

Chapter One

Once I was a reasonable man. That was before the trial separations, before I fell in love with a fictional character, a woman in a book of short stories. Facts are facts, and I believe in stating them. My father, a reasonable man, says, "Crying gets you nowhere," and he's right. That's where it got me. Nowhere.

Facts made me Alton Broome, assistant professor of geology at North Cascades University. As a rule, geologists don't make a big deal out of the soap opera side of life. They take the point of view of the millennia, the ages, the Grand Canyon's point of view. They take separations in stride. They don't fall for fictional characters. Eloise Hartwig is--or was--fictional.

But first there were the six trial separations. Each time Clarissa and I broke up, we said tearful goodbyes in the basement of the bank where we kept our joint account. Six times we took off our wedding rings and laid them in our safe deposit box, in case we changed our minds. Six times we stood by the clanking iron door, signing and countersigning forms. Soon a judge would likely parcel out our house and cars, my rock specimens and Clarissa's antique jewelry collection. Luckily, we are childless.

As a child, I wasn't always as reasonable as my father, Boom Boom Broome, could have wished. When he lounged in the TV room watching Bat Masterson, reading the Wall Street Journal, chainsmoking Lucky Strikes, eating raw onions, and farting, sometimes I'd ask, "Daddy, don't you think Bat Masterson is stuck-up?"

"What do you mean, stuck-up? Define your terms." He glowered, smoky as Vesuvius on a bad day. "What's wrong with being proud? Reasonable men are proud. I might add that you, Alton, would be a more reasonable child if you didn't mumble when defining terms. Speak up."

The day I heard from Eloise--and her creator, Emily Weed--hadn't been one of my better days. Clarissa and I had met in cubicle number three, where we never did as well as we did in number one. In fact, she took off her white-gold ring, closed my fingers on it, and tugged my fist in front of my nose. She left, and I deposited our rings myself.

It was after four-thirty when I walked out onto Commercial Street. The ornamental star on top of the Mount Baker Theatre's white turret sparkled in the twilight. It had been raining for a month--since October--the way it does in northwest Washington. The sky, black at the horizon, had a bulging, gray overhang above. Past the brick tanks of the pulp mill, logs like old bones lay beside heaps of sawdust.

I kept seeing bits of a dream I'd had the last two nights in a row. My students from the last sixteen years made a worm of a line winding into the Grand Canyon. There was Gracci, who argued about his grade ten years ago. I gave him an A because I didn't want him to think I was vindictive, and he had improved. There was Brill who always got A's, she told me in a firm, injured tone, and whom I'd been just as firm with. There was Noll, who answered a ten-point question on geological time with a touching essay on "the necessary steps necessitated to make something of yourself." There were students I'd had crushes on--Miss

Spreck, Miss John, Miss Stringer, and Miss Van Sand--none of whom I'd spoken with outside of class.

In my dream, my favorite students flew past the Bright Angel Shale and Coconino Sandstone, tumbling toward the black Precambrian layers at the bottom. "Hooray!" each one yelled as he or she fell. "Hooray! Goodbye!" the others shouted, and then I plunged into the air, waving. "Goodbye! Hooray!"

When I got home, the house was dark. I yanked the door handle. It was locked, and I didn't have my key. I tried my shoulder against the door, twice, but it didn't give. I sat down on our front step, rubbing my shoulder. I didn't know where Clarissa would be staying. Her birch tree I'd planted sixteen years ago when we married looked scraggly. I must've stuck it in the ground wrong.

I got up and skulked around back. If worse came to worst, I'd sleep at my office. I never locked it. Pressing my face to the dining-room window, I tried to see the stairs to Clarissa's attic where she kept her knotted string of Peking glass beads, the miniature hands holding roses, one hand carved of ivory and one of bone. The glass steamed up. I was crying.

Don't make yourself miserable, I told myself. Sleep at your office. Leave her a message, in case she comes back. But I didn't have pen or paper. Mashing my lips against the glass, I murmured, "Clarissa, Clarissa." Maybe a short siege would help me see things in perspective. I'd write "Alton and Clarissa" in six-foot-high letters, emboss them in glass, giftwrap our names in a picture-window heart.

If I licked the glass a little, left a discreet tongue script, that would be something. She'd see my message was urgent, this symbol of what we'd created, signed with my tongue, sealed with my lips, home-delivered. An explorer reading the message of a fellow explorer, she'd see my struggle in each letter, each stroke of each letter. If she didn't, then to hell with her. I'd have done all a reasonable man can do.

I stuck my tongue out, testing the glass. I pulled it back in. Was it Puget Sound I tasted? In Alaska, hunters kill wolves by leaving knives in ice heaped with gobs of fat. A wolf finds the knife, licks it with numbed tongue until he rips his tongue to pieces and bleeds to death. Better be quick, I thought.

I dug in, then drew back. My letter A lay like two bent sticks, the cross-bar between them squirmy and squeamish-looking. My tongue was unpracticed, a poor, blunt instrument. Oh, do it, I thought. Don't be such a damned perfectionist.

I licked the glass in bold, slashing strokes. Tomorrow I'd hate myself. I'd walk into class, thinking, "Go ahead, tell them. Alton Broome licks glass--licks it and likes it." But I wouldn't have to tell them that. A man's best and worst moments are his private possession, even when they're hard to tell apart. If he can't tell the sublime from the ridiculous, that's the price he pays for leaving his seal on the world.

I took a look at my work. It wasn't the best message a man ever put his tongue to. I liked the pure, wriggling look of the letter C in

Clarissa. The heart I'd licked around our names resembled a baby whale, but I didn't care. I'd brought something new into the world.

I headed for my office, not forgetting to pick up the day's mail.

Angel Hall has high, cool ceilings and bare, pocked walls; flesh-colored ventilator pipes suck air in and out of the Chem labs, whooshing past a relief map of the Cascade Range. In my narrow, second-floor office, I sat, trying to think. Tomorrow I'd go get my car. I'd left it on Commercial Street somewhere.

On my desk, between Clarissa's picture and one of my blue agates, lay a hardcover book, *Yes, I Don't Love You, Merlin*, by one Emily Weed. Funny title. My department chairman's ex-wife Thelma had left it for me. She'd mentioned the author, a visiting writer who teaches here, too. I glanced at the jacket notes. Short stories. On the cover, a woman wearing jeans and a blue-and-silver jacket walked away toward purple mountains.

I flipped to the last page, put my feet up on my desk, settled in. When I was ten, I read a book about a horse lamed by its cruel owner. Ever since, I've checked out endings first.

For a second, I was back in my parents' apartment in Riverdale, New York, near Spuyten Dyvil, where the Hudson and Harlem Rivers meet. Sitting on the windowsill, I used to read and wave to the man in the shack on the railroad bridge whom my mother called the man in the moon. His job was to open and close a drawbridge. Mine was to carry messages between my parents when they barricaded themselves in their rooms. On that day I read about the horse, my father's password had been "amalgamate"; my mother's had been "spirit guide."

Now I glanced up from the page. One of my remaining thundereggs glared at me from its shelf. Clarissa had carted my best rocks to the landfill just last week. Turning her picture face down, I flipped back to page one, a story called "Thanks." How dare she say I don't take risks? Boldly, I began.

Eloise Hartwig stared at the wreck of her VW Bug, Brunhilda. Yellow flames went up, kind of pretty. She didn't believe in dying. But then she didn't believe in freeze-dried coffee, either. So what if someone was blowing up the clunkers of her friends in the Vegetarian League? So what if they had a C.I.A. man in their midst? "Or a C.I.A. woman," she muttered. She was pretty sure it wasn't her.

All right, a thriller, cars blowing up. I reached out for my thunderegg, pressed it to my lips. Eloise sounds different. She wouldn't cart a man's best rocks to the landfill. But why is she just "pretty sure" the double agent isn't her?

The metal popped. A piece of soot brushed her lips. She spat. Damn the Dink. She didn't care if he was the head of the Vegetarian League. She had her other satellite lovers. So what if he did plan to kidnap the Secretary of Agriculture and release fifteen million beneficial insects if the League's demands to end the murder of animals weren't met? She had the clothes on her back, her blue satin oriental jacket, her jeans,

her deer-skin boots. She had the piece of dental floss she always kept taped to her wrist.

She started walking. With a loud boom, something picked her up in the air and threw her down flat.

She got up slowly. She was walking down a street. Holly Street. Brunhilda was... toast. Her house was... charred timbers, dust slowly rising. It was toast. Shit, shit, not a super day. She wiped her lips with one hand. It came away bleeding.

As she went past the Lighthouse Mission, she muttered, "Thanks," over and over I stood up. My scalp was prickly. In my mind, I saw her. Toast, what an expression. And she doesn't believe in dying. What a brave spirit. And that "Shit, shit." Doesn't that say it all? And her "Thanks." How mysterious. And she lives right here in Sehome.

My teeth were chattering. I dropped the book. I was freezing. When I jammed my fists in my jacket pockets, something fell to the floor. I bent down. Scrawled on the back of a postcard of Mount Baker, was the following:

TRY HARDER, ALTON.
XXXXXXXXXX
ELOISE.