I

Chaos reigns, Joshua Flanagan thought, and all's well with the world.

It was his repetitive homily, rarely spoken, more often whispered, especially now as he arrived from his morning jog with Caesar—his Rottweiler companion, friend, and nudnik—at the front entrance of Flanagan's Antiques Emporium on North Pratt Street.

"I declare thee open for business," he muttered, unhitching Caesar's umbilical cord, and by a jiggle and twist of an oversized key, opening the shop's front door.

Not that this act made much of an impression on the already stirring morning world of Lakeland Falls, which, according to Flanagan's personal gospel, was ground zero for the dotty, the eccentric, and the whimsical, and therefore the perfect place to nest for the latter fourth of his life. Or so he hoped.

Flanagan, buffeted impolitely by Caesar, entered into the eclectic clutter of the large front room of the shop. The room housed his seven tall clocks as guardians of Emily's hodgepodge of Victorian furniture, their oval backs and faded floral patterns set in helter-skelter disarray, much to the stoic disapproval of a trio of solid-oak Dutch armoires. They, in turn, could take some satisfaction in their obstruction of the view of early American primitives, mostly of stiff-faced somber children posed with absurd-looking animals.

Before entering into the living quarters in the rear where he and Emily nested, Flanagan scrupulously followed the ritual of the lighting of the lamps, twenty-two in all, including peacock lamps, brass carriage side lamps, an opalescent *Gone with the wind* lamp and an assortment of art deco bronze lamps of young ladies with

hands raised to the shades, Flanagan was certain, begging to be released from this prison of wacky antiquity.

The tall clocks, now known as Flanagan's folly, hadn't attracted a single buyer in a year—so much for his marketing skills. Emily was far better. She knew what merchandize moved. Her latest exhibit contained three full sets of dining tables and chairs, one a valuable Victorian walnut loo table. The tables supported a forest of silver candlesticks, epergnes, vegetable dishes, pedestal dessert stands, vases, vinaigrettes, trays, salvers, toast racks, teapots, and tureens presided over by dark varnished floral paintings.

Emily had given Flanagan license to create a paneled library in a corner of the store, which, he thought, offered a private lesson in logical clutter, with neatly standing leather-bound sets of English and American authors, most his favorites, on the high shelves, and with the lowers set aside for smaller objects like paperweights, scent bottles, glass goblets and drinking sets, Staffordshire figures, Ralph Wood Toby jugs, terra-cotta busts, cane handles, car mascots, carved wood, small bronzes, and a couple of China dolls.

Lamps lit, he proceed to walk the long hall to the so-called living part of the house deliberately done by Emily in minimalist modern, mostly with built-ins and lots of shiny chrome. The back part of the house had been extended and redone with a glass facade that looked out on Emily's garden, half formal English, half vegetable, and a screened-in bandstand gazebo where she did her pottery and breeze-block carving.

From the front, the modern rehabbed rear could not be seen, and a screen of evergreens, bought already tall, protected the sides and rear from nosy tourists who roamed Lakeside Falls spring, summer, and fall seeking country serenity far enough from big-city life to recognize the purity of oxygen that swept in over the giant lakes from Canada. According to Flanagan's self-created rumor, a

scientist who had turned to real estate for a living had once suggested—based on a genuine research project—that Lakeside Falls was the least-polluted spot in the United States, which brought an end to tranquility and hoards of tourists seeking life extension through better breathing.

Small hotels and clutters of bed-and-breakfasts had proliferated at lakeside and were spotted throughout the town. When the tourists descended in the summer months, one realized, from the display of broad beams, thick thighs, and distended stomachs that the obesity pandemic was still in flood stage.

Flanagan's steaming coffee was waiting on the glass table in the children's mug, exclusively his own, with the inscription "Keep Thy Shop and Thy Shop Will Keep Thee." Emily was already dipping her unfrozen water bagels into her Queen Victoria Commemoration mug, an anomaly if ever there was one, but he had long ceased to offer any puns or sallies on this point. In the background the ever-present polishing tumbler tumbled. Emily was polishing stones for the jewel tree she was crafting, one of many that she had created.

The shop, which they had opened two years ago, represented a life change of sorts. They had chosen to reverse the pattern of full-time Manhattan life in a West Side apartment with a second home in Lakeside Falls where they both had grown up, by making the town their full-time residence and Manhattan an increasingly part-time sojourn, especially now that their twenty-something offspring had absconded with most of the space.

Joshua still continued to consult as a freelance insurance adjuster, and Emily—who had worked full-time at Christie's, where she diligently had applied her degree in decorative arts as an appraiser—was often called by her ex-employer to eyeball various entries to the auction world of antiques and collectibles.

Now in their late forties, they had chosen this less-frenetic life

to concentrate on Emily's lifetime dream of operating an antiques store. They had done all the traditional preliminaries, raising their children in the Big Apple. Both of their offspring, who visited infrequently, characterized Lakeside Falls as a place for one's last lap after a disorderly and dissolute life, when better breathing was an absolutely necessity.

Joshua, his name a compromise moniker agreed to by his Irish Dad and Jewish mother, parlayed his degree in criminology into a lucrative freelance practice as an insurance investigator, a legacy of his father, an insurance agent whose stories of fraud and duplicity at the dinner table had turned him on to the profession. For years his father trudged up and down the streets of Lakeside Falls and all its rural appendages, selling insurance on the installment plan, mostly at a dollar or two a week, which he collected and recorded in his long black insurance book.

Emily was the descendent of storekeepers who ran what was once the only general store in town. Her own father was still a storekeeper of sorts, running the only family-run pharmacy in town. It was hard to believe but growing up, there was a hierarchy of so-called class in Lakeside Falls; and although Josh had watched Emily from afar throughout his early life, he had never felt a return of interest, which he had attributed to his own father's humble profession.

"I loved you from the moment I saw you," Josh had once confessed.

"When was that?"

"I saw your mother dry your little naked tush at the beach on the lake. That did it for me."

"How old was I?"

"Five—give or take."

"You were a pervert, even then."

The miracle was that they passed each other in Lakeside Falls with nary a blink of recognition, until they met again in Manhattan at the Metropolitan Museum. His opening line was the cliché of clichés.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?"

"I have never been somewhere," she had responded.

Then as they say, fate intervened.

"I'm Josh Flanagan."

"Flanagan, Flanagan. Flanagan." Then came the oh-my-Gods. "The gawky string bean with pimples."

"The flaming redhead nose-in-the-air snob."

That was it, as they both recalled. Josh dubbed it "the moment of the joining of the hips."

Both Josh and Emily truly loved her childhood home, and Josh and she summered there for most of their married life. Emily early on had discovered in herself an aesthetic sensibility, which brought her a scholarship to Yale. There she excelled in history and enhanced her knowledge of old objects and the decorative arts. His work dovetailed with hers, another miracle of sorts.

As he began the ritual of breakfast with Emily, Caesar lay his heavy head on his right Nike.

"Rottweiler, will you remove your heavy-heartedness," he said, trying to extract his foot.

"Can't you call him by his name?" Emily mumbled, flipping a well-soaked clump of bagel between her lips and dripping dark stains on the *Lakeside Falls Herald*, which lay open on the table.

"That is his name."

"That's his breed. His name is Caesar."

"Another Roman dog," Flanagan muttered.

"But he loves you. He's entitled to your respect."

"He is entitled only to my services, which include such items

as maintaining my life according to his erratic schedule of waste disposal."

"You should have paid more attention to the way he was housebroken."

"It's he who's breaking me. I'm now on his schedule. Last night he had the urge before dawn. I didn't see you stirring."

"He sleeps on your side."

"Bedding with him is not an inducement to sexual congress."

"It doesn't seem to interfere with frequency."

"It is sinful," he smirked, "for him to watch with those doleful brown eyes. He is learning bad habits. He is, after all, only nine."

"Sixty-three in man years," Emily said.

"Mighty Caesar continues to stand fast."

"A bit too frequently."

"His ancestors are legion."

"A bit too legion. The vet wants him fixed."

"What is not broken must not be fixed."

She nodded, at times more adamant than he, a great supporter of the natural.

He took his Swiss chronograph from his flannel shirt's vest pocket and peered at its enamel dial. "Dawn of a new error," he said.

Emily smiled and shook her head in mock exasperation as they waited out the ten seconds until the tall clocks struck. They both listened, obviously counting off the strikes as the familiar cacophony vibrated through the house like the knell of church bells calling the faithful of diverse persuasions. Then suddenly only one clock was striking.

"Accept it," Emily said. "It will only drive you mad."

"It has already," Flanagan said. They had tried the best craftsman in the country. None dared to even try to eliminate the extra strike.

"The clock is accurate. It's only the beats that are screwed up."

"We could always ship it to Holland," Flanagan sighed. It was an eighteenth-century Dutch marquetry longcase built by the great Rotterdam clockmaker Steven Hoogendyk.

"Hoogendyk is a bit on the dead side."

"May he turn in his grave at every extra strike," Flanagan murmured.

"Why can't someone fix it?"

"That word again. You are fixated on *fix*. Some things are beyond such mundane chores. It is Hoogendyk's voice from the grave."

The clock had just been shipped back by still another craftsman. None of them wanted to take the chance of ruining the mechanism. The result was a ten-thousand-dollar white elephant. Still, the workmanship was miraculous. But no one wanted a tall clock with an extra strike. It made people crazy. Besides, it was a giant, one-hundred-and-ten inches, too tall for most ceiling heights. And more than a foot higher than its nearest brother, a George III mahogany longcase by Lawson that was more than a foot shorter.

"Accept it, Flanagan," Emily said. "It's a white elephant."

"Not at all," he replied defensively. "It's a one-of-a-kind. Like a stamp printed upside down."

"It needs a special customer, someone one beat off."

"In that case, it should be a best seller. Everybody in Lakeside Falls is one beat off."

She looked up at him pointedly.

"I'm not one beat off." He lifted her hand with the bagel and bit off a piece. "I'm two."

"Hosannas for a man who knows himself."

"It will sell. I will not be daunted," he protested.

"Even the others are laggards. Problem is, Flanagan, you go for the big guys. They're all well over eight feet. Most ceilings are that

size. I wish you hadn't—"

"None of that. You promised. Besides, I'm over my tall period."

"Let's hope." She emphasized an air of finality by pinching his cheek.

"I still say they're all gorgeous. People have lost their taste. Especially the summer people."

Since it was the beginning of October, most had left. Perhaps they might sell to the winter people due to arrive in a few weeks to ski the nearby slopes—or the smattering of tourists who will come to breathe better in the thin air of icy winters.

"They'll move," he mumbled. "Time marches on."

"Like my armoires," Emily snickered. As she talked, she had been taking a cursory interest in the newspaper. She was squinting, having trouble with the smaller print.

"Face it. You need specs."

"I'm only forty-three."

"Seven."

"That's what I said. Four and three are seven."

Josh snickered.

He watched her sly smile, which showed her double dimples and ocean-green eyes peering under her reddish bangs, still radiant even as her once flaming-red curly hair was somewhat tempered with age. Seeing her like this every morning was a special treat, a celebration of the dumb luck of the mating game. He knew, too, that when he appeared for morning inspection, he felt certain that she exhibited the same thrill of recognition. Of course, such emotional content could never be insulted with words. Some things do not require verbalization.

To keep this illusion verdant, he took great care with his own physical grooming. Workouts kept his stomach flat and his muscles firm. He had turned gray prematurely, and thanks to his late

mother's genes, he had not lost his hair, and the little wrinkles that had popped up beside his hazel eyes were giving him an air of gravitas, or so he believed. He was tall and enjoyed his height advantage especially in viewing spectacles like parades and pageants. People always remarked that they were an attractive couple. He believed implicitly in such observation.

Suddenly, Emily's eyebrows rose. "Looks like our hopes for more winter people are down the tubes. They've stopped work on that new ski slope and condo project. The one that Jesse Shanks has been building." She read snippets from the story. "Apparently they've run out of money."

"Those fellows don't run out of money. The banks just stop throwing it at them."

She shrugged and continued to read, but with effort.

"Eyes," she said, conscious of his observation. "My eyes no longer see the glory," she said, aping his pun pretensions.

It sparked in him a tiny tug of alarm. He was not very good at dealing with her pain or defects, or, for that matter, any hint of her unhappiness. She knew it, too. "I think I need eye aid. I've already made an appointment with that new Dr. Blandings. Here three months and making quite a stir. He's a specialist in contacts."

"Blandings? What's wrong with Dr. Grant?"

"Dr. Blandings is younger, probably more progressive. Grant is way behind, especially on contacts. Besides, Audrey knows what's good."

"Case closed," Flanagan sighed. "The guru has spoken."

Audrey Hazeltine was more than Emily's best friend, confidante, and all-around adviser. They had been friends since first grade. She had married Sam Hazeltine, who had become county sheriff, a post he had acquired, by Flanagan's reckoning, through some inherent flaw in the system.

The two men, thrown together by the irrevocable sisterhood of their wives, were pugilists locked in a life-and-death competitive struggle for—Flanagan always faltered at an all-encompassing definition—ascendancy, ego satisfaction, stubborn pride.

Neither could resist the opportunity to taunt the other, although it all took place just beneath the surface of civilized respectability. The arena, naturally, was criminology, in which they had each spent a great deal of time, Sam as a cop, Flanagan as an insurance investigator.

Thrown together at closer proximity since the Flanagan's full-time return to Lakeside Falls, both had, by mutual and silent consent resumed the taunt and torment, the play and counterplay, the warp and woof of their relationship. For them it was the spice of life, as necessary for their well-being as water and oxygen.

"Audrey is up on the latest in everything," Emily said, barely missing a beat. "Dr. Blandings, being younger and comparatively new to the area, would naturally know more about the latest developments in vision improvement. Yes, I'm going to try contact lenses. He's supposed to be marvelous at that."

"Vanity of vanities. All is vanity."

"Remember those old black-and-white movies in which the girl takes off her glasses, and the man suddenly falls in love?"

"Now there's a good eye-dear," he said, aiming the pun to light up her smile.

It did. She offered him a look of mock deprecation and shaking her head began to turn the pages of the newspaper again. She came to the last page and grimaced.

"Not one mention of Sam's testimonial dinner," she said with disgust. The sheriff was to star at a dinner in Traverse Park glorifying their "Clean County," since it had one of the best records on all forms of pollution, including crime. Sam, being the best,

most popular, and obvious symbol of the county's well-being was to be given an award and would be making a speech. "When Mr. Sanford owned the paper, a story like that would never have been missed. He never should have sold the paper to strangers."

"A barbarian has entered our gates," Flanagan mused. "But business is business."

"And that man that runs it—what is his name?" She pursed her lips until her mind found the answer. "Herb Braker. He just doesn't know Lakeside Falls. Audrey is convinced he's loaded for bear against Sam."

"Sam could use a bit of criticism occasionally. All public officials can." He paused. "Especially dear old Sam."

At that point the front bell tinkled, and the Flanagan's exchanged puzzled glances. An eight o'clock customer was as unusual as snow in July.

Emily patted her hair, but Flanagan was swifter, having slapped away Caesar's heavy head and padded through the long hall. At that hour, he knew, serious business was afoot. It was not the time for browsers, not in October. At first, he saw no one, until he heard the squeak of the main-room floor. An older man turned abruptly, offering a startled, slightly annoyed look through thick spectacles.

In one hand, the man held a brown slouch felt hat, in the other, a doll with a china head. Flanagan, responding to habit, dated the man as circa 1930s, with polka-dot bow tie that could not hide a wattle, striped shirt, blue serge double-breasted suit with wide lapels, a gold signet ring on his pinky. Frozen in time period, Flanagan concluded, probably retired for twenty or thirty years. He had well-shaved shiny red jowls which shivered as he spoke.

"I'm looking for a certain doll," the man said, gazing down at the object in his hand. "Not this." He was holding one with a long-sleeved taffeta dress with buttoned bodice and white lace-trimmed

petticoat. She was wearing a hairdo with a wraparound braid.

"That's a shiny finish, porcelain," Flanagan said, mostly to establish his authority on the subject of dolls, which was hardly awesome.

"Doesn't matter. She doesn't want it. I'm not a collector," the man said grumpily. "But I know what I'm looking for."

"A man with a mission. Good starting point," Flanagan said. The man leveled magnified steel-blue eyes on Flanagan, whose attempt at ingratiation fell flat, prompting the strictly business approach.

"I'm looking for Bonnie Babe. 'Bout twenty inches high. Brown hair. Brown eyes that close and a mouth that opens."

"Bonnie Babe is it?" Flanagan asked. He could vaguely recall the item from his insurance days. People often made claims for antique dolls stolen or destroyed by fire.

"Bonnie Babe," the man repeated, lips tight. "For a child." There was a brief flicker of alarm in his eyes, an excess of sudden blinking.

Flanagan was on the verge of saying something facetious, but seeing the brief pain, held back. "Bonnie Babe, you said?" He had said it twice.

"Remember the box. Bought it for my daughter when she was a child. Middle twenties, I'd say. Millie was photographed with it, you see. Now Charlotte wants it, and I promised I'd find it."

"Have you got the picture?"

"Back in Flint. If I saw it, I'd know it." The man shook his head. "I promised it."

His determination was as real as his apparent frustration. Still the man did not smile and gave off unpleasant vibrations, which considerably sparked Flanagan's disinterest. He was about to shrug the customer away.

"It's my granddaughter. She's at Lakeside General for a heart

operation. Leaky valve. Fair chance. Tricky." His last remark seemed unsure, and his eyes could not hide their worry. "She's being prepped for an operation. I told her I'd try to find it. Not try, exactly. I said I'd find it. You know what a promise means to a little girl?"

"Let me check my inventory," Flanagan said, ignoring the answer. The oldest mush in the world: a doll for a little ailing girl. He felt that tug of storekeeper greed—manna from heaven, the perfect customer, no browser he. "Be back in a jiff."

Flanagan went back to the kitchen where Emily was rifling through the catalogues.

"Live one?" she asked.

"To die for," he chuckled. "Dolls. He wants a Bonnie Babe. Brown eyes that close. Mouth that opens."

She tapped her teeth and her green eyes grew dreamy, which was her usual thinking mode, followed by running her fingers through her hair.

"Not Bye-Lo?"

"Bonnie Babe," he repeated. "For his sick grandchild. She's going to be getting a heart operation. Call it a desperate need."

Emily got up from the chair and headed up the winding metal staircase that led to their office, gathering speed as she ascended. He went back to the store, where the man still stood essentially in the exact same place. Nothing else interested him.

"My wife's looking it up," Flanagan said, rubbing his chin. "Nothing else will do it?" It was a stupid question, he knew.

When there was a want, a specific identifiable need, no substitute would ever do. He had learned that long ago, and it had made his reputation as an insurance investigator. A missing object had a life of its own. Dollars could never compensate for its loss. He never understood what made people attach themselves to things,

but then it wasn't necessary to understand why the earth was round either. He was not surprised when the man did not answer the question.

Emily came into the display space with an illustrated book of doll collectibles, laying the open book on the checkerboard surface of a Victorian walnut games table.

"That's the one," the man said, pointing a roughened finger.

"Designed by Georgene Averill for the Averill Manufacturing Company in 1920. It was a biggie." She thumbed through the back of the book and whistled. "Pricey."

"Cost me twenty bucks. Bought it for my oldest daughter, handed down to my youngest, Millie. That's Charlotte's mother. Pretty beat up after five girls. Threw it away finally. It's in a lot of snaps, though. I want one good as new and I don't give a damn about the price. People in your business are a bunch of robbers. Selling old junk for such high prices."

"Even so, we can steal be friends," Flanagan muttered.

"Not now, Flanagan," Emily admonished. "Obviously the man is upset."

"I'd pay it, though," the man said, unrepentant. "Pay more. You name it. Especially if I got it fast."

"We'd have to do a search," Emily said. "There are sources."

"I need it fast, and I'll pay."

"We'll do the best we can." Again she tapped her teeth. "Maybe we can find one around town."

"We're really good at poking around," Flanagan said brightly. It was strictly a placebo.

"Remember. Bring me the real thing, and I'll pay whatever you ask," the man growled.

"It's the fund thing in this business," Flanagan said, knowing that the tiny barb would barely prick the man's hard old hide.

"We'll try," Emily said, bowing to pragmatism. They were so heavily invested in inventory they could not sell, that being a middleman without risk was balm for her antiques dealer's heart. And Emily was not one to let a lucrative sale go by the boards. The man pulled out an engraved card and wrote a telephone number on the back of it with an old ink-filled Waterman and handed it to Emily.

"That's the telephone number of her hospital room. Her mother and me are there most of the time. Faster the better," the man said. Flanagan looked at the card. "T. Richard Ingersoll."

The bell was already tinkling before Flanagan could offer his good-byes. He followed Emily back to the kitchen where she poured two more coffees.

"Aside from giving the girl a boost, we sure could use the do-re-mi. The time frame's a bummer, unless—"

"—Unless we can find some old lady with self-indulgent parents who had the temerity to buy the little apple of their eyes a nearly two-foot-tall Bonnie Babe." He looked at the open book, turned it around. "Even a voice box in the lower back, a lace cap with satin ribbon, and crocheted cotton booties."

"So who in town might have had one of these back eons ago?"

All her little thought tics came into play now, the teeth tapping, fingers brushing through her hair, to which she added the soft-shoe tap under the table. Her green eyes grew vague and fixed and her Cupid's bow upper lip curled in under itself.

He knew better than to intrude, urging his own concentration on the matter of collecting dolls, looking over pictures of Baby Grumpy, Patsy Baby in a hamper, Li'l Darlin', Bubbles, Tantrum Baby, Kaiser Baby, Dream Baby, although none could boast the heft, size, and sweetness of dear old Bonnie Babe.

As he expected, Emily began to verbalize her thought processes.

What her mind's computer was turning over, he knew, was the directory of old Lakeside Falls' families, descendants of those who came to the Great Lake region to earn a living from the waters, either as boatmen, woodsmen, traders, fruit farmers, and much later as health nuts. As often happens to the converted, Josh had taken to the lore and history of his town and had made it his business to know everything he could about its origins and mores. Emily, too, had surrendered to the same urge. Her dictum was: If you don't know where you come from, you'll never truly know where you're going.

Familiar names of streets, storefronts, orchards joined the listings. The Pratts, the MacPhersons, the Pettigrews, the Foxstones, the Downses, the Larsons, the Honnigers, the Goldmans—names that he, too, recognized from childhood days and their summer sojourns.

But the Foxstones, Emily's family tree, went back five generations, six if you counted Big Jim Foxstone who arrived in Lakeside Falls by getting drunk and falling off a coal barge on its way to Canada. Lord knows how many Foxstone seeds were sprinkled around Lakeside Falls before Big Jim got religion and sobriety from Emily's great-great grandmother, whose life and legend made today's women's libbers seem like shrinking violets.

"It wouldn't have been the Pratts who lost their timber business back during World War I according to Dad. The Goldmans, on the other hand, were great child indulgers. Sarah Goldman got a pony with solid silver harness for her fifth birthday. Of course, Lizzie Honniger got a dollhouse for her tenth that took up an entire room and was furnished with genuine antique doll furniture." She grew silent, sipped the last of her coffee, and tapped the table with her knuckles.

"Lucy Downs. If anyone got a doll like that it was Lucy Downs.

Of course, she was a few years older than me—"

"Still is, as a matter of fact," Flanagan agreed. His historical recollections of Lucy Downs were far less photographic, although he did remember her father and the vague celebrity of Lucy's marriage to a something Farnsworth from over in Battle Creek, who was a pilot killed in Vietnam. "You mean Lucy Farnsworth," he corrected. Flanagan himself had been a marine lieutenant in Vietnam.

As a confirmed born-and-bred Lakeside Faller, Emily snobbishly persisted in not counting "outsiders," which on occasion included Flanagan, having arrived in town three years after he was born. She even put down their twenty-odd-year absence in Manhattan as a "brief interlude," like a tour of duty with the Foreign Service.

"William Downs had to get the largest of everything," Emily continued, his mildly defiant interruption barely noticed. "He would have gotten her the largest doll. Later he gave her the largest car when she was sixteen and, of course, she did inherit the largest cherry orchard."

Lucy Downs was, as all the antiques dealers in the region had learned, one of the great local sources for art deco and art nouveau—the period of Bill Downs' most blatant acquisitions. Lakeside Fallers considered such folderol gauche at the time, despite that it was the rage of London, Paris, and New York. In those days, circa 1920, Lakeside Fallers were probably still suffering from the ravages of Victorian aesthetics.

"I'll give her a call," Emily said, marking a note in her appointment book. "More than likely she would have handed it down to her daughter, Kay. Actually they're more like sisters these days. Inseparable. Poor Kay. Never married. Lucy hadn't much luck with her kids."

"They say Tony is a gambling addict. In debt up the kazoo, and Lucy, as the grapevine avers, is finished staking him," Flanagan said.

"And that creepy brother-in-law Jesse Shanks of hers. I read they shut down that ski area he's building. Ran out of dough, and Lucy's run out of patience with sister Amy." With a son like Tony and a brother-in-law like Jesse Shanks." He shook his head. "Ah, the travails of the superrich. My heart goes out to them."

"Anyway, if she does have a Bonnie Babe, we know the old man will pay. So we can afford to buy higher."

"And she knows what it means to have a sick little girl."

As everyone knew, Lucy Farnsworth and her daughter, Kay, were devoted and inseparable. The Kay and Lucy Show was the way the townsfolk characterized them behind their backs, as if there was something slightly unsavory in such mother-daughter devotion.

The truth was that Kay had been an asthma sufferer since birth, which explained a great deal about Lucy's motherly protectiveness. Some said possession, but Flanagan always attributed that kind of mean spiritedness to small-town insularity. An unmarried maiden like Kay was still an object of curiosity and speculation in the boonies.

"Worth a try," Emily mused. "I'll give her a ring."

"And may you live happily ever after."

"But I already do that." She pecked him a kiss on the forehead.

Emily got up from the table and climbed the circular metal stairs to the office while Flanagan read more about the culture of old dolls and tried to memorize the fine points of Bonnie Babe's picture. Suddenly, he took out his pocket watch and braced himself for the nine o'clock striking of the tall clocks. He waited, listened, his ear discerning the count, satisfied, once again, that they were, with the exception of the Hoogendyk, in good working order.

Under cover of the striking, Emily had slipped down the stairs. He was aware of her humming behind him, although he did not turn until he had identified the tune.

"You did it."

"… It's so nice to have you back where you belong," she sang.

"I played it cool. She said she had lots and lots of dolls in the attic somewhere. Saved them all for Kay who wasn't much for them."

"And Bonnie Babe?"

"She thinks there was one like that. You'll have to pop over there and see for yourself."

"I've always been pretty good at chasing dolls."

"News to me."

"I caught you, didn't I?"

"You make it sound like a cold."

"A hot. Not a cold."

He winked, remembering the routine of their awakening.

Continue reading...

Amazon: https://amzn.to/2v9so9i

iBooks: https://apple.co/2geAki2

Kobo: https://bit.ly/2gdMtUr

Audible: https://adbl.co/2vc0eub