



Home

A Peaceful Pilgrim Novel

Excerpt

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Part I:

Stranger in a Strange Place

“Home’ is any four walls that enclose the right person.”

~Helen Rowland

June 2, 2010

Chapter 1

“There you go, harping on home again. Isn’t home wherever your family is, Della? Isn’t that what everybody says?”

I refuse to say anything, just stare at my husband angrily, thinking a dozen different things that contradict what he’s saying and only one point that agrees with his words. My...our...son, River, is my home. But *this*, this place I ended up in and can’t fathom how I let myself be manipulated into agreeing to live, is *not* home. For me, there is only one home, one *physical* home. The town I was born and grew up in—Peaceful, Wisconsin. I haven’t been there for so long, the loss is with me daily, every second lately. To me, home is safety, comfort, and peace. I have none of those things in this place. And Declan Flynn is the reason those basic needs were stolen from me.

“Your family is here, Ayodele,” Dec says in a soft, condescending way that infuriates me.

That he calls me by my full name is beyond a slap in the face. I know it’s a slur on my almost desperate desire to go home. The origin of my name is West Africa and means “joy has come home”. Only my mother calls me by my full name now. Everyone else calls me Della.

“Me and River are your family. Can’t you see that?”

The tone of his voice is biting, sarcastic, dismissive. I can’t help hating him when he gets like this. When I look at him while we’re fighting, I forget what it is that I ever saw in him. Every day it gets harder and harder to remember, and sometimes the need to recall is excruciating—because that love or whatever it was that brought us together is all that’s been keeping me here. And now... *Now it’s no longer a factor.*

At these times when our fight personifies the death of our relationship, all I see is that any emotions I had for this man have eroded down to bare rock. I no longer believe that his feelings for me have any hold over him either. At times, I believe he no longer even *likes* me, let alone loves me.

Three months ago, everything had changed. The turning point came down to a single incident that burned itself into my brain when it happened. In a casual tone, he’d announced that he was doing me a big favor: He was moving into the guest bedroom because his obscene snoring was out of control, keeping me awake constantly. We haven’t slept together—in any sense of the word—since then...since the moment that something died in me with his calm, unconcerned words. I hadn’t been able to define exactly what it was that had withered inside me at his words, but I do know that it was a form of tolerance. Until that moment, I’d never realized how crucial tolerance was in a marriage. I know it now. I equally know I can’t get it back. When Declan made the break with me, my needs ceased to matter to him. As a result and maybe even unconsciously, he no longer factored into the scheme of my life.

My teeth clench, then I say softly, “I told you when you forced me to move to Chicago that I wouldn’t stay indefinitely. You know I hate big cities...”

“You hate any place except your precious Peaceful,” he grunts.

“To live, yes, but Chicago is dangerous. Don’t you dare tell me it’s not. You promised me we wouldn’t have to stay long. Just until...”

What had he said back then? I realize now that maybe I’d never listened properly. Then, as now, he...or was it *we*?...had had no choice. He and his business partner had been offered an irresistible deal if they sold their fledgling, handmade furniture business and all

their current designs to a mega corporation named World Furniture. The company had been headquartered in Chicago, and it now distributed Dec and Hannah's original furniture designs on an international scale—unlike anything the two of them could have imagined. The corporation had wanted them in charge of getting the line up and running the first few years. Then the two of them would take their considerable settlement and do whatever they liked. In other words, they would willingly cut all ties with their own designs and walk away.

That was supposed to be the plan. Unfortunately, within a few months of the deal being fulfilled on both sides, Declan and Hannah had regretted their decision to sell off all that was theirs. As soon as they'd completed the contract—two and a half years after we moved to Chicago—we were supposed to be able to go back home to Peaceful. Instead, Dec had decided to go into business with Hannah once again. They'd used the remaining money from the lucrative sale of their original designs to establish a new furniture business. That pretty much fixed us in Chicago indefinitely. In all the time that's followed, I haven't gotten over the shock of his unwillingness to consult me or so much as listen to my side once he announced *his* decision.

I'd had my first and only child in the midst of this situation, and River became my entire life, my only joy. I'd barely looked up from my focus in taking care of him every day. Not until Dec announced another doozy that sent me reeling, that is. He said we couldn't afford to live in the halfway decent apartment in a good neighborhood in Chicago anymore, that we were moving. We ended up in a part of the city that had a reputation for being one of Chicago's most dangerous.

In the last three months, I've begun to realize that Declan was telling me what I wanted to hear when he said we could go back to Wisconsin. He'd never had any intention of returning, or allowing me to. When River got old enough to go to the four-year-old kindergarten near our apartment, Dec had again cajoled and finally insisted that I get a job during the hours River was in school. Whether or not my husband would admit it at the time, I'd made the connection that his business wasn't doing well. Not at all. All the money that could have set us up for years in Peaceful was gone. We could barely make it paycheck to paycheck. River is eight now, in school full-time. While he's there, I'm working at the diner that's a handful of scary blocks from our ramshackle apartment building.

When Dec had said he wanted to talk after River went to bed tonight, I should have realized something was up. Unfortunately, I was exhausted and all I've been able to think about lately is that River will be out of school soon for the summer and Dec and I have a deal—I don't work at all in the summer. There's no way I'll pay for someone to take care of my son for me while I work, since most of that money would go right back into childcare anyway. No way. I refuse to do that, and Declan's not going to talk me into anything this time. The way he always does initially when he wants me to give in to something, he presents this idea as if he's doing some noble thing for his family. "If you work full-time this summer, River can come with me to the factory during the day. We won't have to pay anyone to take care of him. We'll have more money coming in, Della. You know how hard it's been."

I say the first thing that comes into my head: "If your business is doing so badly, there's no reason in the world we have to stay here. We can go home. We can go back to Peaceful and be *safe*."

Declan and I were both born and raised in Peaceful, which is a tiny town about an hour

from La Crosse—easily three hundred miles from us now. Peaceful is an apt name for a place where good people live, where crime is scarce, where a person can walk the streets after dark and go completely unharmed. I know there are few places like it left in the world, but Peaceful has never changed in this regard.

Dec had never been happy there. I honestly don't believe he's ever been happy *anywhere*. His parents still live in Peaceful, but he doesn't have a strong relationship with them. I'm not even sure why, since I love his parents and see little logic for the unspoken grudge he harbors against them. If not for the ties between me and his mother and father, I'm sure Dec would never bother seeing his parents again.

River's grandparents have never met him, though I e-mail them photographs constantly and we write back and forth on a daily basis. Dec's mother has a heart condition that forbids her from most travel. I can't blame her for never visiting us. I wouldn't want to come to this filthy, ill-maintained apartment either. A testament to its age, the apartments themselves are surprising large with decent sized rooms. Unfortunately, the owner/super let the place go more than thirty years ago. Nothing's been done to improve it since then. If anything goes wrong, he barely takes the time to lie and tell you he'll get around to it. I suppose he figures the cheap rent is a trade-off. But the crappy state of the apartments isn't the worst of it. This neighborhood is made up of criminals, drug addicts, the desperate and destitute. It's a terrifying place with police sirens screaming day and night.

Because Dec and I are so poor, we can't afford a second car, and so I have to walk to and from work every day. That walk never gets any easier for me, any less scary. I endure crude comments all the time and carry pepper spray and my cell phone whenever I'm not in the apartment. I think the only reason nothing bad has ever happened to me is because I work during the day and the walk is into a public business district where there are too many people for blatant crimes to take place in the light of day. If I had to walk there at night, it would be a different story. I've always known that if I went to permanent status at the twenty-four-hour diner, my boss would start cycling me into the night shift, the way the permanent staff alternates in and out of in the course of any given month. I can't allow that. I have to think about my son's life if anything happened to me.

That Declan would even suggest that I do this is telling. He doesn't care if something happens to me as long as I'm living out *his* will, as long as I'm supporting his dream. What would he do if his bread wagon was no longer available to him?

"You promised," I whisper.

He's no longer facing me. He flips the television on. I find that I can't look away from him. I barely recognize this man. His blondish-brown hair is way too long, curling around his neck because he can never make the time for a haircut, let alone scrounge up the money for one. I've lost track of the last time he shaved. His green eyes are now embedded deeply in a puffy face that used to be lean, tan and handsome. He's put on so much weight in the last few years, even his tall, once muscular frame can no longer compensate. We used to exercise together with long walks—when we lived in Peaceful, we walked more than two hours a day together, talking endlessly. We even walked, though nowhere as much, when we were living in the halfway decent neighborhood in Chicago. Now he eats nonstop, mostly junk food, as if he doesn't realize that we can't afford such a bad habit. Stress only makes his overeating worse.

Shameful guilt fills me at my uncharitable thoughts, but I can't help recalling the boy he'd been all the years we'd gone to school together. I only really got to know him after he'd

had a serious car accident in high school—homecoming night—that put him in the hospital. Other than his parents and relatives who didn't live far away, I was the only one who visited him. The other kids at school were uncomfortable because the bright star, albeit moody, Mr. Popularity had been felled, and there was a good chance he'd never walk, let alone play football, again. In Wisconsin, football is as important as family and church.

Swallowing with difficulty, I accept that it's always easy to question things in retrospect. Question whether I actually fell in love with him during that time, or if it was just the next, natural step for friends. Did *he* decide we should get married? I can't remember now, though I recall that I didn't feel I had a real choice in the matter. He expected me to marry him, expected me to continue taking care of him. His parents expected the same. What else could I do? Had it been a situation of, by not making my own choice, I inadvertently made the worst possible one? I was the mighty Declan Flynn's champion, his rock, his support and comfort. What am I now to him? What is he to me? The definitions elude me. Ultimately, I no longer feel the same as I once did.

"I won't do it, Dec," I say, hating how I feel inside. All my life, I've known I'm too introspective. I spend far too much time analyzing and thinking things to death. Part of it now is that I have too much time on my hands, too much time to be unhappy with our situation. It doesn't help that Declan and I no longer spend time together the way we did in the beginning. We no longer communicate. We fight.

The words my best friend had said in an e-mail earlier today are too fresh in my mind. "Why don't you just leave him, Della? You're not happy. You sound utterly miserable. What are you afraid of? What's the worst that could happen? You'll have to admit that you're as flawed and powerless as the rest of us?" I recall thinking, *Rosalia is too quick to fall in love, too quick to bail out when it's not going well. And me? It takes me too long to fall in love, too long to bail out when love is long dead.*

Declan's gaze slides without interest to me from the TV he's watching mindlessly, no longer listening to me because, like usual, to him the situation is decided. He wants me to work full-time during the summer and so River will go to work with him each day. What else is there to discuss?

I glance at the television. There's a huge crack in it where, during an argument, he punched it. His violent temper has never once been directed at me or River, but any inanimate object is in jeopardy. You can still view programs but not well, and we can't afford to replace it anyway. Since he's the only one who watches TV around here, for once he's had to face the consequences of his own mistake instead of trying to make someone else pay for it. Unfortunately, this isn't something that will teach him a lesson about life. Dec rarely learns from his mistakes.

"You're not gonna do what, Della? Work so your family can survive? What else can we do? What other choice do we have?"

I can feel myself shaking, the emotion inside me is so volatile. "You can give up the stupid business that's not making any money—the opposite, in fact—and we can go home like you promised long ago."

In obvious disbelief, he barks at me. "Give it up? Do you know how much money we put into it when we started?"

I'm not moved by his situation. I continue to stare a hole through him. "Do you think for one second that I don't know—down to the penny!—how much of our money you dumped into that business? Do you think I don't know that you took everything and left

your family nothing? That was *your* decision, Dec. You think you can make all of our decisions. You decided you were taking the deal with World Furniture, that we were leaving Peaceful to move here. You made the decision to go back into business with Hannah again, and it bombed. You decided that I had to work while River was in school. From start to finish, you made this mess, and you're trying to get me to clean it up again! It's all you're capable of doing. But I won't do it this time, Dec. I'm not leaving my son to roam a factory filled with dangerous equipment for more than eight hours. I know what you're like when you start talking with another adult or get busy. You won't watch River at all when you're distracted."

"What are you saying? I'd let my own son get hurt? That I can't be trusted with him?"

"Maybe you wouldn't intentionally let him get hurt, but, yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. It's not going to happen. I won't work while you take him to the factory."

He's staring at me like *I'm* saying something that could possibly offend *him*. "Look, Della, I'm not gonna abandon something I dumped that much money into. I've got more fortitude than that. I can't believe you'd ask it of me."

Oh, he has nerve to claim that it's fortitude that's kept him going in the worst possible direction. "I spend every day of my life in utter disbelief of what *you* ask of *me*, Dec. Living here, in this hellhole. Walking to and from the diner, past all those..." I swallow, shaking my head because I can't voice my fears. Not to him. I won't leave myself vulnerable to him.

"Nothing's gonna happen to you."

"Or maybe you just don't care if anything does. But then what would you do without *my* paycheck? Did you ever think of that?"

He glares at me, his expression the I-hate-you one that covers his face nearly all the time now. My anger burns lava-hot inside me. I don't even try to stop the volcano from erupting, though I keep my voice down because I don't want to wake or upset River. "So sell the business off again. I'm sure World Furniture would be interested in your new designs."

He turns his head and looks off across the living room at the double doors that lead out to the terrace. The silence stretches, and I realize something is up. Something he doesn't want to tell me. "What, Dec?"

"We already asked 'em. They're not interested in another deal. Apparently they didn't get as much mileage out of the originals as they expected."

I should comfort him. Obviously the designs weren't something that had consumers spending all their hard-earned dollars to purchase. But I'm too angry. Even knowing the big company is no longer interested in him or his designs, he's intent on sticking it out with his dying business. Why? "So what's your plan, Dec? You're just gonna keep throwing good money after bad indefinitely? Hoping *I'll* work to cover *your* debts and make sure there's food on the table every day?" I have to physically restrain myself from shaking him because he's sitting there so unmoved by what matters so much to me. "There's nothing for me here. Why can't you understand that, Dec? There's no incentive to stay here any longer. Our lives are so screwed up..."

He doesn't look at me when he slumps back on the threadbare sofa. "It's not my fault. There was no way I could know this new business wouldn't do well. The other did okay, even for being situated in a small town like Peaceful."

I try to take deep breaths and get myself under control, but I can't let this go. "It's not your fault? How can you say that? Dec, if it's not your fault, whose fault is it? You made all the decisions from start to finish. I'm just saying that I won't let you do it again. You've

ruined my life long enough.”

His furniture designs gained attention for one reason and one reason alone. Because of Hannah Powell. A couple years after Dec and I got married and his furniture business halfway between Peaceful and the city of La Crosse was just taking off, he met Hannah at a design show in Chicago, where they’d both had exhibition booths. From that moment on, they’d become inseparable. Hannah had even moved to La Crosse so they could go into business together.

I knew from the instant I met the woman it wasn’t just Dec’s business she had designs on. She’s one of those immoral females who take whatever they want because they believe they’re entitled to it, God only knows why. She’s also incredibly ambitious in business. Despite the fact that I’m a Christian, I can’t help but feeling passionate hate for her. I avoid her whenever I can, which is also what she does with me. Declan has always insisted he and Hannah are nothing more than business partners and friends, but I’ve never quite believed him. Fortunately, I’ve never had any proof to the contrary. Never had any before...

When Declan decided to sleep in the guest bedroom three months ago, I recognized that something was blatantly wrong in our marriage. Something I hadn’t wanted to believe—not because I’m so in love with him or even *still* in love with him, but because I don’t have any options. We’re all but broke, without any savings backup, and I have to take care of my son. I have to think of River first. The only thing I have is the fifty dollars I’ve been taking out of the second paycheck of the month, the one we don’t pay rent with. It’s all I can afford to withdraw, and I initially did it to “match” the \$100 Declan insisted on withdrawing for the expensive carton of cigarettes he stretches to last for weeks. He doesn’t know about the money I keep for myself, but I’ve been saving it since he forced me to go to work. While it’s not enough for River and me to live on for any length of time, I realized with my last paycheck that it’s enough to get us home. The \$2400 I’ve saved could cover a couple months of rent and necessities if we’re very, very careful, and I can get a job quickly. I keep the money in a locked jewelry box I have the only key to. The money won’t last long, but if Dec’s parents help us, maybe let us stay with them for a few months, then I’ll have time to get a job that can support the two of us.

Dec looks over at me and laughs in clear pain, as if I’m the one doing all the inflicting of wounds here. “Oh, is that what our marriage is to you, Della? A ruin?” He snorts in disgust. “Fine. Don’t go to work full-time. Let River starve.” He snorts, in this one area knowing me too well. I can never let my son suffer. “Like that’s gonna happen.”

He’s trying to make me feel stupid and responsible...and it’s working, darn him. “*You’re* the one trying to deprive him of all he has in the world—by holding on to something that’s been a waste of time almost from the start. There’s no reason in the world we need to stay here.”

“You keep saying that—that we don’t have to stay. You planning something, Della? How do you think you’re getting out of here? Your mom’s in a nursing home. She can’t take care of herself, let alone you and Riv. Your old man left her nothing when he died—nothing but what she needs to stay in that home. So quit saying we can leave, okay? You’re not going anywhere. I’m not. Our home is here with River. And I’m not getting rid of the business. I’m not throwing it away just ‘cause you’ve got no faith in me.”

I sneer at him. “Nice try. But you keep talking like *I’m* not free to make my own choices and decisions, especially if they differ with yours.”

“Free? What do you wanna be free to do, huh? Other than ‘go home?’” Cruelly, he

imitates me, then grunts, “That’s every other damn word out of your damn mouth.”

“I’m free to do anything I choose to, Dec. Free to go home. Free to say I’ve lived up to my end of the bargain, far longer than you’ve deserved, and I’m done. I don’t have to stay here just because you won’t leave your precious money pit and your beloved Hannah.”

Because I can’t sit next to him anymore, acting like I could ever be comfortable in that position again, I leap to my feet and cross the room to the kitchen beside the terrace. When I turn back to him, his expression has changed and he’s staring at me like he can’t fathom what I’ve said. It’s as if he’s realized the truth of my words, as if he’s finally comprehended what I’ve been saying throughout this conversation without voicing the actual words. “What are you...? Are you...? *Divorce?* You would do that, Della? *You?* Just to get back to your precious home?”

Wrapping my arms around myself, I murmur, “I don’t need a divorce to leave.”

He swallows with obvious difficulty, and I feel a lump enter my throat. I’ve never, ever liked the word divorce, let alone what it means. My friend Rosalia thinks divorce is the answer to everything. But for me, divorce means tearing down every single part of what we’ve built together over the course of a decade and a half. I gave Declan two years of my life while he was recovering from his car accident and fifteen years of marriage. All of that would be destroyed by divorce. Our life together would be put up on a chopping block, and I would have to forget all the time and energy I’d put into our marriage.

“You think you’re gonna take my son and leave here?”

Unfortunately, his tone isn’t angry or uncompromising. If it was, that would make my decision so much easier. I refuse to give him any slack. Everything inside me is unyielding and has been since he abandoned our marriage bed, as it were. “You can come with us,” I murmur. “It’s your choice. Make the choice, Dec.”

“How? How do you think you can leave? Did my parents give you the money? It’s the only way.”

He’s upset, and that makes him quiet, his face stormy. I can’t help wishing he would say fine and just come with us. Even when deep down I really don’t want that, I wish for it because it’s easier and I understand myself well enough to realize that all I’ve ever wanted in life is the easy path. I know I’m not alone in that. Dec’s always been that way, too. I don’t want a divorce, and I don’t like the idea of leaving him. I have no feelings for him that are good anymore, yet I don’t feel ready to turn my back on him, our marriage, and walk out for good. But if it means that River and I can go home...

He reaches for the pack of cigarettes on the scarred table in front of the sofa. His hand is shaking. I won’t let him light the cigarette. When I grab the lighter to stop him, he gets up with the pack and takes the lighter from me, then he goes out silently to the only place he can smoke in the apartment—onto the rattletrap terrace. He doesn’t close the door behind him. I go out after him and shut it so River won’t be subjected to second-hand smoke and so I can make my position clear to him. “I’m not working full-time during the summer, Dec. I’m not paying someone to take care of my son. And I’m certainly not letting him go to the factory with you. With *her*. I don’t trust either of you to watch him. I don’t trust anyone but myself to take care of him in this place.”

He’s leaning over the railing, his back to me. “Do you really think I’d ever let anything happen to him?”

“Yes. Don’t make me say it again. We both know that scenario won’t work.”

“Fine. So don’t work full-time. I already said you don’t have to. I’ll figure something

else out.”

“Selling the business?”

“No. That’s not an option.”

“I won’t stay here any longer.” I can’t understand why he’s being so stubborn over something that’s obviously a losing prospect, an unsuccessful endeavor. Is it his pride? But no... Why didn’t I realize it before? Because I simply didn’t want to know the truth? My mouth falls open. “It’s her, isn’t it? She won’t sell, give it up. She won’t give *you* up.”

“She doesn’t have anything to do with it,” he mutters, but there’s something sheepish in his tone.

“I think she has everything to do with it. She’s what’s wrong in our marriage. You’re not sleeping with me anymore because...”

Surprising me, he turns to me, tossing the cigarette he can’t afford to waste in the bucket of sand in the corner of the terrace. “So let’s sleep together, Della. I didn’t know you were interested anymore, or I would have made a move sooner.”

Feeling horrified, I put up my hands to ward him off. “You’re not sleeping with me anymore because you’re sleeping with her, and she’s jealous,” I finish the revelation of what I started, and the words are like razor blades in my throat. I’ve been so blind. Willingly. Eagerly. Anything to avoid what could hurt me, avoid my own failure.

I’m staring at him, shaking my head without really noticing what I’m doing. The fact that he won’t talk at all now and pivots back to the cigarette in the bucket solidifies the truth of his betrayal. He shows me his back to re-light the cigarette. A single word will only make things worse. He’s always been so good at sidestepping trouble with me.

It’s too late now anyway. I know. I can’t turn a blind eye anymore, and a change must come as a result.



Declan’s policy is to avoid confrontation at any cost, and he’s always the one to walk out in the middle of every argument, willing to allow the situation, the *many* situations, to go unresolved. His attitude infuriates me. This time, instead of demanding that he be a man and face the situation, I simply drill holes in his back with my gaze and I face the facts with a clear head. One fact in particular is burning inside me like a beacon of hope. Is this problem finally resolved? On my end...maybe it is. I *am* free. The dawning makes me gasp, a sound not heard audibly by either of us because a police siren erupts somewhere close by at that moment. I hold onto my stomach as, almost unwillingly, unconsciously, unwaveringly, my mind begins accepting and planning.

River’s last day of school before summer is tomorrow. We can leave when school lets out. We can get on a bus and go back to Wisconsin. I just know Dec’s parents would love it if we stayed with them for a little bit, until I can get a job. They can watch their grandson during the day while I’m at work. I would trust them to do that. I’ve always thought that, if only they had the opportunity, Declan’s parents would make River the center of their world.

I don't have to stay here.

I'm free.

I can go home.

I can take River with me.

I can even afford this, just barely.

Whoa.

There's only one snag. Am I willing to abandon my marriage? Dissolve it? I hate the idea, but my hate for the relationship he's been carrying on with another woman is much, much worse. Even without his confirmation, I know what I said out loud is true. I can't stay in a marriage with someone who's cheated on me, maybe is still cheating. I've known that all my life. I can't forgive someone who does that because in a marriage intimacy is everything, the most basic part, the core, the heart, the epitome of leaving yourself vulnerable to another person. There's no turning back from something like that. And it isn't something that can be shared with anyone else. Once one person in a couple cheats, the end has been decided.

I'm speaking before I'm even aware I decided to: "River's last day of school is tomorrow. And then we're going. I'm quitting my job in the morning—for good. My last day was today anyway. My boss knew I wouldn't be working this summer, but I'm going to call and officially quit. River and I are going. Don't think you can take him away from me, Dec. I would kill you before I allowed that. But I won't need to, will I? You've already provided me with the grounds for divorce and full custody, haven't you?"

I want him to say something—anything to explain how he could betray me like this. What did I ever do to deserve his infidelity? I've never been with any other man but him, and I can't imagine ever being with anyone else. He knows that. He knows enough about me to be unable to claim ignorance in that regard. I'm intractable about certain things, and that's one of them. All I've ever done is what *he* wants, what *he* expects. In truth, I've also done what everyone else has expected of me. Maybe that really was my first mistake.

Since he won't talk, I turn to go back into the apartment. My move in that direction prompts him. He pivots and says through clenched teeth, "It's nothing, Della. It only happened... I...I don't love her. Never. Couldn't."

I shift back to goggle at him. How can he say those ludicrous words with a straight face? "*You had sex with her!* I could care less if you actually loved her before, during, or after that act. Regardless of love, you betrayed me just like I always believed you would if given half a chance. I knew it would be with her, too. All those times you insisted it was nothing... I shouldn't have trusted you right from the beginning. And now you want me to stay here and work so you and your slut can make a go of your failing business? How dare you? I've done that far too long and for no discernable reason I can come up with now."

Why is it that whenever we fight, I spend far too much dwelling on how *ugly* I feel during the episode? Shame and worthlessness just wells up inside me until I'm almost choking on it and I truly believe that it's taking over my entire being. I can never shake the sense that he sees my ugliness in those moments, that I can't cover it no matter how hard I try. And that's somehow, ridiculously, the whole reason everything fell apart. Because he saw me for who I really am, and I've just done the same with him.

He takes a step toward me, but I back away. I almost make it through the terrace door, but then I have to go and look back, like Lot's weak wife. Declan stops his advance and gives me this pleading look that I don't know how to take, especially when he asks, "What if I said

we can all go, Della? I'll give Hannah the business. Me and you and Riv can go back to Peaceful, just like you want."

"Now? You're not seriously asking that of me *now*? It's too late. *I know*. You cheated on me, and I know it. Do you expect me to forgive you? I all but wrote it in our marriage vows that I won't forgive that betrayal, so don't act surprised now when it comes to it! I've always felt this way. You'd have to be completely stupid not to realize that. And you think now that I'll just forget about that fact because you're willing to go home with us?" I'm shaking my head so hard, I can feel the motion dislodging tears from a vast, unfathomable pit inside me that almost never opens up. Maybe I wouldn't be such a walking time bomb if I could release my emotions more often through crying. But I realize that I don't allow myself to feel things deeply except where my son is concerned. "I'm sorry, Dec, but I can't be your Kathy Lee Gifford. I would never let myself be used and abused so callously, so publically, so *privately*. I wouldn't be able to respect myself if I did. I can't respect you now or ever again for what you did. How can I trust you? I *can't* trust you. That's the bottom line."

Tears are making it hard for me to talk, and I'm just saying all the words that pop into my head—softly because I don't want River to wake or hear me. "Do you think I could let you touch me again? Knowing how often you lied and deceived me? That I'm not the only woman you're... What exactly is your reason for sleeping with her anyway? I can't imagine what it is that you find so repulsive about *me*? You're the one who's let himself go. You're the one who moved out of our bedroom because of that flimsy snoring thing. I was willing to live with it. You abandoned me that very night. I knew it, too. You're the one who lost all interest in sex months before you did move out of the bedroom. You're the one who forced me to live in this hellhole when you had to know it would kill me to be in a place like this. But you didn't care. From the time I met you, it's been all about you. I've let your selfishness rule my life. I don't know why you suggested marriage in the first place. I don't believe you ever loved me. Were you hoping someone would support you financially? I did. Was that it? Was it all about the money? Trust me, you could have found someone to do a much better job supporting you than I have. I can't fathom what any of this has been about."

I wave my hand around the apartment as if it's the physical evidence of a relationship that's been built on lies and deceptions, ruin, not love, not care, not monogamy. This relationship has been dying for so long and soon the only part of it left will be River. Still, Declan has nothing to say. He's standing there mute as Helen Keller. "You have to say something. Explain at least one part of it to me. Explain why you slept with that conceited sleaze when you knew how much that would hurt me? Why did you think it was all right for you to do that?"

He can barely look at me, but that's no consolation whatsoever to me. "You're never happy, Della. The only thing that matters to you is River and going home."

"So...what? You punished me for those things? I told you I would be miserable if you took me away from Peaceful. What did you expect? Why should I be punished for something *you* brought about? From start to finish, Dec, every single thing that's gone wrong all these years is your fault. I've only ever been accommodating. You've only ever been selfish and thoughtless. So, if that's your reason for having an affair, I'm sorry but it's not good enough. It's not justifiable. This is yet another thing you'll have to take the full blame for." I start to turn away, wanting to be the one who gets to escape this time, but then I can't help adding, "I'm leaving. I won't live with your poor decisions and the misery you've

brought on me anymore. It's over."

I leave the terrace, closing the doors behind me. I go into the room that was once our bedroom and close and lock the door behind me. I want to be unwavering in this decision I hadn't been aware I would make until it was made. Now I know I've been thinking about it for a long time. Seeing the amount of money I've saved when I got home from the bank yesterday and put another \$50 in my jewelry box started me on the road to the possibility of leaving.

I have to do this. I know I do. It's the only way to survive because I can't remain in this place and I can't stay with Declan anymore. I should have expected that he would destroy even the joy I should be feeling at the prospect of going home. My life feels like it's over, and the only thing left is River and a future that might include home if not actual happiness.