

April 16, 2003, Wednesday afternoon, Elk Creek

Jen felt pretty stupid running through a cold downpour in a soggy stand of ryegrass holding two longneck Millers. It started off promising enough: she'd guessed about right, stopping at Elk Creek Cheese at 2:30 to learn that yes, Steve was done in the factory but no, he wasn't here. She had the two beers in hand as Steve's office staff—three of his patrons' wives—talked about the events of the day, the shaking ground on Monday and peppered Jen with questions about her career and plans now that she was “here back home.” Only after the interrogation did Sandy say that Steve was out back with the wastewater.

As Jen stepped outside, the sky, ribboned in grays, opened up again, and any pleasant thought she'd had about crackin' a cold one and handing it to a friend stiffened, froze and died in cold, stinging drizzle.

And for God's sake Schleusener was way the hell out there. Amazingly, Steve was using the same system she'd seen when she visited the factory as a kid. Elk Creek Cheese used a hose and spray gun to land-apply their wash water on the lush acres that sloped back off of Highway 93 toward the Roque highlands. It was old-school technology, but it worked, if the dense grass underfoot was any indication.

By the time Jen reached Steve, she was shivering and soaking wet even encased in the most water-repellant coat she could find in Mom's closet. The spray gun was already launching wash water. “Don't you have people for this?” Jen yelled as she approached in noisy rain.

“What?”

“I said you're an asshole and I brought you a beer.”

Schleusener lifted his cap, looked right up into the rain, then wiped a hand across his face. “Yeah, I was just thinkin' how dry I was.”

Jen tossed him a bottle. “It couldn’t possibly get more shook up,” she said, looking up at Steve. He had real rain gear and a slick hood up and over his Elk Creek Cheese cap. “This idea looked better on paper when I was sitting by my fireplace,” Jen said.

He broke a knowing smile and said, “Come here a sec,” opened his long coat, and she stepped inside and got a decent hug and a blessed moment of warmth.

Thunder rumbled and Schleusener reached around their embrace to open the bottle a distance behind her head and watched rain wash away white foam. He got her in a headlock to get a long pull at the warmish beer. He ended the ritual with a deep breath through the nose. “Beer’s good stuff, you should try it sometime.”

“Are you done out here?”

“Ah, yah. Why?”

“Well, I vote we walk these beers over to Jim’s and drink indoors like decent folk.”

To Jen’s surprise, Steve didn’t nod them forward. They were maybe eight hundred yards from the bar, but Schleusener stood there looking through and beyond her. He stepped back from their hug, took off his cap, tugged back the too-small hood covering Jen, and twisted the brimmed cap on her wet head and covered it with Mom’s overcoat again.

“Yeah, I kinda have to talk to you,” Steve said. “But in private. And in a lightning storm,” he added as a flash lit the dull grays of the afternoon. He smiled a bit at his own joke.

“Walk and talk,” Jen said, heading for the bar. “There’s probably no one in there anyway.”

She got two steps ahead and when she turned around Steve was already finishing his beer. He caught up in a couple of big strides. They walked silently together, intent on the green pasture with its furrows cleverly hidden under matted grass.

Steve hadn’t expected to see Jen just now. With effective indecision and plenty of distractions, he’d avoided solving the puzzle of how to help his oldest friend without getting her killed. If he and Ronny had come up with an answer in his hot tub Monday, he couldn’t remember it.

A cheesemaker gets no sleep, Steve thought, and a cheesemaker trying to decide if the world is gonna end gets even less. Too many damn secrets.

Some folks knew about diamonds around here, and fewer knew about the hole in the ground that caused them. There used to be people—sober, responsible dudes—who ran the whole circus that kept things quiet. But the off-agenda responsibilities of the Elk Creek Town Board and Sheephead Club had faded from memory. When the DNR shut down the Trempealeau County Fish Hatchery in 1974, everyone in the county, even those with no secrets to keep, figured it made perfectly good sense to close that run-down piece of crap. Only Steve and Ronny, Sheriff Tubby Torgeson, Father Mitchell and a few other “sons of” knew the US Army and the CIA had orchestrated the shuttering of that World War II relic. Of course, Lawrence and Tess Marten knew, and old Ten-Star General Frank Ross and Hans Meier. They were up there freezing their asses off right now.

“You felt the earthquake Monday?” Jen asked, sensing the need for a simple question to draw Steve out.

“Yeah, it rolled the factory a bit but nothing snapped. Strange, huh?” he added and looked down at his footfalls. He shuddered at the thought of the stronger quakes the professor was predicting. A cheese factory is built to handle mild vibrations from pumps and the movement of milk and curd in pipes, but a serious shaking could burst a balance tank bolted to the floor, crack a weld in his make vats and torque all sorts of metal fittings. Cheese plants don’t bounce. “Your mom’s house?”

“Crashed a few of Mom’s five hundred pictures, but no major damage,” she said. “I was down in La Crosse, actually, and we felt just the subtlest rocking.”

“We?”

Jen tripped on a rise in the turf and let out a “Whoof.” She had questions for Steve, but she hadn’t thought about questions for her. Should she share her father’s clue to trust Lawrence Marten (and no one else)? Was Contessa’s whisper that put her together with Paul Meadows a secret?

“I was in a restaurant. We were in a restaurant. People,” Jen said sort of casually.

“Have you been driving down to La Crosse for every meal, or just suppers?”

“Mostly for beers in sleazy Harley bars.”

“With sleazy old high school boyfriends.”

Steve was a tonic, but as Jen sloshed through the frigid field rows, she

remembered the jarring tractor ride last Friday when she spread Mom's ashes. She'd spent most of yesterday trying to understand Mom's death, looking for the Martens, looking for Hans Meier—looking for answers. All she had was a fortune in diamonds and a VHS tape she could not decipher. Oh, and a crazy new friend. When Jen looked up, Steve was several steps ahead and seemed to be heading toward a shed between his acreage and the bar. He strode to the eave on the south side, and Jen followed. He opened his mouth to speak but a look from Jen stopped him.

"Steve, what did Mom die of?"

Rain tocked on the metal roof like a thousand clocks awaiting his reply.

Steve swallowed, then, "Didn't anyone say?"

Jen waited. She hadn't met with any doctors, just church friends and Father Mitchell, who said an illness progressed to pneumonia and blah, blah, blah. Her shame blunted inquiry—she hadn't spoken with Mom in months. She really didn't know if her mother had become weakened or ill. But since the moment she arrived, everyone she met seemed to back away from that question like it was death itself. Even Steve.

Her silence was Steve's kryptonite. "I mean, I don't really know. She got sick," he said. "All I know for sure is she's in a better place now." He studied his shoes.

"Mom met with Lawrence Marten not too long ago," Jen said, moving in on Steve. "She taped a conversation they had. Something about water, a pond, that was closing up. It seemed to be related to earthquakes." She stared at Schleusener. He stared back, and something in his eyes said a siren was sounding in his brain. "So I decided to see an old friend Monday—an old classmate I had in Professor Marten's geology class, Paul Meadows."

Schleusener literally turned red. "Milk Carton Meadows? You know Milk Carton Meadows? How the hell . . ."

Jen grasped the inference and was not impressed. "Yes, Paul Meadows, the guy who's apparently been looking around up here for his missing friend since he was a teenager." Jen drew in close enough to push a finger in Schleusener's raincoat. "You remember his friend. Turns out he died on the exact same day as my dad! And I used to ask, 'Why did Daddy disappear?' I'd ask Mom and she'd give me the same look you're giving me, and now she's gone. And Professor Marten disappeared, and Mrs. Marten.

And my neighbor's suddenly gone. So, Steve, I'm asking you, what the hell did my mother die of?"

"I can't tell you!" The burst of emotion from Schleusener was punctuated by another lightning flash. He stepped back, palms up.

Jen beat the thunder with her own. "You can't or you won't!?"

"I can't," he said, dropping his hands, his head, his voice. The valley rumbled. "But I want you to know that I'm here. I'm here . . . to be here for you. To protect you."

Jen saw real conflict in his eyes. She took a breath, but she wasn't finished. "Protect me? What is it, Steve? What have we all done?"

Now he fell silent, and Jen checked herself. Steve was hiding something, stonewalling, and she realized that her ignorance was her protection. She took a breath and nodded gently. But she needed one more handhold—something more to grasp. "Steve," she said softly, "when I mentioned Lawrence Marten outside church this Sunday, you acted like you never heard of him. When we went by his house, you seemed to recall him a bit more. Just now, I mentioned him, what, three times? That didn't confuse you one bit."

Schleusener's eyes unclenched, his shoulders dropped. "I know him."

Jen stepped back and out of the protection of the eave. "I think that's the first honest thing you've said to me since I arrived." She backed up to the corner of the building. "It's a start." She turned and strode ten paces before sneaking a peek back. Schleusener had rounded the corner of the shed and was looking at her. With the flick of her gloved hand, she waved him on and turned and walked toward the warm lights of the bar ahead.