Hear Him Roar

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I had spent nearly a week recuperating in Edward’s bedroom and in all that time I hadn’t once wished I was anyplace else. But the minute June left me that changed. I had my first hunger pang since the surgery. Odd, since Sadie had fed me lunch only an hour before June’s visit. Now Sadie was out, Boyd was still at work, and the girls were doing whatever they did after school. I was alone in the house and a long way from any food.

To distract myself I lifted the EnCompass and punched in June’s initials. The screen showed me the streets around Sadie’s house, the pulsing asterisk still parked up here at the top of the hill. Next I punched in Jean’s initials, but the picture on the screen stayed the same. I laughed a little at this malfunction, hearing Kyle’s exuberant voice talking up his “quality product.”

The hunger reasserted itself, urging me to hazard a trip to the kitchen downstairs. The trip was not a long one. It might be good for me, I reasoned, to test myself on the stairs. A trial run seemed in order. After all, I couldn’t camp out in Ruth’s bed forever. The stitches in my belly were the only worry. I’d be fine as long as I didn’t jostle them too much.

And so it was with great gingerness that I extracted myself from the bed and set off toward the staircase. At the top of the stairs I paused to solidify my equilibrium. But soon a sharp hunger pang goaded me downward. At various points during my slow descent I imagined I heard voices below, but I was too concerned with my stitches to realize I was catching snatches of a conversation between June and Jean. The voices were only voices until I arrived at the kitchen and saw the two chief women of
my life talking like cronies or conspirators in the breakfast nook. This explained the picture the EnCompass had shown me just before.

“How’s *that* for a coincidence,” June said as I shuffled toward them. “I was on my way out when I met Jean coming in. I was just getting ready to come upstairs and see if you were up for another visit.”

I sat down at the table. “She never could lie worth a damn,” I said to Jean.

They both laughed, while I resisted on account of my stitches.

“What are you doing down here?” June said. “You’re not supposed to walk down stairs yet, are you?”

“I got hungry.”

“That’s a good sign,” June said, standing. “I’d be glad to make you something, but I’m supposed to meet a customer in a few minutes.”

“I’ll cook him something,” Jean said, rising. “You go ahead.” She walked June to the door. She had wool slacks on, dark blue, and a sweater of the same color. Under the sweater she wore an ivory silk blouse. Its collar lay open like some soft flower in the wide V of the sweater’s neck. When she sat back down her nervous fingers began playing with the collar.

“Looks like you made a friend,” I said.

She nodded. “June’s a terrific person.”

“You seem surprised.”

Jean gazed at her lap a minute, then raised her eyes to me. “Maybe I am. She *is* a lot different than I imagined.”

“Different how?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess I never expected her to be rooting for you and me.”

“You thought she was against you?”

“She was, in a way. I don’t mean she disapproved of me or even thought about me. But she *was* against me.”

“The way Joe was against me, you mean?”
She nodded, laying her hand on the table. “My father was against you too, in that kind of way.”

My informants had told me Jean was thinking along these lines. Still, it pleased me to get this straight from the source.

“Can I ask you a favor?” I said.

“Right, your food,” she said, popping up from her chair. “What would you like?”

“Make it something easy on the stomach,” I said. We both got a kick out of that.

She stood in front of the fridge awhile, running through my options, and once we’d settled on scrambled eggs she set briskly to work.

“I don’t know why I’m hungry,” I told her. “Lunch wasn’t that long ago.”

“It’s a good sign, like June said. Your appetite’s coming back.”

And not just my appetite for food, I was thinking as I watched her trim strong body reach into oak cabinets and flit along the tile countertop and bend over low drawers. Foolish as it was, my crush on Brook had served the vital purpose of priming my carnal pump.

“I hear you met Brook,” I said, catching the first whiffs of olive oil warming in the pan.

Jean was busy at the stove but she gave a vigorous nod. “She’s been just great for Kyle.”

“He moving to the zoo?”

“I don’t know what the plan is.”

She stayed quiet while she beat the eggs and poured them from bowl to pan. Then she glanced over at me. “There’s still a lot to sort out with Brenda.”

“Sure there is.”

I kept my eyes on Jean while she coaxed the eggs to fluffiness. She had been to the house on the hill a few times during our years together, but no more than was strictly necessary. She had certainly never assumed this kind of command over the hearth of my former family. As I relished the sight of her now, I also appreciated
the significance of seeing her here, so far inside my old defenses. I had thought we’d have a terrible load of hurts and angers to sort through when we saw each other again, but it seemed we had done much of the sorting separately.

She brought a steaming plate of eggs and toast and watched with obvious pleasure as I set to.

“You know what June told me,” I said when my plate was clean. “We were upstairs talking, having a kind of heart-to-heart. She said she feels like she’s stayed married to me all this time.”

Jean nodded.

“Not literally, you know. Just that she wouldn’t let herself get attached to anyone else. Not all the way.”

That was out of my mouth before I realized where I was going.

“I don’t know,” I said, “I guess I had some of that too. I think our marriage is really over now.”

In all the time I had known Jean I’d never been the first to bring marriage into a conversation. And once the topic had been broached Jean had always been last to let it drop. Today she never even picked it up, though I did see the temptation in her mouth, saw her debate with herself over whether to say anything, watched her decide to hold her tongue, saw her see I knew what she was thinking and answer my smile with a smile of her own.

Here she got up and came to me, put my head against her breast and told me how relieved she was that I’d survived. From the midst of that fragrant cuddle, survival did look like a hell of a deal.