

## O N E



### *Squalls*

“We’re just plain bad for each other, Archie,” Z says, cutting, characteristically, straight to the point. Still, she *has* consented to this drive—“One hour,” she says. “Tops.” After all, what’s left to say that can possibly take any longer than that? Probably nothing. Nonetheless the Caddy is full of petrol, the hour already fleeting and, by her own reluctant admission, she concedes again to that unmistakable, deep-seated something we just can’t resist about each other.

I’ve owned this land yacht, a ruby red 1975 convertible, for longer than I’ve known Z. Power seats and electric eye on the dashboard and a trunk you could share with a small rhinoceros. A take-charge Coupe DeVille that I lucked into with a ridiculously lowball estate sale bid.

We’re here on good tread—the snow slashing so hard into the headlights that we’re momentarily blinded and staring dizzy-eyed into the tunnel between these fields of last year’s standing corn. But this is not a storm we’re cruising through—these are Michigan lake-effect squalls that slow us, sometimes to a crawl. But once they open up, the road is slick-black and entirely inviting, my arm around Z like old times, the world wildly alive again, and the radio loud.

“Archie,” she says, turning the volume down a few decibels.

“We’ve been down this road how many times before? And to what end?” When I don’t respond she says, “You do realize, don’t you, how hopeless this is? How completely insane?”

I can tell she’s softening, making this the most delicate moment of the drive so far—one wrong utterance and it’s over, and this time no doubt for good. Nonetheless, I launch into this speech about real caring and trust over the long haul. I argue that on a sliding scale maybe we’ve slid as far as we’re going to into that marital dead zone all couples fear, and from now on the momentum’s thrust is up, up and away. It’s the kind of testimonial you can only ever deliver straight-faced to someone you honest to God love, and actually mean it. Impassioned assertions that do not, however, as I’ve discovered firsthand, stand up well against the lessons of either logic or experience.

Z’s an artist, a master glassblower with a degree from RISD, and I remind her how often she’s argued her theory that anything can be transformed by art and love. Absolutely anything.

“This marriage?” I ask, flicking the wipers off again as we finally exit another squall. But this one’s different, dissolving so slowly at the thin, opalescent blue rim of first light that it feels mystic. And I get serious chills when a swan emerges from that same dense snow behind us, with its wings outspread not three feet above the wet and shiny hood. It’s that close, and Z whispers, “Archie,” and I hit the brakes hard. On black ice as it turns out, and we’re spinning now into a series of 360s, the top-heavy front end of the Caddy hesitating just long enough at the apex of each wide swoop for us to glimpse the torture of that enormous white bird’s interminable somersaulting on the pavement.

We come to a stop in an empty field, the engine stalled. Z is holding my hand, squeezing it, and the radio is suddenly all static, like the snow, and Z is humming some made-up song. Just staring out the tinted windshield and humming, like she’s been stunned. I can tell already that one of the swan’s wings is broken, and one eye is completely shut, and the wind keeps lifting its neck feathers.

I don’t want to move a muscle, but the gasoline fumes are strong and I’m afraid that the car might blow, so I switch the igni-

tion off. And maybe it's the tinkling of the keys on the key ring—I'm not sure—but Z lets go of my hand and leans forward and takes off her navy peacoat and says, "Here." She says, "Please, Archie. You've got to go help it. You've got to."

What's most humane in this situation would be to put the swan out of its misery as quickly as possible, and by whatever available means. But try explaining that to the woman you've loved and are losing and so desperately want back in your life.

"Look, there's an inch of ice on its wings," I say, though I'm not sure how that matters exactly, except perhaps to solve the mystery of this terrible accident we've just witnessed.

"Go get it, Archie," she pleads, and she starts to cry because the swan is staring back at us with its one good eye, from me to Z, back and forth like that.

"You don't just walk up on wounded things," I say with absolute certainty. "Not on wild things, Z. Listen, I don't even have any gloves with me," which sounds like the chintziest and most insensitive and cowardly excuse in all God's creation. "Listen to me," I say, but she doesn't. Instead she lowers her face deeper into her hands and I notice, really for the first time, when I touch her hair, the first hints of gray, and how, unlike me, she's not wearing her wedding band. Which frightens me so much that I get out of the car and breathe deeply into the cold air to try and clear my aching head.

And it begins to snow again. Enormous feathery flakes floating down slow motion and so thick that when I wrap Z's wool coat around the swan and pick it up against my chest, I know she can only imagine in what direction I've gone, where it is I've bolted to under pressure this time. The only reason I don't call out to her, like someone lost and panicked, is that this bird has actually leaned its face against mine, and seems to be asleep.

Even more so when I lay the swan in the back seat, collar up, those black anchor buttons fastened like a line of poker chips down the center of its breast. It would be comical if it were not so damn sad.

She says, "Archie, look," and I do, this time in the rearview mirror, and what I see is that orange bill opening and closing as

though it were trying to speak. Because I can't get the car started there is nothing we can do. The plumes of pink sulfur from the emergency flare I've already lit are visible on the road's shoulder. But nobody is driving this far outside of town on a Sunday morning. I imagine parishioners attending early Mass, and lighting candles at the feet of St. Francis, birds perched on his fingers in the Church of the Sacred Heart where Z and I were married in a tiny private ceremony.

Z, now huddled under the Hudson Bay blanket I stash in case of winter breakdowns, asks, "Is it really true that swans mate for life?" I nod, close my eyes, and wonder if the other is up there circling and circling, and then I crack the window and listen for that unmistakable slow whistle of its wings. I hear nothing, and I realize that it's not in me right now to confront the loss that sound would mean.

Z says she needs to say a couple of things, which she worries might sound foolish, but I tell her no, that nothing could with such a beautiful creature dying so close to us. She has no idea how soothing the music of her voice is. No earthly idea.

"We go way back, don't we, Archie?" she says, and I nod yes, her head on my shoulder, her right arm draped over the seat back where I know her fingers are fluttering slow, final dances for the swan. Then Z asks me if I remember *Swan Lake*, which of course I do—the only ballet I ever attended.

"Yes," I say, "every last detail"—the tight black strapless satin dress she wore and the way the camera shutter seemed to stop in mid-click, and that handful of white rose petals she threw toward me, laughing on those mammoth granite stairs outside the theater. And how she flapped her arms as though *she* might rise and fly, a raven, I thought back then, or a crow, or yes, a rare and elegant black swan.

"Archie," she says again, "don't you wish sometimes that we could retrieve the best parts of our past—just those—and hold onto them forever?" I swear to her that we can, which I know is a lie. "No," she says. "It's over. This time it has to end. This time for good."

"I know that," I tell her, and although true or not true, I want

*How Like an Angel*

to believe that nothing ever really dies. But Z is already reaching for the swan, and crying again, as there must always be a first to cry out among the great flocks that take off by the thousands to migrate home. And then pair off, and because the world is sometimes like this, one must go on alone.