she took, he felt a tugging sensation inside his body as if his heart were being pulled in her direction.

"Kora ..." he said in a slightly strangled voice.

"Yes?" her voice rose from the other side of the slope, like a siren's from the sea.

"Kora," he said louder and with more intention.

"Yes, Ian, what is it?"

Her voice sounded surreal, and the silly thought that he was hallucinating occurred to him. He skied closer to the edge and looked down at her. "You do exist."

She laughed. "Of course I do. Is that why you called me?"

"Yes. I mean no. I mean ..." He took a deep breath and frowned. "What are you doing tonight?" he blurted. And before she could answer, he added, "I'm going out with some friends for a pizza and you're welcome to come if you like." A pool of cold sweat formed in the small of his back.

She paused for a moment, long enough to fill him with regret for having been so bold.

"Thanks Ian, really, but I'm not in the mood to be around a lot of people yet. I still feel like I need time to heal."

"Yeah, okay, I understand. Anyway, I just ... well ..."

"But if you want," she said, "you can come by my apartment after your pizza, and I can offer you a cup of hot tea in front of a warm fireplace." She tilted her head to one side, and he wondered if she knew how cute she was when she did that.

"If you don't have other plans, of course," she interjected into the silence that had filled the air.

“Plans? No, I don’t have any other plans, and I’d love to see you after dinner. Do you have a number where I can call you or something?”

“No. No phones here. As I said, I needed to cut off from the rest of the world. I’m easy to find. Do you know where the Pine Ridge apartment complex is? It’s the one next to the tiny grocery store as soon as you pass the welcome sign if you drive up from the valley.”

Of course he knew the place, although he had never been there. In fact, he practically never went to that part of town, except when driving through it on his way to the Creekton. That was where the tourists’ lodges were and the denizens of Pointy Needlers never had a reason to hang out in the “tourist dorms.” Everyone he knew or frequented owned a home or apartment, either because they were natives of the area or because their ancestors had made their homes there. Tourists came and went and were often the source of harmless puns for the Pointians.

“Yeah, I know where it is. It’s that new building, the big condo. Which apartment are you in?”

“Number sixteen. I better go now. It’s getting cold. I think the trees will have to wait to be rescued from their plight another day.” She glanced up at the sky; a few stars were timidly poking their shiny noses through the purplish curtain overhead.

Ian felt his mobile phone vibrate in his chest pocket and knew it was his friends calling him. He was over an hour late; he could almost sense the anger in the ringtone, but he didn’t answer.

“Bye, Ian,” she yelled with her back turned.

“Bye Kora with a K,” he answered, raising a meek hand as he watched her bounce down the mountainside in the fresh snow. When she disappeared into the woods, he turned around and quickly skied down the closest run.

“Where the hell you been, man? We’re freezing our butts off out here! And it’s almost dark! Damn, I don’t want to end up as some wolf’s dinner!” Larry huffed and skied away without waiting for an answer.

“Yeah, Eez, where you been, man? We were ready to call the rescue team,” Mike, his best friend asked, sincerely concerned.

“Hey, I’m sorry, M, really. I lost all track of time. I’m sorry, really. I owe you guys one tonight.”

“Yeah, you owe us more than one! Come on, let’s go before it gets dark and the wolves really do come out prowling!” Mike skied down the slope after Larry.

Ian took a deep breath and gazed up at the sky that had turned cobalt blue. He felt a lightness he hadn’t felt in years and it made him want to laugh out loud.

“Isn’t that something?” he murmured to the immenseness around him. Then he took two long, skating strides and raced after his friends. He full-tucked and schussed past Mike. The cold evening air was stinging his cheeks and the adrenaline was shooting through his vein. He let out a succession of elated yelps as he headed toward the valley below.

The streetlights in Pointy Needles were already visible, and he tried not to worry about the woman he had just met who was now walking through the dark woods.

Kora was running through the darkness, cursing herself for having waited so long to go down. It was risky enough to walk through the woods alone, but to walk through them this late at night was downright stupid: one false move, one twist of the ankle, and she would be immobilized. Who would come to her rescue? She had no family or friends there— or anywhere for that matter—no phone to call a rescue team ... *girl, why didn’t you say good-bye to him sooner?* But just the thought of her recent encounter sent an unexpected wave of euphoria through her body. She picked up speed and took a detour straight down the flow line; the fresh snow gave way under her feet as she floated over it and through it. The closer she came to the valley, the clearer the reality became of having invited a perfect stranger to her house that evening. What had come over her? Breathless, she arrived at her apartment and pulled off her soggy boots. It was already 6:30 p.m. The street lamps were beaming warm, luminous circles on the snow-covered terrain below them.

Kora had always been a reflective person, with a tendency to ponder too much before reacting, but ever since her mother's passing, she found that the more active she was, the better she felt. It was as if her emotions didn't have time to catch up with her, hence tricking the sorrow into abatement. Nevertheless, whenever they did, they rushed over her like a wave, and with such force, her knees would wobble and she would have to sit down until the moment passed.

The only time her mind was carefree was when she was hiking in the mountains. She called those moments "reflective therapy" or "mountain meditation." She had entire conversations with her mother without experiencing the lacerating pain that normally shot through her at the mere thought of her mother; a sentiment caused not only by her passing but also by the memories of their unstable relationship. Kora battled her mixed emotions as much now as she had when her mother was alive. To ease the unpleasant feelings that perhaps required some analysis that she was not ready to make, she had begun reliving their times, modifying them with "slight" alterations to improve them to her liking. She substituted the tense moments with serene and happy scenes and this soon led to fabricating conversations that had never taken place. She was aware of what she was doing, at least in the beginning, but it is true that the more one lives a lie, the more real it can become. Through this process, she eventually eliminated the latent feeling of enmity that had always lingered between them like dank smoke.

She could not recall the exact moment the wall had erected between them, nor could she recall what had caused it; nevertheless, it had been tangible, real, and unpleasant. She did recall certain moments in her childhood that still squeezed her stomach with fear and left her with an overwhelming sense of loss. The interminable nights she had sat on a wooden stool by the kitchen window, waiting for her mother to return from who knows where. Those memories still made her heart race with anxiousness. The earliest regressed to when she was six years old, although her mother had begun many years before to leave young Kora alone all night long. She remembered sitting on the stool staring out of the kitchen window in the direction she knew her mother's car would come from, her legs dangling lifelessly. A dirty drizzling rain was misting in the cone of light lingering from the street lamps, now feeble with the nearing dawn. It was November: cold, gloomy, and scary outside. The lamp flashed twice, and then pattered out. Kora shifted her weight on the stool, her butt cheeks numb with sleep.

With time, she had learned how to anticipate her mother's nighttime disappearances. The ritual had always been the same. She treated Kora unusually kind during dinner, she inquired about her school projects and listened attentively to the answer, and when it was time to go to bed, she tucked Kora in with a sweet kiss on her cheek; the fresh scent of flowery perfume would hover between them for a moment. Then her mother would read her a book until she felt certain her daughter was sound asleep, which she never was.

As soon as her mother's car pulled out of the driveway, Kora would run to the kitchen window and that is where she remained, all night, until the headlights of the mother's car rolled back down their road. Then, with a different kind of fear shaking her, she would rush back into her bed, dive under her covers, and pray for the drumming in her chest to slow down before her mother walked into her room, which she always did, reeking of cigarettes, alcohol, and sweaty polyester that reminded Kora of their neighbor Mr Magdan who often stopped by for a cup of coffee—without Mrs. Magdan. A moment later, the door would close and Kora would finally fall asleep listening to the sound of her mother's nyloned legs rubbing together as she walked down the hallway to her bedroom.

Her mother's nighttime escapades carried on until Kora turned thirteen. Either her mother figured Kora was old enough to understand or she had just gotten too tired and lazy to gallivant around town at night. Then her male friends began to come to the apartment and stay for as long as they wanted to. This way of life might have continued for any indefinite amount of time had not one of her mother's male

friends—a creepy man nicknamed ‘Red’ for his auburn colored hair—began to look at Kora with disputable intent.

It never crossed Kora’s mind to criticize her because she had no other mother with whom to compare hers. In fact, she seldom expressed an unfavorable opinion about anyone, which most would consider a virtue. Her mother, however, considered it a weakness, a show of lack of character and she never missed a chance to remind Kora of her shortcomings. “The criticism is for your benefit, daughter,” she would sermon, “I have to correct the wrongs that have seeped inside you thanks to your father’s genes.” Kora did everything she could think of to please her mother for there was nothing she desired more than to eliminate the multitude of inadequacies her mother constantly pointed out to her.

Nonetheless, it was never enough to make her mother happy. When Kora accomplished something impressive, such as winning the school chess tournament or making the school volleyball team, her mother, instead of praising her, never failed to share the merit: “You got that from me.” Or, “You got that quality from my mother.” Or, “I remember my great-grandfather being good at that.” On the other hand, if Kora did not perform up to her mother’s standards, it was simply her fault for not dedicating herself enough, or the “other genes” had been responsible. “That’s from *his* side of the family,” her mother would sputter and tut reprovingly. Her father, who she had never met, took on an ogre-like image in her mind, a monster with *evil genes*. It wasn’t until she was seven years old that she discovered that genes were not something you wear. Until that age, she had refused to wear anything even resembling denim for fear that her father had placed the “evil” jeans in her closet while she slept.

Her mother could embark on endless rants against the man who had impregnated her, as if it had occurred without any doing on her part. Kora always knew when one was about to occur for there was a kind of “ceremony” that led to her mother’s bombastic spouts: she would stand in front of the full-length mirror in the hallway, swaying back in forth while admiring her thin silhouette, then she would sigh a long and loud sigh. That was the blow of the starting whistle. However, the ex-husband battering was only a warm-up to her sentencing. Kora was always her next target, her criticisms cutting, her words cruel. Only when she was on the verge of tears would her mother change her tone of voice and grant a ceremonious pat on the head, “Well, at least he gave you your height although I’m sorry you got that rearend. All from his side of the family. You should have seen his mother and sister! Mamma thunder thighs and sister hippo hips!” She’d laugh then concede with a smug grin, saying, “But you came out all right, I guess. At least I did the best I could.”

There had been some good times in their lives when her mother had seemed happy and Kora cherished them like precious stones. When she was still a young child, she loved hanging out after elementary school and on weekends at the beauty salon where her mother worked as a hairdresser—a temporary job that lasted twenty-five years. She told everyone that she was planning on going to university to study psychology, which she was certain she had a natural knack for. In fact, and to the annoyance of many, she gave her advice about anything even when it wasn’t asked of her. Whilst cutting and trimming she would question her clients about their lives as confidently as if she were their analyst and they were lying in a chaise-long and not in a squeaky plastic high-back chair in a small town beauty parlor. She gloated over the women who poured out their tales of angst and abandonment all too happy to find a lending ear. Her mother had all the answers, how to deal with men—her favorite subject of chastisement, how to run a household, how to chose the right purse with the right shoe, and how to lose ten pounds in ten days. She knew how to raise a child, how to get a man to fix your car, how to tell a man to “get lost,” and how to get over a broken heart. There was nothing her mother did not have an opinion about and there was no circumstance in which she would not express it. How she thrived on divulging her opinionated thoughts to the trail of women that came and went to and from the salon! At the time, Kora was convinced that her mother was the most beautiful and the most intelligent woman on earth.

Every mother is the best mother through the eyes of a young child.

Then, Kora grew up and became a strong, beautiful young lady; a teenager with a mind of her own, with viewpoints, opinions, and questions. She found other mentors: teachers, journalists, and artists. She began to understand that her view of the world was very different from her mother's. Kora was open to change. She protested publicly against the wars and believed in equal rights regardless of sexual preference, color, race, or religion. Her mother began to fear this stranger her daughter had become so her criticisms intensified, her words cutting, anything to make her daughter cower into a corner where she could control her. And when that didn't work, there was always one technique that never failed: the silent treatment.

Her mother was a champion sulker and could go without talking for weeks on end until the weight of her silence became so unbearable Kora would plead for forgiveness for a sin she could not remember having committed.

Asking questions was off limits in their household. Her mother set down rules that were to be followed and her opinion was the only opinion of value. Kora was to listen and obey, not question or doubt for as long as she remained under the same roof and the older her mother got, the more rigid she became, measuring everyone and everything with her own yardstick, and her daughter was certainly no exception. She never gave up trying to program Kora into the woman she believed she should be, someone similar to herself. Kora resisted and fought in silence to keep her sense of self, dreaming of the day she would find her own way.

The opportunity arrived when the time came to choose a university. The only ones she considered were on the other side of the country. Kora was sad to leave her mother however she knew that it was the only way she could find herself.

Those years away from home, surrounded by university companions and inspiring professors, were some of the warmest and happiest in her life. In her new life, there was no one from whom she needed to protect herself so she relaxed her guard and a kind and gentle Kora emerged. She remained reserved and somewhat introverted, dedicating most of her time to her studies however, she felt a lightness inside her heart that she never had imagined possible. Life was shining down on her and she felt a new beginning just around the corner. Even the occasional visit back home became bearable for she managed the fear she had had of her mother, psychologically preparing herself for every visit so that when her mother began her sarcasm, the words slid off her like water off a duck's back. The once ugly and insecure duckling was turning into a strong and beautiful swan.

One Christmas vacation, her mother shocked her by complimenting on her appearance and she instantly allowed her protective barrier to crash down at her feet. Did it matter that before each visit home, Kora bought new clothes she was sure her mother would approve of? Clothes only worn for that specific occasion? Her "going home to mother's" collection? They were spending mother-daughter time together, they no longer argued, and even if they did, it didn't matter. She no longer lived there.

At the end of her studies as a journalist, she received an offer to work for an important newspaper in Chicago—a city little more than an hour away from her hometown! She had laughed at the irony of it. Never in her wildest dreams would she have imagined living so close to her mother again, but the offer had been too exciting, the money too good to refuse, and deep down in her heart she had felt a twinge of joy at the idea of finally creating a relationship with her mother. The distance had made Kora mistakenly believe that her mother accepted and understood her now. And she would be living an hour's drive away, so they would be close, but not too close.

Although a tiny voice in her head begged her to change her mind, the yearning in her heart to bridge the gap was far too strong.

The job in Chicago did not turn out to be the answer to her prayers and living in such a big city overwhelmed her. She couldn't adjust to the hustle and bustle, the monstrously high buildings that loomed over her, and the incessant deafening noise that made her dizzy. The hordes of people that buzzed past her on the streets like flies made her feel insignificant. And being closer to her mother only served to reopen the unhealed wounds that her mother did not hesitate to dig into. Her first weekend in Chicago, her mother had invited her over for the weekend and Kora had accepted gladly. But when she was getting back in her car to drive home, her mother asked her

what time she would be arriving the following Friday. Kora felt her heart race as she stuttered the first excuse she could come up with to avoid landing in a web she sensed her mother spinning. Her mother did not insist. She calmly stated that she would make the sacrifice and drive into Chicago so Kora “would not get lonely.” Every weekend that followed was the same: if she did not make the trip to visit her mother at least for a couple hours, her mother would land on her doorstep, unannounced, with plans for the both of them. And if Kora did not call every day, the following morning her mother would, at dawn, “Whaddya do, break a finger or something?” she would bellow into the receiver.

When she could take no more of Chicago and her mother’s smothering, she requested a transfer to a sister company on the West Coast. But destiny would not allow Kora to spread her wings. Something occurred in their lives that, to this day, Kora believes came about by the force of her mother’s will. She was diagnosed with cancer of the uterus. She phoned Kora begging to spend the final months—that turned into years—of her life with her, a request Kora could not deny.

The doctors had no alternative but to remove her mother’s uterus and that marked the beginning of the end for both of them. “What is a woman without a uterus?” she would cry. The very essence of her womanhood had been dug out and tossed away like expired meat, she claimed, and often suspired she saw no reason to live anymore.

But live she did and contrary to what Dr. Harris, the family doctor, had informed her when explaining the gravity of her mother’s illness, giving her no more than one year of life, she remained on earth and in Kora’s small apartment for six years. Kora had wholeheartedly agreed to take her mother in for she truly desired to assist her to the end. She psyched herself up to handle the situation, as she always had in the past. However, nothing could have prepared her for what was in store.

Long before the sickness manifested itself, her mother broke off all contact with the outside world. She never left the house, never changed out of her pajamas, let her grey hair grow out and her nails chip and break. The only part of her that did not quietly give up the ghost was her temper and the outbursts of fury were as unpredictable as they were lengthy. When she wasn’t furious at the television, the weather, the sofa or Kora—still the favorite target of her vitriol—she once threatened that she would take Kora down to the grave with her if it were the last thing she did; death became her and she wore its shroud with false stoicism. There were times when Kora returned home from work and, with key in hand, she would pause in front of the door to listen (and pray) for the silence that indicated her mother was fast asleep. Then she would take a deep breath, and ready to face the foe, she would open the door. “Hi, Mom! I’m back! How was your day?” she would call out cheerfully over the loud volume of the TV. Kora would often find her dozed off in front the TV, remote control in hand, small and feeble—sweet even—like a defenseless child. But as soon as she awoke, the fuselage of lamentations would recommence, slapping Kora back into reality.

Death enters a home without knocking, and it is not always as sudden as one would imagine. It is not the one last exhale and then, lights out. Long before the body takes its leave, the ghosts take permanent residence in the home, seeping through the walls and clinging like toxic black mold whose invisible fumes find easy passage into the lungs. So it was for Kora’s mother; as the angry cancer consumed every healthy, decent cell, it left behind only what brought out the worst in her. One day, Kora came home to find her mother sitting in the dark, a large knife in her hand.

“Mom, what are you doing? Are you alright?”

“Come near me and I’ll kill you.”

“Mom, come on give me the knife. You could hurt yourself.” Kora took two quick steps closer, grabbed her mother’s skinny wrist and easily freed her hand of the weapon. Nonetheless, it was not so easy to free herself of the words her mother had hurled at her during the struggle “I hate you,” she had said through clenched teeth. “It’s your fault that I’m in this condition. All those years taking care of you. I hate you!”

When she took the drugs that fogged her mind, she let her guard down and became tender, almost loving, toward her daughter. She expressed emotions so pure they would bring tears to Kora's eyes, and she would once again fall captive to the fairytale image she had of her mother, convincing that her mother had never intended to cause her so much pain. She even blamed herself for being so oversensitive and judgmental until one evening, when her mother, trapped in a delirious drug-inflicted oblivion, more here than there, had begged for Kora's forgiveness for all the times she had treated her unjustly, severely, and unremittingly. The confession had shocked her.

So she had been aware of her harshness?

When Kora's mother had breathed her last breath, the grooves of her perennial frown miraculously smoothed out, like water dissolving the ripples from sand. She left this world with a contented and peaceful expression on her face, but her confession had left a deep scar in Kora's heart. How could a mother knowingly treat her daughter so coldly?

She would never have a chance to ask her, and this led to a deep-rooted rancor that would surge unexpectedly to nag her in her loneliest times, and then transform into never-ending guilt. They had had a lifetime together, and yet Kora felt as if she had known her about as well as she knew the landlady of her apartment building.

But, why did she miss her so much?

While the steaming hot water filled the bathtub, Kora peeled off her damp clothes then sat down on the bed and closed her eyes. The wind was blowing just loud enough for her to hear its whistle as it swept up and down the wintry streets. Her mind drifted back to the afternoon's events and, without realizing it, she began to rock gently back and forth, as if cradling herself. She softly massaged her firm thighs, the skin still cold from the stingy mountain air, and Ian's face appeared before her. She felt his proximity and the warmth that had flowed between their bodies. As she wondered if he had noticed it too, she smiled for the first time in months.

She opened her eyes and cast them around the room, imagining seeing it through his eyes. How could she have never noticed how boring this apartment was? She had rented it furnished, and the furnishings hadn't been important, until now. Why bother to make it homier when it wasn't her home and she had never expected ... what? She grabbed a pillow, and hugging it, she fell back on the bed.

Kora let her eyelids hang heavily; she sighed and felt the tenseness ease out of her muscles. The bath water gurgled as it poured into the tub, and the crackling and popping from the wood burning in the fireplace soothed her like a gentle mantra. The afternoon's unexpected turn of events flowed back into her mind, and she relived each moment, chiseling each frame and every word into her heart.

When she had first spotted him standing there atop the cornice of snow that had become her favorite viewpoint, it had perturbed her—as if she had discovered someone leaning on her car. Kora meticulously calculated her arrival for when she was certain the skiers were already descending their final run of the day; today had been no different.

Who was this man and how dare he be there, in her place?

As if he had perceived being observed, he had turned and faced her direction, causing her to duck like a guilty voyeur. After a long moment, she raised her head to look at him and was relieved that he had not seen her. She remained immobile, impatiently waiting for him to leave. At the same time, she couldn't help but observe him—and a part of her did not want him to leave. The way he stood, so still and proud, and the intense, admiring way he gazed at his surroundings fascinated her. He belonged there. He seemed to be an integral and natural part of the environment. He observed the panorama not with the awe of a tourist, but with pride, as if the totality of what he beheld were a part of him; each towering peak, the swirling valleys below, the swaying branches of the trees, and even the snow that lay before and beneath him were his. He reminded her of a mighty ibex overlooking its territory. Unexpectedly,

she had begun to feel flustered, as if she were the intruder; she had looked for an inconspicuous escape route back into the woods. But why hadn't she inched away when she could have easily done so without being noticed? One tiny step backwards and she could have become part of the scenery, yet she hadn't budged; and reflecting on that unconscious decision, she had to admit that she had felt an attraction to the lone ibex man. He had aroused her curiosity, and instead of retreating with a disappointed huff, she had remained to watch him.

Then, she had stealthily trekked around the backside of the hill until she had been standing behind him. He was taller than he had seemed from below. Just as she was about to speak to him, he had straightened his back, vertebrae by vertebrae, and then had lifted his head high before turning around; a gradual motion like that of a majestic elk she had seen long ago with her mother in these very woods. The animal had turned its enormous head of ramified antlers to face them and, to their amusement, he had crinkled his nose in disgust before uttering an angry bark and galloping away from "the stinky humans." She would have giggled at the memory had the mysterious skier not turned around to face her.

How long they had stood staring at each other before she had spoken, she couldn't recall. It could have been minutes or just a few seconds, but she remembered distinctly hearing the beat of her heart inside her eardrums, which, at the time, she had blamed on the fatigue of the uphill trek. He had grinned a crooked, boyish grin, and the blood rushed to her head then plummeted down to her stomach as if it hadn't a clue as to where it was supposed to go.

A quiet breeze had blown down from the mountaintops and the powdery snow had risen and danced circles in the soft blue light around them.

Kora opened her eyes and sat up on the bed.

"Oh my God, the bath water!"

After a long, blissful bath, she ate a quick dinner, and then sat on the sofa with a book in front of the burning logs in the open-hearth fireplace. This had been her routine every day for the past month: sleep late, go for a hike, take a bath, dine early, drink a glass or two of wine (depending on how much assistance she required to become drowsy), read until she dozed off, and then to bed.

However, tonight was different. Very different.

She glanced up at the clock. 8 o'clock. Only 8 o'clock. *What will I do until he gets here?* She chastised herself for not renting an apartment with a television.

Maybe I should have accepted his invitation to dinner. Maybe I'll read my book. Who can read a book with all of this excitement? Maybe I'll go for a walk. Yeah, with a flashlight. Maybe I'll just sit here and go completely out of my mind. Kora got up, went to the bathroom, and looked at herself in the mirror.

"Maybe I should put on some makeup," she said to her reflection.

"But you never wear makeup," her reflection answered. "Then again, you've never asked a man you just met over to your apartment in the middle of the night."

She squinted and scrutinized her face.

"I think I've gone mad," she said softly, relaxing her expression. "Mother, where are you when I need you?"

"She was never there when you needed her."

"That's not fair."

"Well, tell me one time she was there for you."

"All right. Be nice now. She's dead."

"She's dead, she's dead, ding dong, the witch is dead, the wicked witch is dead," she sing-songed.

"Behave yourself, Dorothy, or you'll never go home."

A pause and a heavy quiet sigh. "I don't want to go home."

She made a goofy face, flicked off the light, and went back into the living room.

"What to do? What to do? Ho hum ho hum Tra la la tra la lee."

She looked at the clock again—8:15.

“Well, time certainly flies when you’ve having fun, now doesn’t it? So Koraleen, now what’s the plan? You’re always full of great ideas, girl. Come on ...”

She felt the frustration growing in her. Here she was again waiting on someone, *for* someone, an exterior force to create a reaction in her, an outside power to un-spell her from emotional inertia. Waiting and hoping and wondering and doubting. Waiting is time’s sadistic pawn. Why do people glorify these aspects of relationships? Kora found the waiting and the wondering unbearable. Masochistic pleasure: an oxymoron! It reminded her of the times she had longed for her mother to show her some affection, like a dog waiting to be tossed a crumb. And then she had waited for her to die.

Over the past month, time had been an ally in the healing process, day by day, easing the sorrow, shining a glimmer of light into her darkness. But tonight, once again she felt its oppressing weight, like a boulder on her back.

Don’t be silly, Kora. Always exaggerating. Always making a mountain out of a molehill.

Yet, she couldn’t deny the disturbing yearning she had to see him again. Waiting for his arrival, worrying he might not show, angry that she had no more control over her heart than over her eyelids blinking.

Time was dragging its lazy feet, again.

While her body fidgeted, her mind fretted, excogitating the worst-case scenarios for the evening’s outcome: he would have an emergency and not be able to come; or he would get a call from work and have to leave town; or perhaps he would fall on the ice and hurt his head; or, God forbid, the worst of the worst, he would just plain forget about her. Why hadn’t she put a telephone in the apartment? Then she would be waiting for his call. She had chosen to live without a telephone so she would not be constantly reminded of the phone calls that never came.

Kora had not had a social life almost since her mother had fallen ill, and since the illness had coincided with her arrival in Chicago she had not had sufficient time to make any friends there. Initially, some of her new colleagues had invited her out, but when she explained her mother’s condition, the invitations ceased and her colleagues limited themselves to inquiring into her mother’s health. Some ex-fellow alumni had generously passed on numbers of friends and acquaintances for her to call, but Kora’s life could not be untangled from her dying mother’s web. Eventually, the phone calls dwindled, the new acquaintances stopped coming around, and she was alone. She could not blame them. No one wants to be around death. What if it rubs off or brings bad luck?

What really distanced people from her was her apparent aloofness. Kora never seemed to need anyone or anything and need is at the base of all relationships. Everyone concluded that she had someone special in her life or many someone specials close to her. She was young, pretty, and her face was kind. No one could have imagined how alone and lonely she truly was.

Why hadn’t she asked Ian what time he would arrive? Didn’t she have a right to know? Who did he think he was, coming over whenever he chose to? We women, also waiting for them to arrive like manna from heaven. Why hadn’t she told him she would go to bed if he didn’t arrive before such and such a time? At least there would be an end to the wait, and she would know when to stop expecting him. Time would have a form and cease running amuck.

If only Penelope had taken a lover instead of weaving a cloth, we women would not be stuck in this time loom.

She plopped down glumly on the sofa.

Oh, please, God, make him arrive soon before I start thinking really stupid things.

“I have to keep busy. Keep busy. And stop thinking.”

From her semi-supine position, her eyes examined the apartment. Her surroundings were dismal. No wonder the melancholy never left her side; it lived there.

“I’ll clean the house.”

She jumped up from the sofa and went into the kitchen to grab the cardboard box she had folded and stowed away under the sink. She returned to the living room and began tossing every undesirable knickknack of someone else's haphazard existence into it, pausing once to grimace at a ceramic moose with a "made in China" tag still stuck to its bottom.

"How could I have not noticed this junk all around me? I can't believe I've been living here for a month surrounded by such garbage. No wonder I have nightmares!"

With the elation one feels whilst packing up one's belongings at the end of an unhappy relationship, and with the sound of sweet freedom and the promise of a new and happier life beckoning outside the door, Kora swept through the apartment eliminating the junk she had never before noticed or given importance to. She dumped the dusty plastic flowers and their faux porcelain vase that adorned the table on which she had never eaten into the box. She collected the kitsch mountain animal souvenirs that sat sadly atop the pinewood shelves on the wall—plasticine sheep, goats, and marmots with chipping paint—and an old, warped print of a bear with her cubs. She deposed of them all. She removed the five-year-old calendar, the set of hand-carved wooden spoons someone had hung on the kitchen wall, for God knows what reason, and dumped them along with the colorful beer mugs that displayed improbable sceneries. She taped the box shut and pushed it into the closet, clapping her hands free of the dust.

After ridding the rooms of every poor excuse for decoration she had found, which was pretty much everything in sight, she proceeded to clean ... and clean and clean. Two hours later, Kora stood with her arms akimbo, smiling satisfactorily.

"Now that's more like it. It's minimal, but as they say, 'Less is more.'"

She peeled off the rubber gloves and headed to the bathroom to wash up, but on the way, her eyes fell upon the wall lamp.

"Oh yuck. What to do about that ..." she said, approaching it as if it were a bug on the wall. A dirty bulb beamed a yellow light from underneath a carpet-like shade impressed on browning plastic. A burnt mark the size of the bulb had tattooed its territory on the fixture. *I could cover it with a towel to hide it and soften the lighting*, she thought, sheepishly smiling as the memory of the one and only time she had resorted to a similar solution came to mind. During her second year of college, she had joined a yoga meditation group in her dorm. One evening, the group had invited a mystery man; the wind had blown him onto the university grounds out of nowhere to come and speak to the small congregation about the ancient practice. He went by the name of Kiran, and after the lesson, for which each pupil was kindly requested to make a donation, Kora had eagerly returned to her room to experiment the intriguing things she had just learned. The lighting in her cubicle-sized room had been far from esoteric, so the first step had been to create "the perfect spiritual environment," as guru Kiran had explained. She had placed an orange colored scarf over the bright lamp normally used for study purposes, and then she had sat down on the floor, her legs crossed, her eyes closed, the back of each hand on bended knee, her thumbs and forefingers connecting to form a perfect O. Just as she thought she was "feeling the third eye heat," as Kiran had so sagely prophesied, the lamp blew up into flames, triggering the fire alarm system. That had been her first and last experience with the esoteric world. As she found out sometime after, Kiran, whose real name was Mario and who was the son of the local priest, was later charged with drug possession and fraud.

"Covering the lamp with a towel is not a good idea! Very, very tacky, Kora."

She switched off the light and frowned at the darkness that fell into the room. She had to find a remedy to the bleakness. She remembered seeing two large supermarket paraffin candles that the previous renter had left behind in one of the kitchen drawers. They were nothing much to look at, but it was either the candles or the brown carpet lamp, so she found the candles and lit them. To her dismay, the atmosphere became overtly intimate, and the warm crackling wood in the fireplace only increased the coziness that, together, suggested a desire for something she certainly did not want to suggest. Kora went from lamp to lamp, and like a busy bee

she turned one on, then one off, then two on, then two off. She attempted every possible illumination to find the most natural, but the more she experimented, the more contrived everything appeared. The hall light cast a sinister white shaft into the room—the perfect setting for a murderer lurking with axe in hand, she mused. She tried the light outside on the balcony, but it only looked like she had forgotten to turn it off. Her reading light was strong enough just for that: reading. As a last attempt, she switched on the kitchen light and examined its effect. It was a tad bright, but friendly, and overall, it made sense to have the kitchen light on; she had to go in there to open and serve the wine or to make some tea. However, to keep a good balance with the warm glow from the fireplace and the bright light of the kitchen, she kept the candles lit.

She cast her eyes around the apartment and smiled, satisfied. Everything was in order. It had taken an entire evening to make her house and her life appear normal. The cleaning—she understood why some called it therapeutic—had sufficed to stop her heart from beating in delirious anticipation, but now she was exhausted. She took a quick cold shower, poured herself a glass of wine, and then she sat down on the sofa with her book again. Soon, the words captured her attention. So when the doorbell rang, she startled, almost spilling the wine into her lap.

“That was a close one! Could you imagine answering the door with wine stains on your pants! You need to stop talking to yourself. What if he hears you?”

She glanced at the clock—10:45. He had come earlier than she had expected. *Good sign? Bad sign? Who knows? Maybe he has to leave to meet up with his friends again later. You think too much. Answer the door or he'll leave now.*

She paused to check her appearance in the mirror. She took a deep breath, stretched her neck from side to side, shaking the nervousness out of her hands and feet like a boxer about to enter the ring, took one last glance around the room, and then turned the knob and opened the door.