



covered it with her hand, and exclaimed, "I forgot the coffee and cookies!" And then she was gone. The door between the dining room and what Jimmy assumed to be the kitchen swung restlessly on its hinges.

George smiled and laughed. "My wife."

Jimmy nodded. His wife.

"Ever been married, Jimmy?"

"Yes, but I wasn't as fortunate as you. My wife and I were divorced after four years and two little girls. I've got some good memories, some bad ones, and, above all, steep alimony and child support payments to remind me of that time in my life. Seems ages ago." Jimmy laughed, expecting George to join him. But George looked away. The old man cleared his throat once, then twice, and when he finally looked at Jimmy again, his eyes seemed a bit grayer, and a little wet.

"Alice and I, we . . . uh . . . we never had any children. Just . . . just never did, that's all." George looked away again. Jimmy started to feel sorry for him, but quickly channeled his emotion toward anger at himself for the silly way in which he had allowed intimacy, and the subsequent awkwardness, to enter the conversation.

George looked into the other room and Jimmy followed his gaze. Mrs. Springer had entered the room again, this time carrying a silver tray with a coffee pot and cups and cookies. She came directly, purposefully towards them. She did not bother to glance at either Jimmy or her husband. Her eyes focused upon her destination, the mahogany coffee table which separated Jimmy and George. She hurried to it, bent over, noisily plopped the tray of refreshments upon it, and jerked herself into an upright position again.

"Please, Mr. Cooney, help yourself." Her smile illuminated her entire face. She then turned to her husband, told him to move over, and sat beside him on the couch. She is, thought Jimmy, remarkable.

"Thank you, Mrs. Springer."

Mrs. Springer giggled and nudged George in the side with her elbow. "Did you hear that, hon'?" She laughed louder and stared into Jimmy's eyes. "I'm Alice. That's what everyone calls me, and that's what you'll call me."

Jimmy smiled. "But then you'll . . ."

"Yes, yes, you're quite right. We can't have a double standard. I'll call you Jimmy." Alice relaxed her body and let the couch's cushions swallow her. "You know, Jimmy, George has been looking forward to meeting you for some time now. Ever since he stopped going to church several months ago, he seems obsessed with the idea of building a shelter. Strange bird, my George."

George reddened and jumped to his defense. "Churches just aren't what they should be. Takes a person a while to see that. It seems so nice when you start out —

hell, it seems nice for a long time — meeting on Sundays and sometimes on weeknights and all wanting to live the way a person should live." George shook his head and reached for Alice's hand, which she readily gave to him. He wrapped his fingers around hers. "But people don't really care that much about living the right way. And I'm not talking about Bibles and commandments when I say living the right way. I'm talking about being good to each other, being kind to people. I'm talking about good will, forgiveness." George tensed the muscles in his face and bowed his head.

Alice Springer patted him on the back of his neck. "Four months ago the most beloved minister our church has ever had was asked to leave. He'd been counseling a woman in the church whose husband had abused her and her children. This woman had taken her children and left her husband and was quite at odds with the world and the way the future looked. She was very miserable. So our minister spent a great deal of time counseling her and her family. Then the church found out that during their relationship the two had fallen in love and begun to have . . . well, I hate to call it this . . . an affair. Anyway, they refused to keep the minister on."

George looked up again. "That's right. These supposedly Christian people — and there's not one of them who hasn't done worse things or committed his share of sins — couldn't find it in their hearts to understand what happened or forgive the man who had done so much for all of them. Damn hypocrites, all of them." George's eyes had become very dark, very wet.

Still, he continued. "I drive by our church now and I tell you, the steeples don't seem as high as before. The stone doesn't shine like it once did. Was a time I saw that place as a castle. Now it just looks old, that's all. Old and ready to crumble."

Alice once again polished off what her husband had said. "I tell George that leaving the church was the right thing to do. You know, when you've lived as long as we have, you begin to wonder. You've seen so many things happen that are so horrible or so miserable that you begin to wonder if there really is a God or something or someone like him. Look at George and myself. We were never lucky enough to have a family of our own. God knows we wanted one, but . . . conditions . . . pre-

vented it. We thought that maybe there was family to be found in the church but we've seen that that's not the way it is."

George managed a lifeless nod. "I think, Jimmy, that it goes like this: You've got the people you love and who love you — aren't always a lot of them — and then you've got your home and anything that makes you comfortable, makes you feel good. You've also got anything that gives you a name. And that's about it. When that goes, or when you go, it's over. As if it meant anything at all."

I understand them, Jimmy thought. I understand their sense of injustice at the hands of fate. Their desire for some continuing form of happiness, their seemingly pitiful method of reaching for it. What do they want? To be together. To outwit the forces of fate which have robbed them of family, of religion, but would not rob them of each other before it was time.

And what do I want? Meaning? Purpose? Dammit, I'm no fool. I've seen George Springers. I've seen too many of them. I want luxury, I want comfort, I want leisure. I want to have enough around me to be able to ignore the rest of it — the meeeeaning, the purrrrpose . . . the intangible bullshit. I want a pleasant stay. For as long as it lasts.

Jimmy poured himself a cup of coffee and drank it black. After a few invigorating sips, he opened the folder in his lap. He loosened his necktie.

"I think," Jimmy began, attempting to manufacture an even, deep tone in his speech, "That you've done the right thing to look into shelters. It's the best way to take matters completely into your own hands. You read the papers; I don't need to tell you that you can hardly trust anyone but yourself these days. There are a whole lot of rash fools in the kinds of positions in this world which

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