

## Chapter One

All Heather wanted was a nice house. Well, a nice house and a nice lot. A few bushes out front would be nice too. And of course good schools. That was important.

There were a few other things that were important as well. The house had to be new, of course. At least five thousand square feet. It had to have a Great Room. That went without saying. It had to have a two-car garage, minimum. Three would be nice, but she wasn't greedy. And it really had to back up to some scenery, woods or something. Who wanted to pay more than half a million dollars for a house and have to look out at their neighbor's swing set?

None of the other things on Heather's checklist were absolute deal breakers. A basement gym, a master bath with radiant heat, Jacuzzi and his-and-her toilets, a marble powder room, a kitchen shiny with stainless steel, a media room with built-in plasma screen and real movie theater seats, and a vaulted ceiling in the master bedroom – she wanted these things, sure. Actually, it wasn't just a matter that she wanted them. It was a matter of dollars and cents. Whatever house she bought, she would – eventually – have to sell. So if only for the sake of re-sale value, Heather needed these things. Well most of them. She could make do without a media room if she absolutely had to. After all, the pioneers hadn't had plasma TV, and they'd survived.

And certainly growing up in that pathetic little cape in Nutley, NJ, sharing an attic bedroom with her sister, Heather had managed without any of life's luxuries. A radiator that produced more noise than heat, and a bathroom that wasn't even on the same floor as her bedroom. She'd endured that. It had, as her mother was always saying, "built

character.” And then there were all those years that she and Kevin had been squeezed into their two-bedroom condo in Woodbridge, with the overwhelming smell of curry seeping in from the Patels’ apartment across the hall and the pitter-patter of the not-so-little feet of all six Cosentini children thumping about upstairs.

No, Heather could compromise a little on the new house. They could always add movie seats later.

She and Kevin had fallen in love with this part of Burlington County and they’d been looking every weekend for months. The area was perfect. Country but not too country. Barns, horses, things like that – but there was also a new mall anchored by a Bloomingdale’s and a Saks, and its parking lot was filled with Jaguars and BMWs, so you could tell that successful people lived there. It was a great area, despite the little cracks her mother sometimes made about moving to the sticks. What did her mother know? This was where Heather deserved to live and the kind of people she deserved to live with: men like Kevin who were doing quite well in the world, and women like herself with good enough taste to spend that income.

Most important, though, was that living out here would give Connor a leg up in the world. That was the prize she had to keep her eye on: a successful future for their one and only son, who would be starting third grade in just a month. All she asked was a fair advantage.

So far, though, she and Kevin hadn’t found exactly the right house. And Heather liked things exactly right. She prided herself on being an informed shopper, in checking out every possible choice. If you weren’t careful, if you didn’t do all the research, you could (her stomach clenched at the very thought) make a mistake. But it was August, and

if they didn't move pronto Connor would have to change schools in the middle of the year. And, well, Connor wasn't exactly good with transitions. She had to think of Connor, didn't she? That was the whole point.

Today they were checking out Galapagos Estates. Maryanne, the sales manager, had told Heather there were a few houses left, pre-built, on spec. One even had a view of a pond – and they might snatch it up if they were quick. Well, Heather thought, who was quicker than she was? So why was Kevin slowing down?

Their Land Rover stopped in a gravel lot in front of an old general store. It was a small plain white building with lots of signs. An old metal Coca-Cola sign that looked like it was from the 1940's, a big plastic sign for Vineland Farms ice cream, and smaller signs advertising sandwiches, beer and wine, coffee, copies 10 cents. In front was a large ice chest and next to that a bench, which was occupied by a man in a feed cap who looked like he'd just stepped down from a tractor.

Fairly pathetic as a retail establishment, Heather thought, but not without a certain rustic charm. Maybe they had some apple butter, or jam, something else country-ish she could bring back to Kevin's parents, who were babysitting Connor. She prided herself on the thoughtful little gesture.

"Let me see the map," Kevin said.

"I told you, it's just down there. Maryanne gave me explicit directions."

He ignored her, grabbing the map off Heather's lap. She sighed, loudly. Just to let him know. Men. There was no use arguing.

Heather pulled down the visor and puckered her lips, the way she always did when she looked in a mirror. She undid the elastic fastening her hair, shook it out and

redid her ponytail. She looked exactly the same as she had before. Heather assessed herself critically and – except for the fact that her nose formed a little red triangle, something that happened no matter how conscientious she was about sunscreen – she was not displeased. She was going on 35, but could, depending on the light, still pass for a high school cheerleader. A good hair colorist: that was her secret. And discipline. You couldn't slack off. If you slacked off, you could gain weight. If you stopped wearing make-up, you'd become plain. They were everywhere, the fat, plain women; behind her in the supermarket, in restroom lines at the movie theater. Powerless, pathetic women whose husbands left them. She checked the mirror often, but it wasn't vanity. It was more like a self breast exam.

“I'm going to get a Diet Coke,” she announced.

The general store was a disappointment. No apple butter or jam, although there was Diet Coke. It was just a 7-11 with sawdust on the floor, Heather decided. On her way out, she noticed the farmer sitting on the bench. He was wearing a hunting cap and a plaid, short-sleeved shirt – probably synthetic – and he was chomping away on something that made his cheek bulge out in a funny way. The man reminded her of a cow, sitting in a field chewing its cud.

“Excuse me,” Heather said, with the perky voice she used whenever she needed faster service from store clerks and the people who checked your tickets at the airport. Like her mother said, you got more flies with honey than you did with vinegar.

The farmer was as motionless as a cigar store Indian.

“Excuse me,” Heather repeated. “My husband and I are looking for Galapagos Estates. I told him it was right down there but he doesn't believe me.”

The man continued to look straight ahead, as if Heather hadn't just asked him a question. As if, she thought, she didn't even exist. Strange. Well, maybe he was deaf. She'd had a bad bout of tinnitus back when she was in college, after going to a particularly loud Pearl Jam concert, and couldn't hear anything but a hum in her ears for weeks afterwards. She still had trouble hearing sometimes. Maybe this guy, this farmer, had that too. She would give him the benefit of the doubt.

Heather was about to turn away when the man slowly leaned over and – still without looking at her – spat out a wad of chewing tobacco. It splashed onto the gravel, only a few inches from Heather's sneakers.

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The farmer on the bench was Harlan White.

He had seen the little blond get out of the big SUV and walk into the store. He hadn't noticed her here before, but that didn't mean anything. Clearly, she was one of the new people. City slickers with their noses in the air. They liked the way the country looked, but God forbid they should smell manure. People like her were ruining everything with their great big ugly houses, and all those new strip malls with tanning salons and sushi places. The thought of eating raw fish made him want to puke.

Harlan had been warming this bench for half a century. In the old days, there'd been plenty like him, men who'd grown up here, who'd carved their initials into trees as boys, hunted deer, fished trout. Back then, men had time to sit and shoot the breeze. But most of the old farmers had died, and the rest had sold out. And the tradesmen – carpenters, plumbers, roofers and the like – well, with all the building going on these

days, they didn't have time to eat, let alone sit around. Harlan saw them scarfing down sandwiches in their vans, talking on their cell phones at the same time.

Cell phones, Harlan thought with disgust. Plumbers going around like they were the President of the United States waiting on a call from Russia. That was the problem with people these days. They took themselves too goddamn serious.

Harlan was one of the few men left in Hebron Township with property big enough to run a horse on. Not that he had a horse. He had hens. He was an egg man, just like his daddy had been; only a couple of years ago, Harlan had gone organic. That's what the people in the fancy houses wanted: "organic," "natural," "free-range." Fine. It was like stealing. He could get \$3.50 a dozen.

He also hired out as a handy man, doing odd jobs for people in the big new houses. Hell, any man with a ladder and a hammer could make a fortune off those suckers. For all their fancy four-wheel drives, not one of them could dig themselves out of a little snowy driveway. They were as helpless as newborn kittens.

Take the man over there in that SUV, the one the tarty little blond had hopped out of. Handsome enough fellow – looked a bit like a young JFK – and just as full of himself too, probably. By the looks of things, he could buy and sell Harlan ten times over. But when a flake of snow fell, this guy would be on the phone to someone like him, someone with a real truck and a snowplow. He wouldn't rake his own leaves either, or even blow them. He'd have people for that too. People to clean his gutters, clean his pool, change his light bulbs.

Harlan sat on the bench these days by himself. He wished that one of the few old-timers left would come by and talk about where the fish were biting. He wouldn't even

mind seeing one of those fat old wives, girls he'd gone to school with, coming in for Crisco. Any old face. Anybody who knew his name. But lately, there'd been nobody. In fact, the little blond was the only person who'd walked into the store in the past hour.

He'd heard her ask for directions, all right. But it was a free country, and he was free to ignore her if he pleased. He felt better after he'd spit. He'd aimed just right. He hadn't hit her shoes, but he'd gotten close enough to send her a little message. Welcome to Hebron Township. Now get out.

A sliver of a smile broke across Harlan's face, like a hairline fissure in a great outcropping of solid rock.

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"Did you see that?" Heather said, when she got back in the car.

"See what?" Kevin said.

"That man. I asked him for some simple directions, and he... he...." Heather started to sputter. "He spat."

"What man?"

"That farmer," she said, pointing at the bench. "Are you blind?" She bent down and began to inspect her white Keds. "I think it was tobacco juice. Yuck."

"Doesn't sound too friendly," Kevin said.

"You think?" said Heather. "Good thing, like Maryanne says, most of the old-timers are leaving."

Kevin didn't say anything. He hated the way Heather quoted people like Maryanne. Maryanne this, Maryanne that. He'd heard it all the way down. What did she think Maryanne was, a fucking oracle?

Heather stopped the inspection of her sneakers. Apparently, they'd not been stained. Thank God. They wouldn't have to sue the general store.

"Maryanne says they all have gas fireplaces," Heather said. "And guess what? They come with a remote control."

"What comes with a remote control?" said Kevin. It was hard to keep up sometimes. Weren't they just talking about tobacco juice?

"The fireplaces!"

"Oh."

"Come on, Kev." Heather snapped her fingers. "Get with the program."

He sighed. He hated when she snapped. Some of the same things that had made Heather so attractive as a girlfriend – an undeniable vitality, an unexpectedly sharp tongue – were a lot harder to deal with in a wife. It had been one thing to chase after Heather when she was a cute little pony-tailed coed at Rutgers. Quite another to spend his thirties always hustling to keep up.

He slammed on the brakes. There was the sign: Galapagos Estates. It was made of logs and featured carvings of animals: a tortoise, a bird, a rabbit, deer. Two pine trees guarded the sign like wooden soldiers. Kevin steered the Land Rover down the curving drive, which was covered with a soft pine needle carpet. It looked like the entrance to a state park, but for the fact that it ended, abruptly, in a small parking area filled with expensive cars. Just beyond the lot stood a white sales trailer.

There was mud. There was always mud. It came with the territory, because of the bulldozers and the trucks. But Kevin frowned, knowing he'd just have to pay \$15 for another car wash. He wasn't going to let mud cake up on the side of a \$50,000 car.

Heather rushed into the trailer, but Kevin stopped to survey the neighborhood. A black ribbon of road unfurled into the distance. The trees planted alongside it were tiny, but the houses were huge.

Inside the trailer, which was air-conditioned to the point of refrigeration, was a rack of booklets printed on heavy, flecked recycled stock. A large map dominated one wall and a young Asian couple was inspecting it as if looking for hidden treasure. They were being assisted by a vivacious woman in her 40's, who pointed to map with a pencil.

“Maryanne!” Heather called.

The saleswoman nodded politely to the couple and turned towards Heather. “You must be....”

“Heather,” Heather said. “Heather Peters.”

“Just give me a moment,” Maryanne said, holding up a finger. “While I help the Lees. Why don't you go check out the model house? It's right there.”

Heather flashed a bright smile at Maryanne and took Kevin's arm, walking out toward the model. But once she got outside, her expression drooped.. “Shit,” she said. “The Lees are probably getting the lot we wanted.”

She was always so dramatic, his wife. “Look Heather,” Kevin said. “I'm sure there are —“

“Weren't you listening? I told you. Maryanne said there were only three houses left.”

“Well, now there'll be two,” Kevin said. “We only need one.”

“If they get the one by the pond, I'll just die. Damn, if we hadn't stopped at that stupid general store, we might have gotten here first.”

Naturally. It was always his fault.

But it was a nice house. There was a home entertainment center built right into the Great Room and a nook in the bedroom for his treadmill. The mechanics were sound too. A brand-new, 95 percent efficiency-rated gas-burning furnace presided over a basement clean enough to perform surgery in. No more dungeon-like cellars like his dad's, with boxes everywhere, and crumbling asbestos, and generations-worth of old tiles and linoleum and lawn furniture.

It was fine. Great. Really, they all looked pretty much alike to him. The only thing Kevin didn't like was its name, the Walden. Each house in Galapagos Estates was named for a naturalist or conservationist or something about where they'd lived. There was the Darwin, of course, the Cousteau, the Audubon and the Walden, named for the pond where Henry David Thoreau had spent a year living simply. Wasn't the house that Thoreau lived in basically a shack? Maybe the name was supposed to suggest raw individualism, but to Kevin it suggested failure. Although the \$700,000 asking price was a stretch – now he'd have to make partner at the law firm – he didn't like living in the smallest, simplest anything.

Heather grabbed his hand and walked up the stately circular staircase, which was topped by a rotunda. The floors still smelled of polyurethane. The smaller of the two walk-in closets in the master bedroom was bigger than the room he'd slept in as a boy. Even the room Connor would get had its own walk-in closet and its own bathroom.

“Well, what do you think?” Heather said. She hadn't looked this excited since he'd popped the question.

“It’s okay.” He meant: owning a house like this would be a fair marker of his economic success, but he wasn’t going to start shrieking like somebody who’d just won a refrigerator on a TV game show.

“Just okay? Come here.” Heather pushed Kevin into a walk-in closet. She closed the door and pressed him to the wall, rubbing up against his groin. “It makes me hot,” she said, her voice uncharacteristically breathy. “And wet.” She put her finger in her mouth, and touched it to his lip.

Kevin was hard. He felt his breath get short. There was nothing like the possibility of a major purchase to bring his wife’s libido out. The best sex they’d ever had was after they’d ordered the French country dining room set from North Carolina.

He heard footsteps approaching. Kevin kissed Heather full on the mouth before opening the door. He looked down at his khakis, willing the bulge to go away. They stepped out to find the Lees staring at them. “Just measuring,” Kevin said, his face hot.

An hour later, down at the trailer, the Peters signed the papers on 63 Giant Tortoise Drive, the Walden. It may have been the smallest model, but it was closest to the pond. “Location, location, location!” Maryanne said brightly. The closing would be early September. Perfect. Connor would be able to start the new` year at Pine Hills Elementary.

As they drove off Heather, who seemed to have forgotten about the farmer and the tobacco juice, jabbered non-stop about upgrades, sinks, tile, grout. Kevin nodded. Sex, he thought. Tonight. Maybe his parents could watch Connor just a little longer. He could whip out the cell and say they’d had unexpected delays.

He was so caught up in his daydreams that he had to slam on his brakes to avoid hitting the little woman crossing Route 381, followed by a menagerie of dogs, cats and

geese, all trotting or padding or waddling after her like something out of a fairytale.

Where she'd come from, he couldn't imagine. It was as if she'd just ... materialized. And all those animals? What was that about?

Kevin waited for the woman to cross the road, and as he did his heart began to slow down – had he really almost run over a pedestrian? – and finally his panic turned to curiosity, tinged with annoyance. The woman wore blue jeans and cowboy boots, and had white hair pulled into a tight long braid. She was clearly old, but hardly feeble; she strode across the road with long steps, her back straight. There was something almost regal in her appearance, something about her posture hinted that she came from money. But the way she dressed suggested artist, herbalist or soothsayer. Strange.

“Kevin!” Heather said. “What are you waiting for?”

Was Heather so fixated in grout fantasies that she didn't even notice that they'd almost run over someone? As the last of the geese waddled in front of the Land Rover, the old woman began climbing a steep incline, heading toward a small cabin tucked into a glade of pines. It was – what was the word? – “funky.” That was it. Funky. An old VW beetle from the 60's, painted lime green, sat in the driveway. There were all manner of signs, stones, statuary, wind chimes and even a clothes line, in the front of the house, for God's sake. Very un-Galapagos, he thought.

When the last goose had safely made it to the embankment, the woman turned to Kevin and raised an angry fist. “Why don't you watch where you're going?” she shouted.

Kevin quickly looked away, and stepped on the accelerator. “It looks like the natives are restless,” he said to Heather.

But Heather was in another world, furiously punching the buttons on her cell phone, holding it up to her ear, and then punching again. An automated telephone system, Kevin could tell, and he could feel Heather's irritation working toward a boil. Not that he could blame her. It was extraordinarily annoying these days, to try to reach a human being on the phone. You didn't get people, you got menus. But Heather always acted as if automated answering systems had been invented solely for her own personal inconvenience.

Finally, though, she had gotten through.

"I don't have time to fill out a stupid form," she snapped at the unlucky person on the other end. "I want to know right now. What's the best rate you can give me?"

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