



M E G

Meg Halverson would remember that she hesitated before leaving. In those few cautious seconds before she opened the door she knew that leaving would change everything. She analyzed the sounds behind her—rather, the lack of them, the deadly quiet. The women would be half-smiling, half-looking at each other as they waited for the sound of the door closing and her footsteps running down the porch steps. Once they caught their collective breaths someone would break the silence. It would be Evelyn Stone’s breathy, little-girl voice that would say, “Meg was always marginal—just a farm girl who got in because she married Ed.”

Meg shook her head. Those women didn’t matter, because the real war was between her and Ed. But to be the cause of his disappointment—she didn’t want that. She honestly wanted to help him.

Well, hang the consequences, she thought. Hang them all! I’ve already left! She closed the heavy ornate door firmly behind her and walked, head high, across the veranda and down the broad steps. At the landing she said an encouraging “yes” to herself and kept repeating it as she worked her way around the cars parked in the long driveway. Jill Handley’s green Jaguar, the car that had brought her, elicited another “yes,” even as it reminded her that she would now have to walk home. There was no one she could call to pick her up, or would call. She flinched at the prospect of three miles, possibly four, in these new, medium-heeled pumps and her suit skirt. But she’d do it if for no other reason than it would give her time to think up her reason for leaving—if not the real reason, then something pretty darn close to it.

By the time Ed came home for dinner he'd know, because one of the women would have phoned him about it.

. . .

As she widened her pace to test the walking limit of her skirt, she felt an ominous give to some threads near its hem. But she only said "yes" a little louder. Her skirt and shoes didn't matter, but getting away with her dignity did. For the benefit of those women undoubtedly watching her from the window, she slowed to appear nonchalant. Stopping at the sidewalk she looked leisurely to her left up Halverson Avenue—named for her husband's family—and let her eyes linger on the imposing red brick house in the next block up, the "Halverson House" of Ed's childhood, and of her bridehood (that's how she referred to the eleven years she'd lived there too).

The Halverson House: tall windows, cold rooms, ancient plumbing, an impossible kitchen, and all those Halverson ghosts she couldn't argue with. She'd loved its huge circular driveway though, as had Kurt and Sara—their baby legs powering their tricycles around and around it, safe from the university traffic passing the house. Yet, even with those happy memories of her children, it was the wrong day to be reminded of that historic monstrosity and be forced to give credence to the ghosts that still directed her every step. Undoubtedly those ghosts had been at the meeting just now, as appalled at the manner of her leave-taking as the women were.

Shrugging off thinking about it, she looked beyond the house to where the street ended and the University Campus began. The clock in Central Hall's steeple, which appeared to float upon a sea of pale-green maple trees, had just chimed a single tone to mark the half hour. She could just make out its white face and ornate black hands: 3:30 P.M. She checked her watch. If she kept an even pace she'd get home in time to put the potatoes in to bake. Resisting a final glance behind her, she turned right onto the sidewalk following Halverson Avenue, and began the long walk west through town to her home.

She had a determined walk, taking long strides and moving like a woman who enjoyed her body and was proud of its fitness and energy.

She hadn't always felt this way. When she was in middle school, a wild spurt of growth left her a full six inches taller than both her mother and Tolly, her only, eight-years-older sister. Hoping she could reverse the process she began slumping forward. Once her mother understood what she was doing, she'd commanded her to "Stand up, throw back those shoulders, and enjoy your height!" Now, in her thirty-eighth year, Meg still thought herself overly tall at five feet ten inches, but she always presented herself proudly.

Whether others considered her attractive or not, she didn't know. Whenever Ed made any comment about how she looked, saying, "Yes, that's nice," he was referring to what she wore, concerned that her clothes were up to the current fashion and looked expensive enough (which, of course, they did). It would be nice to hear him comment on her face and the care she took of herself; but if he noticed that at all, giving her compliments wasn't his style. Privately, she liked her face, proud that she resembled her Irish mother, who'd also had dark wavy hair and fair skin with a few freckles here and there. She thought her mouth was a bit too big, but it smiled easily. Her eyes, large and grey, were her best feature. Her three children teased her about giving them "the big look" (their term for it); but that look still brought them to a standstill when their behavior needed restraining.

The length of her hair was a problem between her and Ed: she wanted it short so it would curl on its own, but he demanded that it remain midway down her back in length. With all his demands that she look the very model of fashion, she thought he was inconsistent in refusing to allow her to cut it. But, with no choice in that, she caught it back with a silver clip in front, and twisted and pinned it in back in as elegant a knot as she could manage. Around home and in the garden she wore it in a single braid and tried not to wish it was conveniently shoulder length.

On the few occasions when she really studied her reflection, she saw strength in her face, an underlying softness around her eyes, and a willingness to get along. She hoped that was what others saw in her too, but she wasn't sure. Today she had shown another side of herself: a frustrated and angry person at the absolute end of her patience.

Before today she'd kept all that in check.

Aware that her face still wore its "I am Mrs. Edward Halverson" mask—which pulled her features into horizontal layers of calmness, objected to nothing, and was so easy to hide behind—she decided to wear it a little longer, at least until she got away from the part of town where she might be recognized. Anyone who knew her might think she was just taking a lovely afternoon stroll through this old, still-elegant part of town. Or perhaps they'd think she was on her way to another meeting. She began to sing to herself softly and deliberately off key, in rhythm to her steps: "...luncheons, meetings, parties, teas, luncheons, meetings, parties, teas..." When she tried to find some kind of meter in the words "committees and organizations" she began to giggle and got quite out of step. She caught herself just in time when she saw two young women walking toward her. Even though she didn't know them, she assumed a grave, dignified expression and nodded as she passed. Mrs. Edward Halverson must never, never be observed as...as what? Most certainly not as *herself*. Who in this name-dropping part of town knew *that* Meg Halverson? Who indeed? And that included her husband and, perhaps, even herself.

Looking around, she was grateful she wouldn't have to *pretend* to enjoy this beautiful early May afternoon, at least what was left of it. There were too few spring days in this part of Montana. Between winter loosening its grip and summer's abrupt arrival, spring days like this were already numbered.

As unsettled as she was, walking through this splendid part of town and along this lovely old university street calmed her. It never seemed to change. How many times had she walked here—as a student, as a bride, as a young mother? On her first walk here it had been late summer; she was fresh from the farm and twenty-one years old (old for a new student). The trees were what impressed her. She'd never seen large maple trees before, and couldn't believe the grace and beauty of their branches meeting and arching above the whole street. And under the trees were the enormous Victorian houses—looking like so many overly fat Easter hats—sitting so smug and comfy amid their manicured lawns and broad sidewalks and boulevards. And

today, just as before, their antique look was enhanced by a lacework of tiny shadows cast by the sunlight through the tree leaves above them. She held out her fingers to let the bits of sun land on them, too. As though the sunlight had weight and substance, she wanted to scoop it up and pour it over her, in the hope that it might make her feel all right again.

Halverson Avenue. Old lumber money—Halverson money—had built this street. In spite of the expectations the Halverson ghosts placed on her, she never discounted the importance—to the town and to this part of the state—of that historic name. As she walked along, she tried to imagine what Ed had felt growing up in a house and on a street named for his predecessors. Now, as a man, in the telling ways he often acted, his Halverson name seemed more like a burden to him, with those Halverson ghosts having assigned him the task of keeping their past relevant.

A person's legacy was something she could understand, for she had her own. Her roots were sunk deep in a humble central Montana wheat farm, far from here. Despite the eighteen years since she'd lived there, she was still connected to the land surrounding it and to the ideals of her long-dead parents who had cared for it.

Their life had been a simple one, directed by the weather gods and the price of wheat, and it was in their home and family where their comfort and safety lay. How many times had she heard Papa say, "Things will turn out right if you aren't afraid of hard work, if you take care of your land, and be respectful to all creatures." He might have been talking about things that pertained to the farm, but his words spoke of personal responsibility, and she had used them as rules to live by.

Meg had come to the University primed for the rest of her life. Her goal seemed simple enough: after acquiring a vocation (whatever that would be), she'd meet a good man, get married, raise a nice family, and "things would turn out right"—wasn't that what Papa said?

Being three years older than the other freshmen girls had given her no advantage; in fact, she felt far behind them socially—they appeared to know exactly what they wanted and how to get it. She'd been so

eager for her adult life to begin, but the most enduring lesson she'd gained from her short stay on campus was that poor choices often came in attractive wrappings. Now, walking along this beautiful old street, she wondered, as she had wondered so many times before, how she could have quit school and agreed to marry Edward Halverson.

Her face clouded as she thought about that. On this mutinous day, instead of *her* trying to guess the answers to those questions, she wished Ed were here to answer for himself. She slowed her pace and spoke the troublesome words into the air. "Why, with your opportunities, did you ever, ever choose me to be your wife? Was it because I was so obviously naïve? Was finding me akin to finding a slate with nothing yet written upon it? After your flattery was over and the seduction made, after you plucked me from this campus and installed me in your bed, why did our marriage seem more like an ending than a beginning? Why do I always feel alone, Ed?"

In silence, she walked on.

Once the University District was behind her, her attention turned to the less grand part of town she was now passing through. Here the trees were not so imposing, the houses were small and close together, garages opened onto the narrow streets, children and dogs tumbled in play, and mothers like herself basked on porch steps or lawn chairs, reading or talking or laughing at their kids. The beginning smells of dinner drifted on the air—roasting beef, onions, fresh coffee, cookies fresh from the oven. Glancing now and then at the women, she sighed with envy at the simplicity of their lives—so far from the complications of her own. The word "complications" hardly described her predicament. The women in the grand house behind her must even now be clucking like hens over her departure and deciding her fate.

There were fewer than seventy thousand people in Clark Fork, but she supposed it to be as socially stratified as any mid-sized Montana town. Without her being aware of it—or wanting it—her marriage to Edward Halverson had separated her from people like herself, even as it took her from being "an outsider" to being at the very center of the highest social level of the town, where everyone seemed to be connected to each other through business or their history. People at

that social level made a grand display of being friendly to outsiders; but unless there was a good reason for an outsider to be asked to join in, that person remained an outsider.

Ed had just become a partner in Art Stroud's bank when he introduced her, his bride, to his social group. The women were mainly wives of Ed and Art's downtown cronies, the movers and shakers of the business community who had known Ed all his life. Being a Halverson, and being handsome and charming too, Ed had long since been awarded "favorite son" status by that group. Of course, she went along with it.

From the start she found most of the women superficial. Their main concerns were protecting their precious dynasties from all those "outsiders" they deemed eager to gain a foothold into their world. Even though they were nice enough to her, Meg felt like a curiosity—Ed having married an outsider and a farm girl to boot. When she first expressed her anxiety over this, Ed advised her to keep quiet about her background and listen and learn about the other women instead. She felt like an orphan doing this: never talking about her parents and the beloved life they had created for her and her sister.

She and Ed entertained these people, but they never seemed like friends—at least as Meg understood the word. When Meg asked about this, Ed said he didn't need personal friends. Meg kept in contact with some of her college friends, but Ed wasn't interested in including any of them at their parties, so, other than exchanging cards at Christmas, they drifted away.

All events concerning their present neighborhood and the kids' school fell to Meg, so any social contacts she made there went nowhere. Her only real friends now were Marc and Doris Webster—a sixtyish couple living in her present neighborhood. Ed viewed the Websters as nothing more than dependable folks who looked after his children when he and his wife were otherwise engaged; but Meg and the children loved them, and the feeling was returned. When she was with the Websters, who had no part whatsoever in the social group she and Ed were caught up in, Meg was free to express herself as she really was, rather than as others expected her to be.

Over the eighteen years of her marriage, however tightly she clung to the hope that she was not nor ever could be like those other women, the social page of the town's only newspaper told her otherwise. Whenever it lovingly recorded the Edward Halversons' most insignificant comings and goings (which was often), describing in detail the clothes she'd worn to such and such an event, Ed read it aloud to her as though it were his reward. If it were up to her, she'd like to complain to the newspaper that the wrong news was being published; that (as happened today) it should publish the cruel comments the women had bandied around, along with the names of who said what about whom. And tomorrow, if the paper *were* to report that Mrs. Edward Halverson left the meeting early (which it wouldn't, but if it did) it should be honest enough to print that she left in a huff after having told everyone, in exquisite detail, exactly what she felt, and that she had slammed the door on her way out.

As she thought back to those moments, self-doubt crept into her mind. If only she hadn't left like that. In those few precious seconds when she'd hesitated at the door, if only she could have treated it like a joke and rejoined the women. Surely she could have thought up some kind of excuse. But, no, like a freight train without brakes, she couldn't stop herself. However trifling this might appear, something important had happened that was going to hurt her very much—that much she knew. She had openly scorned the very people she was expected to get along with, over nothing more serious than their petty gossip; then she'd left with no explanation or apology. It had caught them all off guard, but her even more. She hadn't planned it—nothing like that—it had just happened.

Wanting to leave that group was nothing new to her; she had wanted to do it a hundred times before, just leave them, call out, "That's enough! This is stupid. Don't think I'm part of this!" How she'd managed to hold her tongue all these years she couldn't say. Well, yes, she could; she'd done it because Ed expected her to do it. But why blow up today?

Her day had started poorly. Ed had been so distant at breakfast—more distant than usual. When she'd told him what Kurt's teacher

had said about Kurt's excellent math skills, Ed hadn't reacted in the slightest—and Kurt was sitting just across the table from him, his face eager for his dad's praise. She hadn't told Ed that the teacher had pointedly asked why Ed never attended such important conferences, or that his excuse of having to work every evening wasn't cutting it anymore with *any* of the kids' teachers.

After breakfast Ed had left the house without saying goodbye. She was busy making the kid's lunches and hadn't heard the front door closing. In fact, the only way she'd known he'd left was when she heard the garage door close—and even that was softer than usual. She'd wondered briefly if he'd deliberately muffled its usual bang so he could escape without notice.

As for today's meeting, she had intended (for once) to play hooky and stay home and work in her garden. But Jill Handley had already offered to pick her up so they could talk about the party they were co-hosting later in the month.

Now, having compounded that poor start to her day, she was faced with explaining her actions to Ed. She simply had to make him understand that she could no longer sit in stuffy houses full of even stuffier women with their swirl of perfume—each scent canceling out the others until all that was left was something metallic-smelling.

Earlier, it was that metallic smell she was reacting to when the lace curtain near her had made that tiniest beckoning curl, and the tiniest whiff of fresh spring air had managed to locate her nose. As much as she might wish to use that image in her defense to Ed, she knew it wouldn't work. Tonight, after dinner (or worse, during it, with the children listening), Ed would tell her what he'd heard about her leaving early. She wondered which lecture she would hear: the one about "The Givers and The Takers" or the one titled "You Don't Seem To Understand My Job, Meg"—she'd heard them often enough, in all their variations.

Early in their marriage she'd challenged him on how she spent her time. They'd been living in the Halverson House for two years by then and were still trying to get pregnant. (There'd been an earlier miscarriage, but it was a full five years before Kurt was conceived.)

That day she'd told Ed she felt at loose ends, that, with the housekeeper and gardener to help with the place, she'd decided to return to the university and finish the degree she'd only begun before their marriage. To her everlasting regret, she'd also told him that although she'd tried, she didn't have much in common with the women of their social set, and felt the endless entertaining was a meaningless waste of time.

She was hardly prepared for the intensity of his "Givers and Takers" speech, intoning it as if talking to someone less than bright, someone who, having come from a different social level, wouldn't naturally know what he was talking about. As he went on and on, she'd stood looking at the floor, humiliated, and willing herself not to cry.

The Halversons (she was to learn) had long since attained the "Giver" status; and the town was their grateful heir. In the next day's mail she'd received a typed list (on Ed's official bank stationery, no less) of all the things their name would be connected with and the events she or he or they together would sponsor. To make sure she had no choice in the matter, next to his signature he'd hand-inked, "Business being business and our security being our security, Meg, Art and I are confident that you'll want to do your part."

All that mattered was that a Halverson be seen out front, be listed first, and be the first to volunteer. It was only about business and money—getting it and keeping it. It didn't matter that anything beneficial was accomplished. It was just meaningless talk, showing off something, dressing up to be admired, trying to outdo each other. And that applied to today's party: the real reason for it was that the hostess, Cora Lee, wanted to show off the antique loveseat she'd just had recovered in blue Italian velvet. A perfect waste of a day!

Meg heaved a discouraged sigh. Despite all her attempts at justification, she longed for Ed's appreciation and counted a day as good when he smiled at her in gratitude over any tiny thing. Thinking that, her eyes filled and she pushed at the tears with her fingers. What words could she use to make him understand that what he wanted her to be was no longer bearable?

She looked at her watch and shook her head; she was still a long way from her house.