

# HAWKE'S

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# POINT

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## CHAPTER 1

The cold rain suited Jonas Hawke's mood. He didn't like large gatherings, and he especially hated funerals.

"Everyone hates funerals," Emma reminded him. "Have you ever heard anyone say they liked going to a funeral?"

"Undertakers, maybe."

"You're giving the eulogy, for heaven's sake."

"Only because I couldn't say no."

"Stop it. He was your partner for twenty-five years."

Jonas frowned as he buttoned his white shirt and tied a full Windsor in his gray speckled tie, both remnants of his four decades as a lawyer. The tie was a little too wide to be fashionable, but no one in Beacon Junction was likely to know that. Folks might notice, though, that the shirt collar was too big, exposing the loose skin on his neck.

Jonas wasn't vain, but he couldn't help being aware of how time had treated him. In his prime, he cut an imposing figure, with huge hands and clear blue eyes that could be either charming or intimidating, depending on his mood. When he was thirty, Jonas stood six feet, two inches tall and weighed close to two hundred pounds, a hard man to miss and even harder to ignore. He was well liked, despite a natural shyness at odds with his professional demeanor.

He was also well respected—both for what he'd accomplished and for all he would have accomplished if it hadn't been for the accident, which had set him to drinking more and doing less. For a while, people believed he would get over it and go back to being who he was. Eventually, he did recover somewhat, gradually emerging from the fortress he'd built around himself. But never completely, and now, at seventy-three, his appearance matched his retreat from life. His curved spine and shabby posture meant the top of his almost bald head was little more than six feet from the ground, and his one hundred seventy pounds hung loosely from his bones. One of those blue eyes was glazed over with a milky cataract, and his once-powerful hands were marked with arthritic lumps.

Emma helped him with his jacket, and he realized she was ready, just waiting on him. It had always been the other way around when they were younger.

"You look great," he told her, and she did, neatly dressed in a dark blue Chanel suit that she hadn't worn in five years, not since Jonas had argued that case before the Vermont Supreme Court. "Dynamite," he added, rediscovering a word he had once used regularly to describe her.

"A little tight in the hips," she said.

"No, really. Dynamite."

She smiled. "You look good, too. We'd best be going. You got your speech?"

He patted his pocket as he followed her out the door.

It was still raining, though not hard, when Emma and Jonas entered the white clapboard church and took a program from an usher in the vestibule. The chapel was filling from the back, as it always did on unhappy occasions, but Jonas and Emma had been assigned seats in the second pew, behind the immediate family. As they walked up to it, Jonas caught sight of their son, Nathan, and they nodded to each other. Emma was staring straight ahead and didn't see him.

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The crowd murmured in whispers, as the relatives, friends, and business associates of Franklin C. Hargrave waited for the minister to begin. A couple hundred people were there, not bad considering Beacon Junction's population of 5,871. The firm of Hawke and Hargrave was a prestigious one; Jonas and Frank had known most of the town and many people in the neighboring communities.

The minister, a dour thirty-year-old, welcomed the mourners with the expected words from Ecclesiastes and then asked them to join in singing "Amazing Grace." Reverend Simms had only been in town two years and hadn't really known Frank except to say hello. That had prompted the request for Jonas to give the eulogy. As Jonas waited for his turn to speak, he began remembering all the good times he'd had with Frank, from the arguments over baseball to the deep discussions about law and morality and life.

Jonas felt the urge for a little whiskey and waited a few seconds for it to pass. He knew it would. He had quit drinking after his heart attack at sixty-eight. The doctor told him he'd have to if he wanted to see sixty-nine. Jonas had thought about it a good while before deciding that drinking wasn't all it was cracked up to be anyway. It sure hadn't helped him accept what had happened, and by that time, it wasn't even helping him forget. So he quit. It wasn't easy, but like most decisions Jonas made, once he had his mind set, he simply went ahead and did it.

Remembering his heart attack made Jonas think that Frank, who was ten years younger, had died out of turn. Frank had always been healthy, a jogger who could explain the difference between saturated fats and trans fats—and did so frequently whether you wanted him to or not. His heart trouble hadn't come until six months ago, long after Jonas's, and then, after Frank had open heart surgery, the doctors told him he'd be fine if he took care of himself. He did, but complications ensued

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anyway, and after a second round of surgery to insert stents, an infection developed, ending in his death a week ago. There'd been a hint of less than stellar work by the doctors, but nothing had come of it.

Jonas looked up at Reverend Simms, who was droning on about the mysterious ways of our Lord and assuring the family that Frank was destined for Heaven. Jonas hoped his own remarks wouldn't be so boring. He'd written them all out, a big change from his courtroom days when he would deliver inspired summaries from brief notes, ad-libbing and adapting, based on the message he got from reading the jurors' faces. With that on his mind, he made his way to the pulpit after the minister finally took his seat.

"Frank Hargrave," Jonas began, "was the best lawyer in the state of Vermont. I was proud to be his partner. He could have been anything he wanted to be, and some of you may know that there was a time when he considered going into politics. He was actually courted by both political parties."

Jonas glanced up at the audience, trying to find a pair of eyes he could meet. Ed Riley, the chairman of the Board of Selectmen, was staring out a window. Angela Dixon, a clerk at the dry cleaner's on Hunt Street, was studying her nails. Even Nathan seemed to have other things on his mind.

Jonas made a decision. He folded the text of his speech, stuck it in his breast pocket, and looked directly at Frank's family.

"Frank Hargrave was my partner for almost a quarter of a century, but I won't remember him as a partner," he began anew, his voice taking on a muscular timbre that demanded attention. "I'll remember him as a friend. As a kind, honest, caring man who had a positive impact on everyone he encountered."

Jonas paused and shook his head from side to side in a gesture of familiarity that he knew would strike home with his audience.

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“You know, life is fleeting, and it’s so easy to get caught up in day-to-day struggles and lose sight of what really matters. We identify people too much by their profession, their accomplishments, their financial status. I could certainly give a eulogy that highlighted Frank’s résumé, but that would miss the point. I’d rather talk about his humanity, how much he cared about others and acted on those feelings, his integrity, his moral fiber, his ability to reach out and help those around him. What I’ll remember most is how he cared for people and how he was able to touch so many lives in so many meaningful ways. I always envied that ability to connect with others.”

As Jonas continued, his eyes swept the pews, instinctively reading the expressions and body language of the congregants. Now he saw Riley smile in agreement. Sarah Moore, the firm’s longtime secretary, wiped away a tear. Harry Piles, who owned the grocery on Main, gave him a look of encouragement. Jonas caught Emma’s eye and got a slight, almost imperceptible nod from her.

“Frank was able to combine the strength of iron with the softness of velvet. You never felt like he would judge you harshly if you made a mistake and let him down. I know that from personal experience.

“But you didn’t have to be a friend or even an acquaintance to benefit from Frank’s kindness,” he said, his inflection getting softer but his voice still reaching the back pews. “Few of you knew it—he wasn’t the kind of person to talk about it—but every Thursday Frank drove to Brattleboro to volunteer at the Social Service Family Court, representing young children who had no one else, kids who were abused or abandoned and needed someone to speak up for them.”

Jonas took a sip of water. It was a habit he had acquired in court, using the pause for effect, but today he did it because his mouth really was dry. He could feel the eyes of the congregation

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staring at him as he swallowed. He looked again at Frank's family in the front row. Nancy, Frank's wife, hung on every word. One of her hands held a tissue and the other held the hand of her son, Michael. Nancy's daughter, Molly, leaned her head on the shoulder of her husband.

"Frank represented these frightened and forsaken kids and helped guide them through the maze of our social services system, even keeping tabs on some of them long after they were out of the system. It was anything but easy and it took a huge toll, but he never once considered giving it up."

Jonas told a few more stories about Frank, the words coming from his heart, his voice rising and falling, his hold on the mourners increasing with every sentence. If he'd been speaking to a jury, they'd have decided in his client's favor without leaving the jury box. At one point, he glanced at Emma and recognized a look of awe on her face. He knew he was showing her something she hadn't seen from him in quite a while.

"I remember one night in particular," Jonas said, surprising even himself that he was going to tell this story but not pausing to consider whether it was a good idea. "It was more than twenty years ago, a time of great personal difficulty for me, a time when I was being stubborn and ignoring Frank's counsel about a case I was working on, one I should have let him handle because it hit a little too close to home."

Jonas paused briefly to catch Emma's eye again, noting her concern and smiling ever so slightly to reassure her.

"Frank did what he could to get me to do the right thing, but when he realized I wasn't going to listen to him, he didn't walk away. No, he did everything he could to support me, and he tried to prevent my mistake from hurting me or anyone else. Later, when it was all over, I tried to thank him. He shook it off as though it were nothing, but I knew better. I was a lucky man to have known Frank Hargrave. I know you feel the same way. His memory will always be a blessing."

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As Jonas walked down from the pulpit, there was a quiet murmuring. He went over to Nancy and kissed her on the cheek, and she squeezed his hand tightly, too emotional to say anything. Molly and Michael stood up to shake hands. Molly added a hug.

Reverend Simms let the mourners have a moment to digest Jonas's words before asking if anyone else wanted to speak. There was silence for a few seconds, but then Betty Brown, a ninety-three-year-old neighbor, rose with the help of a walker and told how every morning Frank would pick up her newspaper from the end of her driveway and deliver it to her front door. "Just knowing he'd done it made me feel so much better. Like I hadn't been forgotten."

Sanford Tyler, a carpenter, told about the time he'd been out of work and Frank had hired him to put in a room full of custom-built bookshelves. Two months later, when he came round to tell Frank he'd gotten a job, Frank tried to make light of the fact that the bookshelves were still half empty. "I knew better," Tyler said. "He didn't need the shelves, but he knew I needed the work."

Kathleen Belton came next, describing how Frank took time out of his busy practice to represent her at a foreclosure hearing, then sent her a bill demanding payment in the form of two apple pies. "He told me no one could make them like I could."

Ed Riley told how Frank had often been a voice of reason and compromise at town meetings. And Mark Stratton, Frank's nephew, remembered how once when he was a teenager and had been in the kitchen watching his Aunt Nancy cook, he'd looked at the olive oil and asked what "extra virgin" was. Without missing a beat, Frank had said, "It's when she brings her sister."

So many people lined up to share their memories that the service went close to two hours before Reverend Simms returned to the lectern to lead the closing prayers.

Jonas and Emma's exit from the church was slow as dozens of mourners stopped to shake Jonas's hand, each complimenting him on the eulogy, most saying how moved they were or how well he had captured how important Frank was to everyone. Nathan gave his mother a kiss and his father a warm handshake.

It was no longer raining when they stepped outside. "You were wonderful," Emma told him as soon as they were alone. He smiled tightly, fighting to control himself. He could see that she was, too. She kissed his cheek and said she'd see him later. Jonas was going on to the cemetery for the burial, but Emma had volunteered to help set up for the reception at Molly's house, and she had to hitch a ride with one of the other volunteers.

Jonas's Explorer was already in line behind the hearse, and one of the funeral parlor attendants held the door open as Jonas climbed in. He was pleased that Emma was going over to the reception. It would give him some time alone to collect himself.

Jonas was enough of a performer, however rusty, to know the eulogy had played well with the crowd, but he gave most of the credit to Frank. He had been an unusual person who would be fondly remembered and sorely missed by a lot of people. Jonas might be pleased with himself for having found the words to capture what was special about Frank, but he could take no credit for what made Frank special.

He was glad that so many others had also spoken. They made it clear how many lives had been touched by Frank, how much good he had done for others. But it also made Jonas wonder about his own funeral. What would they say about him? There had been a time when he, too, had been more outgoing, more willing to get involved. Not like Frank, though. Frank was something else, with an uncanny ability to touch so many people.

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The drive to the cemetery took less than fifteen minutes. Jonas parked, walked to the hearse, and joined the other pall-bearers. The coffin was already on a cart with wheels, making his job mostly ceremonial. He helped guide it to where the fresh grave had been dug. The wet ground was covered with a tarpaulin for the mourners.

The minister recited the final prayers and words of solace, while Nancy, Michael, and Molly stood stoically. Finally, Molly put a single white rose on the coffin, and the family walked slowly to the limousine.

Jonas lingered by the grave after the others had gone. He finally noticed the gravediggers standing off to the side, waiting for him to leave so they could finish their work. He got annoyed at their seeming impatience and then realized they just had a job to do.

He walked slowly to the Explorer and climbed in. He sat for a while before starting the engine and then took the long way over to Molly's house.

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The house was crowded, and it had that mix of solemnity and awkwardness that always defines such occasions. People were there to pay their respects and to console the loved ones, but inevitably the side conversations drifted into the irrelevant and even irreverent, as people exchanged greetings and news with those they hadn't seen in a while.

Jonas entered determined to be sociable, and he got an opportunity when he saw Michael standing by himself off to one side. Michael had grown up in Beacon Junction, but Jonas knew he had never felt very comfortable in the small town environment. After graduating from the DePaul University a year ago, he'd found a job and stayed in Chicago.

Jonas walked over and greeted him. Michael started to thank him for his eulogy, but his voice cracked, and he turned away. Jonas turned slightly to give the boy some privacy, then realized that was the wrong thing to do. He walked Michael into another room and put a hand on his shoulder. “Your father was the best of the best,” he said. “He was always very proud of you.”

Michael turned, started to put his arms around Jonas and then hesitated. Jonas forced himself to reach out and they hugged. Michael made a noise that sounded like the start of a sob but tried to hold it back.

“It’s okay,” Jonas told him. “It’s okay.”

But Michael wiped his eyes, refusing to let himself go. Jonas gave him a few seconds to gain control of himself and turned the conversation to safer ground.

“How’s the job going?”

“Busy. Busy but good. I really like Chicago. And at least I was able to make it back in time to see him.”

Jonas put his hand on Michael’s shoulder and squeezed. “He was always very proud of you,” Jonas repeated, wishing he could think of something else to say.

Michael nodded. “I wish I could stay here longer to be with Mom.”

“You go back if you need to. Your mother’s got Molly here and lots of friends. We’ll keep a close eye on her.”

They each took a deep breath before going back out to face the crowd. Jonas wondered which of them dreaded it more.

“There you are,” Emma said as soon as Jonas emerged. “You’ve been hiding.”

Emma had a plate in her hand, and Jonas helped himself to a cracker and cheese, but before he swallowed, Emma moved along to talk to one of her friends. Jonas wandered over to the table with the drinks and got himself a club soda. He was glad

there was only wine and beer; they were easier to resist than hard liquor. Whiskey, bourbon, scotch, vodka, rye, whatever—a few years earlier he was drinking it all, and all to excess. Emma and some of his friends, Frank included, told him how impressed they were that he could quit so abruptly, but they didn't know what he went through, what he was still going through. It was at times like this, when the stress and the emotion built up inside, that he missed it most.

With his club soda, he made his way to the food table and carefully assembled a miniature turkey sandwich, wondering, as he always did, why anyone thought these tiny pieces of bread made sense. It only meant you had to work twice as hard to make yourself a real sandwich.

He had resolved to be sociable, and the other guests made that easy. One after another, they came up to talk, as if sensing that Jonas's usual shield had been lowered. The message was always the same: Remarkable eulogy. You really captured Frank. I could tell how much you loved him.

Jonas thanked them all, and after the expected comments about Frank dying too young and how well Nancy seemed to be holding up, he asked each person what they'd been up to. The fact that he needed to ask showed how he'd lost touch with so many. And the fact that he had trouble keeping the conversation going after that first question showed he still had a long way to go.

He was surprised to see many of his old colleagues from around the state—not only defense lawyers but judges and prosecutors as well. They had all respected Frank.

David McConnell, the head of the Vermont Bar Association, greeted Jonas warmly. Jonas wondered if he'd recognized the case Jonas had referred to in the eulogy, and if so, what he thought of his admission. Maybe he'd said more than he should have, but the words had just come out on their own. It had

seemed a natural way to illustrate Frank's ability to figure out what people needed and how he could help them.

Sam Martin, one of the three family doctors in town, took Jonas aside to say how surprised he was at Frank's death. "Not what I would have expected from such a routine procedure." Jonas raised an eyebrow, inviting Sam to continue, but he didn't.

Finally, Jonas worked his way over to Nancy, who excused herself from the group around her, took Jonas's arm, eased him into a corner, and gave him a big hug.

"You were always his best friend," she said.

"Maybe second best," Jonas said with a wry smile. "He always told me you were at the top of the list."

Nancy had been in control until then, but the tears came now and she squeezed Jonas harder. He embraced her, but it felt awkward.

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On the drive home, Emma and Jonas were too emotionally drained to say much. They rode in silence, Jonas's eyes straight ahead and Emma's looking out the side window. After a while she turned to him.

"Did it feel the way it looked?" she asked.

"How do you mean?"

"I don't know how to describe it exactly. You were so much in control up there. Like when you would argue a big case. Like you knew how well it was going and were enjoying it. Well, as much as anyone can enjoy giving a eulogy."

He thought about what she said, and also about what it said about their marriage. She still knows me at least as well as I know myself, he thought.

But he didn't tell her that. Instead, he talked about what

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the other speakers had said, and how it made him realize that Frank touched a great number of people in a way that was important. In the end, how you dealt with other people, how you helped them, was what really mattered in life. Jonas had once known that and had made it a priority, but he'd lost sight of it after the accident.

"I've wasted the last twenty-four years," he said.

"You're being too hard on yourself," she told him. And then, after a pause, "Besides, it's not too late."

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It was mid-afternoon and the sun was peeking through the clouds when they got back to the Sunrise. They went up to their room and changed, Jonas donning his standard black polo shirt and khakis, Emma opting for a pair of light blue slacks and a white top.

The Sunrise was a ninety-four-year-old Victorian building that had known life as a hotel, as the home of Beacon Junction's richest resident, and now as a four-rooms-for-rent bed and breakfast that Emma and Jonas owned but their daughter, Sally, ran. Emma and Jonas got to live in it for free, of course, and served as unofficial host and hostess as needed, though Jonas could be downright unsociable when the mood hit him. When the Vermont weather allowed it, he'd sit in the rocker outside and read the classics. He had a list of one hundred that he was working his way through. He'd just finished *A Bend in the River* and was now on *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

He picked up his book and headed down the stairs and on to the front porch, a big old-fashioned gray-skirted structure with a white railing. The rain had long ended, and he started toward his favorite spot, the last seat in the row of tan wicker rocking chairs, the one farthest from the stairs and front door

and most out of the way to visitors. But then he stopped and took the chair closest to the front. He smiled to himself. It's a step, he thought.

After a few minutes, Emma came out, saw him, and hesitated, then sat down next to him. "You going for a change of scenery?" she asked.

It annoyed him that she had noticed, more so that she mentioned it, but if he was going to turn over a new leaf, it meant being more friendly to his wife as well as everyone else, so he forced a smile. "Just 'cause I'm old don't mean I'm set in my ways."

"You won't find me calling you old. Hits too close to home."

He thought a second. "Does that mean you now admit we're the same age?"

"Don't push your luck."

Jonas nodded again and went back to his book. Emma seemed to take that as a cue and opened the new issue of *Time* she was holding on her lap, but before she could start on it, they both heard a car approach. It slowed, moving more tentatively as it got closer and then turned into their driveway.

It was a silver Chevy Impala or Ford Focus or one of those other American cars that all look pretty much alike. Everyone in town would know instantly what it was, a rental.

Jonas looked up from his book when he heard the car door open and watched the man retrieve his bag from the car's trunk. He was in his late twenties, average height and weight and looks. Even his luggage was nondescript—the kind of black carry-on suitcase that just about everybody used these days. He wore an Oxford blue button-down shirt and tan slacks, with a double-breasted navy blazer that looked out of place in Beacon Junction. There was nothing else to distinguish him in any way except for his youth and the fact that he was alone. Most of the tourists who stayed at the Sunrise were older, and most were couples.

As he approached the steps, Jonas offered a friendly hello before Emma could, and she seemed to suppress a smile. The stranger nodded in return. He hesitated a second before opening the screen door and entering the house. Emma got up and followed him in.

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Emma caught up with the stranger at the desk in the alcove. He was standing there looking around, like he expected to find a little bell to ring and not seeing one, was wondering what he should do.

“Can I help you?” Emma asked.

“I have a reservation. Name’s Delacourt. Steven Delacourt. Staying three nights, maybe four.”

She invited him to have a seat and offered a cup of coffee, both of which he refused, while she went to look for Sally. When Emma returned a few minutes later, she found Delacourt wandering around the kitchen, which meant he had already been through the parlor and dining room. Emma hadn’t found Sally, so she took Delacourt upstairs herself and got him settled in the Juniper Room, which he agreed was very nice. He asked if there was a map of Beacon Junction, and she showed him the one they kept in each room for the convenience of the guests, but when she asked if she could help him find anything in particular, he said no.

“I’m here on business,” he said, though she hadn’t asked. “Got some meetings with some people over at Harrison tomorrow. Thought I might want to walk around a bit this afternoon.”

“Harrison’s on the northern edge,” Emma said, referring to the medical device company that was the only big business headquartered in Beacon Junction. She started to open the map to show him, but then sensed he was impatient for her to leave.

"Well, if you need anything, let us know. There's a copy of the *Clarion*, our newspaper, downstairs. It tells what's showing at the movie theater in Bellows Falls and other events that might be of interest. Saturday is the Memorial Day fair, but I guess you'll be leaving before then."

Delacourt stayed in the room only a few minutes before heading down the front stairs and out the front door past Emma and Jonas. Jonas looked up briefly and then returned to his book, but Emma kept her eyes on him as he marched out to the silver whatever-it-was he was driving. There was something about the man that piqued her interest, something vaguely familiar.

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Jonas was still on the porch an hour later when Mary Louise, who did the cooking at the Sunrise, came out.

"Mind if I join you?" she said as she sat down next to him.

"You sat before you gave me a chance to answer."

"Teach you to be faster next time."

"In that case, glad to have the company." He liked Mary Louise. Everyone did.

"Besides, you're in the wrong chair," she told him.

"That seems to be the consensus. I had no idea my sittin' habits were so widely observed."

Mary Louise gave him her sexy smile but didn't respond directly. She was wearing blue shorts and a flowery blouse. Her thick and long red hair was tied in a ponytail that made her look younger than her almost forty years.

"Emma said you were wonderful at the funeral this morning," she said.

Jonas didn't respond. He opened his tobacco pouch and started filling his pipe. Mary Louise waited. When he finished,

he put the pipe in his mouth but didn't light it. He limited himself to one bowl a day, usually after dinner. The doctor had wanted him to quit altogether, but Jonas figured switching from cigarettes to a pipe and rarely inhaling was good enough. He'd already given up drinking. He couldn't stop living.

"Actually, I feel pretty good about it," he said, as though no time had passed since Mary Louise had spoken. "Frank was the best and he always brought out the best in me. So it was fitting."

"I wish I'd been there to hear you."

"You never really knew him."

"No, but I would have liked to have heard you."

He smiled in appreciation. "I have to admit there was something about standing up in front of a crowd that got my juices going again. I wasn't sure I could do it. It feels good to know I still can."

"I'm glad."

They stared out at the street for a few seconds, and then Jonas turned back to his book, but Mary Louise didn't let that silence her. "What'd you make of the new guest this afternoon?" she asked. Jonas shrugged, figuring he was about to get a full report.

"Emma says he's meeting with the folks at Harrison," Mary Louise continued. "He's from Maryland, down near Washington. Maybe he's with the government."

Jonas put the bowl of the pipe to his nose to smell the unlit tobacco, a new Kentucky blend he was trying for the first time, and then put the stem back in his mouth. He knew she wasn't finished.

"Emma thinks he looks familiar. You seen him before?"

"Not that I recall," Jonas said.

"Well, don't be surprised if she asks you. She's in there wracking her brain about it."

Jonas didn't say anything to that, and for a few moments they sat in silence.

Finally, Mary Louise looked at him. “You okay?”

Jonas nodded. “Why does everyone always ask me that? I’d be a rich man if I had a dollar for every time someone asked me that.”

“You are a rich man,” she reminded him.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“You can be quiet sometimes. It makes some people think you’re unfriendly or that something’s wrong.”

Jonas rocked for a moment. “Be a better world if more people were quiet a little more often.”

“If that’s a hint, I’m ignoring it,” she said.

“I didn’t mean you, and you know it.”

She looked at him for a moment and then smiled. He thought she might be about to say something, but she closed her eyes and let the sun work on her face. Jonas went back to his book.



The Sunrise had seven bedrooms in all: four for rent, one for Jonas and Emma, one for Sally and her husband, Jake, who did estimates for one of the two roofers in town, and one for Mary Louise, who ran the kitchen. Her breakfasts were out of this world. Everyone said so, and many of the townsfolk came by each morning to eat because the meals were better than anything they could get at home or in one of the local eateries, which were known more for the quantities they piled on a plate than for the quality of what they put there. Shortly after Sally found Mary Louise, or really after Mary Louise found Sally, word of Mary Louise’s talent on the griddle iron, the skillet, or just about anything else that found its way into the kitchen spread through Beacon Junction, and people started showing up around breakfast time to say hi. Of course, Sally or Emma

would be polite and invite the person to have a little something to eat. Soon it got out of hand, and Jonas suggested they open breakfast to anyone who was willing to pay for it. He thought that would discourage them from coming, but it didn't. Now Sally made a tidy sum from it.

No one knew exactly why Mary Louise left Boston or how she landed on their doorstep, but gradually they realized the arrangement worked out pretty well for Mary Louise, too, because it allowed her to pursue her other career, which involved catering to men in more ways than just filling their bellies.

Mary Louise's room was in the back of the house, divided from the other bedrooms by a big storage closet, a laundry area, and a stairway to the attic, all of which created a kind of privacy barrier. The back of the house also had a separate entrance, and if anyone were to watch it closely—not that anyone did, mind you—he might see the occasional gentleman caller. At first, Emma and Sally just thought Mary Louise had more than one suitor, but eventually they realized there was more to it.

Mary Louise met most of her clients in nearby motel rooms, but once she got to know and trust someone, she'd save the motel bill and let him come to her room at the Sunrise. Her clients were the cream of the crop, the most respected men in town and from places much farther away. They had good jobs—they'd have to, considering Mary Louise charged \$250 an hour—and most had families they were devoted to, at least when they weren't devoting themselves to Mary Louise. Emma and Sally used to gossip about it in the beginning, but only to each other. They got used to it after a while, and they didn't object for fear of losing Mary Louise.

Emma found it hard to believe at first. She liked Mary Louise and couldn't match her up with any of the stereotypes that popped into her mind along with the word "prostitution." Sally shrugged it off as one of those things. At thirty-five, she

saw herself as much more modern than her parents, though in truth she was more conservative than they were in many ways, especially when it came to politics. Running a business will do that to you. She was much more likely to rail about licenses and liquor laws and taxes than Jonas and Emma, who, like most of Vermont, were liberal to the core. There were lots of laws limiting what businesses might do but far fewer when it came to reining in what people were allowed to do.

Jonas figured that was one reason why no one made a big deal of Mary Louise's sideline, even though at least some must have known what was going on. Or maybe they just didn't want to risk losing those breakfasts. Jonas, being an attorney and all, generally believed in enforcing the law, but he was never bothered by Mary Louise. He knew prostitution often came with some bad side effects, but he felt the higher-end work that Mary Louise engaged in probably did more good than harm, if you could tote up different sides of a ledger that way. He certainly had the feeling that Mary Louise did it by choice—that she had other options, just none that paid as well. She didn't seem a victim, and certainly her clients were free to spend their money as they wished. If anything, he felt sorry for the guys who didn't have the money to spare for an hour's pleasure. But that was the way life was. Those with money were better off. That'd been the case for thousands of years as far as he could tell.

Though Sally and Mary Louise counted each other as friends, they didn't openly discuss Mary Louise's other job, but they came fairly close. Sometimes Mary Louise would start yawning as soon as breakfast was over and wink at Sally. "I better go get some beauty rest. I got to work double tonight." Sally knew that meant she had two clients coming, but she was too embarrassed to ask the question that popped into her mind: Did it mean two at a time or one after the other?

On the other hand, the closest Emma and Mary Louise

had come to the subject was when the box from www.condomcountry.com had arrived. She handed it to Mary Louise, pretending she hadn't noticed the return address.

"Damn," said Mary Louise. "They promised me it'd be in a plain brown wrapper. Last time I ever order anything from them." Emma had burst out laughing.

Neither Emma nor Sally knew it, but Mary Louise actually talked about her second job a lot with Jonas. He had shown her how to use some of the state's legal databases to screen her clients for potential problems. And once, when he'd noticed someone he knew hanging round the back stairs, he'd asked Mary Louise if she realized he was married.

"I prefer the married ones," she told him. "They're not looking for anything I'm not selling. It's the single ones you got to worry about. First thing you know, they think they're in love and they want you all to themselves."

Jonas liked being in Mary Louise's confidences. He rather enjoyed the fact that she trusted him, though at moments it made him feel old, as if she thought he was out of the game completely. On occasion, he wondered what Mary Louise would say if he hinted he'd like to sneak up the back stairs. He knew she had a client or two almost as old as he was, and he knew his equipment still worked, with the right patience and care. But he wouldn't dare do anything but wonder. Sometimes he longed to ask her a lot more about her work. He'd never been to a "professional" and had a million questions on how it worked and what it was like from her point of view, and of course, he wanted to know why she did it, but he was too self-conscious to ask any of that. At least so far.