The Hungry Gods

Go to the Dinner Theatre

N. Van Seters & Claude

Contents

I. The Booking *1*

II. Opening Night. *11*

III. The Invoice. *22*

IV. Client Appreciation *33*

V. Year-End *40*

VI. The Rematch *49*

VII. The Account *56*

VIII. New Year's Eve *66*

I. The Booking

Gary announced the Christmas party at the Monday huddle, standing on the bottom step of the mezzanine stairs so the warehouse could see him.

"Knights of the Fraser," he said. "Saturday the fifth. Dinner and a show. Bus there and back. Partners welcome."

Nobody said anything. Out in the yard a forklift backed up, beeping.

"It's jousting," Gary said. "There's horses."

"Is there a bar?" said Wade from receiving.

"There's a bar."

The warehouse clapped. Gary nodded as if that had been the plan, stepped down off the stair, and went back to his office, which has a window onto the warehouse and a window onto Accounts Payable, and blinds on only one of them.

I've done payables at Valley Pipe & Heating Supply for nineteen years. Before that I did payables at a feed mill in Matsqui, and for all of one job and some of the other I was married to Rick. Payables is a lot like being married to Rick. Somebody sends you a bill for something you don't remember

agreeing to, and you have to decide whether it's worth the phone call. Rick lives in Kelowna now, with a boat. The boat is named *Candace*, after his second wife. I consider that the boat's problem.

Gloria Ferreira trained me. She has run Accounts Payable at Valley Pipe since 1987. She was supposed to retire at sixty-five and has declined for three years running, like a credit card offer. She has been divorced twice. She has a jar of Werther's on her desk that nobody is allowed to take from, and a calculator with a paper tape that she runs every invoice through twice, once for the number and once, she says, for the attitude. She does everyone's taxes. She did mine the year Rick left, and she found thirteen hundred dollars he had claimed as a business expense that was actually a jet ski, and she didn't say a word about it. She just drew a little jet ski on the back of the envelope.

Gary walked the booking confirmation over to AP himself. He doesn't usually. Usually he sends things over with Darcy from purchasing, or emails them with *pls pay* and no capital letters.

"I need this deposit out today," he said, and put it on Gloria's desk.

"Everybody needs things today, Gary."

"It's for the party."

"I know what it's for. It says *Knights of the Fraser* at the top in a font like a wedding." She held it out at arm's length, because her reading glasses were on her head and she wasn't going to admit it. "Forty-two guests. Squire gratuity, mandatory."

"I'll look into the gratuity," Gary said.

He didn't go. He stood there with his hands in his pockets, looking at the Werther's.

"Was there something else?" said Gloria.

"No."

"Then I'll pay your knights."

He went. Gloria put her glasses down onto her nose and read the confirmation again from the top, as if it might have changed while he was standing there.

Brenda from Receivables rolled her chair over from the next pod. Brenda can cross the floor in that chair faster than she can walk it. She leaned on my partition and said, very quietly, "Ramada."

"Brenda," said Gloria, without looking up.

Brenda rolled back.

* * *

I called the barn to ask about the gratuity, because a mandatory gratuity is a fee, and a fee needs a GST number beside it, and there wasn't one.

"Group sales," said a man.

"Hi, this is Lorna at Valley Pipe & Heating. I'm looking at your invoice 4471—"

"Staff party," he said. "Saturday the fifth. Forty-four guests."

"Forty-two."

"Forty-four," he said. "Groups your size add two after the deposit. Usually somebody's new partner that nobody's met. Usually the week of."

"I'm calling about the squire gratuity."

“Eighty-eight percent of groups pay it without asking,” he said. “Of the rest, most pay it after asking. It goes to the squires. The squires shovel.”

“Is there a GST number for it?”

There was a short pause, the kind you get from people who are looking something up, except I didn’t hear any typing.

“There should be,” he said. “In about one invoice in six there isn’t. I’ll send it. Is there anything else?”

“No. Thank you.” Then, because he seemed to be the sort of person you could ask, I said, “Do a lot of companies come back? After the party?”

“Forty-one percent of companies that hold a December staff party here book a second event before New Year’s.”

“Who books them?”

“The manager,” he said. “Usually a man over sixty. Usually it goes through as client appreciation.”

“Is Gary going to?”

Another pause.

“I couldn’t tell you about Gary,” he said.

“You just told me about everybody.”

“Everybody is easy,” he said. “I counted for the Romans, once. They wanted everybody too. Then every year someone would come back and ask me about one particular family from Nazareth, and I could never help them.”

“Okay,” I said.

“I’ll send the GST number,” he said, and he did. It came four seconds after I hung up, according to Brenda, who had

been timing the call on her phone from her pod for reasons of her own.

* * *

The section assignments came by email that afternoon.

> *Knights of the Fraser welcomes Valley Pipe & Heating Supply! Your group has been seated in the following Royal Sections:*
>
> *Accounts Payable, Receivables, Purchasing, Admin: YELLOW*
>
> *Warehouse, Receiving, Drivers, Counter: RED*
>
> *Please note that section colours are assigned by the Court and cannot be changed. Cheer loudly! Your knight needs you!*
>
> Below that was a line I hadn't asked for.
>
> *For your information: the Yellow Knight has lost his last 140 shows. This is within the expected range for Yellow.*

And below that was his signature. Most email signatures at Valley Pipe are a name and a direct line and, in Darcy's case, a quote from Mark 11:24 about believing you have received it. The barn's was longer. I found out later that Darren, who owns the place, had asked all the staff to write a short bio for a new insert in the program, because he couldn't afford a copywriter, and then had them paste the bios into their email signatures,

because he'd read that it built trust. Most of the staff had pasted in their name and a line. This one had pasted in all of it.

> *All-Seeing · Group Sales & Bookings · Knights of the Fraser*
>
> *All-Seeing has counted things professionally since before there was a number system to count them in. Previous positions include tallying the stars for a firm of shepherds (unpaid), census work for several empires (all of which used the results to raise taxes), the Domesday survey (contract), and actuarial work for an insurance company in Winnipeg, from which he was let go for being right about everyone at once. He can tell you what share of you will order the vegetarian meal. He cannot tell you which of you. He has stopped apologizing for this. At Knights of the Fraser since 2021. Ask about group rates.*

Gloria read it over my shoulder. She'd come to take a Werther's from her own jar and stayed.

"He wrote his own," she said.

"They all did, apparently."

"You can always tell when they write their own." She unwrapped the Werther's very slowly. "Linda used to write Gary's. For the newsletter. Every year it said *Gary enjoys golf.* Gary's never golfed in his life. She just thought he should."

* * *

I should say about Gary.

Gary Toews started at the will-call counter in 1988, with a mullet and a Firebird and a brand-new Grade 12 certificate he'd earned at twenty-five by going back for it at night. Gloria taught him to read a packing slip. She says it took him a month, and that he still reads them with his finger. He went from the counter to inside sales, from inside sales to branch manager, and from branch manager to regional, which means he's in charge of Abbotsford and Chilliwack and a yard in Hope that is mostly a fence. He married Linda in 1996. Linda did the books for her brother's dental office and brought muffins to the Christmas party every year, even the years it was catered. She died in March of 2023. The service was at Central Heights. The warehouse went in their work boots, because they came straight from a delivery, and Gary shook every one of their hands at the door. Gloria made the sandwiches for the reception. She made four hundred of them and cut off every crust herself, and when someone asked her why she'd made so many, she said that she knew how many people Linda knew.

Since then Gary has eaten his lunch in his truck. He has a Silverado with a bench seat, and he sits in it in the lot at noon with the engine off and the radio on, and eats a sandwich he made himself, and reads the *Abbotsford News* on his phone. Some days Gloria goes out to her own car at noon to get something she forgot. Her car is parked beside his truck. It

has been parked beside his truck for about three years, though there are closer spaces.

Brenda pointed this out. Brenda points out a great deal. Brenda started in 2003, which means she wasn't at the 1994 Christmas party at the Ramada on the Fraser Highway, and neither was I. Brenda has the story from Wade, and Wade has it from a driver named Les who retired in 2009 and moved to Yuma.

"They danced," Brenda told me in the lunchroom, with the door shut. "Three songs. 'Lady in Red' was the last one. Then Gloria said she'd lost an earring in the parking lot and Gary said he'd help her find it."

"And?"

"They were gone forty minutes."

"And?"

"Les says they never found the earring." Brenda opened her yogurt. "Les says they didn't look very hard."

"That's thirty years ago."

"Thirty-two," said Brenda. "Gloria married Doug the next summer. Gary married Linda in ninety-six. And nobody has said one word about it in this building since." She licked the lid of her yogurt. "Until now."

"You're saying it now."

"I'm saying it in the lunchroom," Brenda said. "That's different."

* * *

Two people were added to our booking the week of the party. One was Brenda's new boyfriend, Clint, who sells hot tubs in Langley. The other was Wade's brother-in-law, who was visiting from Vernon and had nowhere else to be. That made forty-four. I did not call group sales to tell him.

The bus came at five-thirty on Saturday. It was a coach from a charter company in Chilliwack, with a TV over the driver that played a DVD of *The Santa Clause* with the sound off. The warehouse sat at the back. Accounts Payable sat at the front, because the front is where you sit if you get carsick or if you want to be first off to see the restroom situation.

Gloria wore a red dress. She has worn a red dress to every staff Christmas party since I started. This one was new, or it was new to me. It had sleeves to the elbow and a neckline that the warehouse went quiet about. She wore her good earrings, gold hoops, and she'd done her nails, and the bus smelled like her perfume at the front and like the warehouse's cologne at the back, and somewhere around Mount Lehman Road it became mostly cologne.

Gary got on last. He'd been checking the headcount at the door, though the driver had already done it. He was wearing his navy blazer, the one from the funeral, with a tie that had little reindeer on it, because Darcy had told him it was a party and he'd panicked at the Walmart.

He looked down the aisle. There was an empty seat beside Gloria. There was an empty seat across the aisle from her, beside the window.

He took the window, across the aisle, so there was an empty seat and an aisle between them. It was the chair by the door, the one you take at a meeting you might need to leave early.

"You can sit down, Gary," Gloria said.

"I am sitting."

"You're sitting over there."

He stayed where he was. He looked out the window at the dark fields and the Christmas lights on the farmhouses. Gloria looked out hers. Around the time we turned off the Fraser Highway onto 264th Street, she took off her coat and laid it across the empty seat beside her, folded, to hold the seat.

Then the bus turned up a long gravel drive, and there was the barn, lit up with floodlights and a plywood castle front and a sign in that wedding font: *KNIGHTS OF THE FRASER · FEAST & TOURNAMENT · EST. 1999*. Behind the castle front you could see the barn's own roof, long and low and green, which had housed fourteen thousand turkeys until 1998, according to the man at the door, who had a scroll and was checking us against it.

II. Opening Night

Inside the castle front was a lobby the barn people called the Hall of Arms. It had a gift shop selling plastic swords and a photo booth with a cardboard throne, and a bar along one side made out of what I think were the old turkey feeders, laid flat and varnished. At the door to the arena they gave everyone a paper crown in their section colour. Gary got a gold one. He'd paid extra for it on the booking, under *Royal Upgrade (Host)*, and I had paid it, and Gloria had initialled it, and none of us had known it meant a crown.

"It's paper," Gloria said.

"It's gold paper," said Gary.

"Gary, it's a Burger King crown with a better font."

He wore it anyway. He wore it all night. It sat on his head a little crooked, because his head is bigger than the crown's average customer, and every so often he put a hand up to check it was still there.

The arena was the barn itself, with the inside stripped out and bleachers built up on the two long sides in tiers, each tier a long counter with benches behind it so you could eat facing the

floor. The floor was dirt. Dirt like a rodeo's, raked smooth, with a smell that Clint the hot tub man called *authentic* and Brenda called *Clint, please*. The sections were marked with banners hanging from the rafters: yellow, red, green, blue, black and white, and red and yellow, which had confused the Chilliwack accounting firm sitting in it all evening. At the far end, up on a platform hung with velvet, was a throne.

Allfather was sitting on it already. He had a grey beard and a patch over one eye, and he sat there while three hundred people found their seats, and he didn't wave or nod or move, and somehow nobody sat down in front of him without looking up at him first.

In front of every seat was a program, and in each program was a pink insert, folded once. *MEET YOUR COURT,* it said at the top, and under that, *No. 1 in a series.*

His Majesty the King

His Majesty has held the throne at Knights of the Fraser since 2019, and several thrones before that, most of them now in museums or at the bottom of lakes. He gave an eye for wisdom and considers it a fair trade, though he would like it noted that wisdom does not come with depth perception. He once hung from a tree for some days to learn to read, and recommends the library. He has ridden an eight-legged horse (retired, now at a sanctuary near Prince George) and kept two ravens, who reported to him every evening and were let go in a restructuring. He has been called Allfather, which he finds a lot to live up to at

Christmas. He has one line in tonight's show. He has not yet found the right night to say it.

"Eight legs," said Wade's brother-in-law from Vernon. "That's a lot of shoeing."

"It's a story," said Clint.

"It's a lot of shoeing," said the brother-in-law, who it turned out had been a farrier.

* * *

There was no cutlery. There was a plate and a bowl and a pile of paper napkins and a damp towelette in a packet with a crest on it.

"The medieval way," said Hand, and he put down a bowl of tomato soup in front of each of us. The program called the soup Dragon's Blood. You drank it out of the bowl, which had a handle on one side for the purpose. Then he went down our row again with garlic bread, and then again with the chicken, half a roast chicken on every plate, and a potato, and corn on the cob.

He was a very big man in a leather apron. He limped a little on his left side. And here is the part Brenda has been trying to explain to people ever since: she had her phone out to time him, because Brenda times things, and she pressed start when he set down the first chicken at the end of our row by Clint, and when she looked up to press stop, there was a chicken in front of every one of us, all the way down to Gary, and Hand was gone down the steps to the Red section, and her phone said

nothing at all. It hadn't started. Or it had started and stopped in the same instant. She looked at the phone for a while. Then she put it face down on the counter and ate her chicken.

Gloria ate her chicken.

Gary was watching. Later, so was most of Yellow.

Gloria Ferreira has been eating lunch at her desk with a fork and knife and a cloth napkin from home since 1987. She has eaten a sandwich with a fork and knife. I have seen her eat a sausage roll with a fork and knife at a retirement tea. And she looked at the half chicken in front of her and at the stack of paper napkins, and she pushed her sleeves up past the elbow, and she took off her rings and put them in her purse, and she picked the chicken up in both hands and pulled the leg off it the way you'd open a stuck drawer. Then she ate it. She ate it with her eyes half closed. She licked her thumb. She licked her first finger, and then the second one, slowly, and then she reached for the potato.

Gary had stopped eating. He had a wing in one hand halfway to his mouth, and he held it there.

"Gary," said Gloria, without looking at him, "you're staring."

"I'm supervising."

"Supervise your chicken."

He ate the wing. He went red from the collar of his reindeer tie up to the bottom of his paper crown, which was an even line, like a thermometer.

* * *

The lights went down. The trumpets were a recording. Then the lights came up on the throne, and the King stood.

According to the script, which I've since read, because the barn sent it to us later with a bill, the King's only line in the show is *Let the tournament begin.* He didn't say it. He stood up, and three hundred people stood up with him, all at once, with a sound like a church getting up for a hymn. Gary stood. Gary does not stand for the anthem at Canucks games. He says he's paid for the seat. The King looked out over all of us for a moment with the one eye. Then he sat down, and we sat down, and the tournament began anyway, because somebody in the booth had pressed the music.

Seeker came out into the middle of the floor with a scroll. He was a lean man with a long stride and the voice for it. He introduced each knight with references.

"The Green Knight! Of the House of Green! Born Kyle Banman, of Yarrow! Third season! Previously a squire, previously a stablehand, previously at the Yarrow Co-op, deli counter!" He lowered the scroll. "I've spoken with the deli. They miss him."

The Green section cheered.

"The Red Knight! Of the House of Red! Born Marco Lisi, of Williams Lake! Fifteenth season! Before that, eight years as pickup man for the Williams Lake Stampede, where he was thrown, by his count, two hundred times, and by the Stampede's

count, three hundred and twelve!" He lowered the scroll. "I have the Stampede's records. I believe the Stampede."

Our warehouse went berserk. They'd been drinking since the Hall of Arms. Wade stood on the bench.

"The Yellow Knight! Of the House of Yellow! Born Tyler Dueck, of Aldergrove! Second season! Formerly the Blue Knight! Before that, a lifeguard at the Walnut Grove pool, Employee of the Month for March!" He lowered the scroll. "I've seen the plaque. It's by the vending machines."

We cheered for Tyler like he was one of ours. He rode out on a white horse, a young man with a round face and a yellow tunic, and he waved up at us like nobody had ever told him before which section was his. He couldn't have been much older than my daughter.

* * *

Chaos-Weaver ran the horses. They came out of the stable door at the end of the arena in a different order every pass. On the first pass the knights had each other's horses, and they had to stop in the middle of the floor and swap, which got a cheer. On the second pass the Red Knight came out on a horse dressed half in red and half in yellow, and both sections booed him, and then, unsure, both sections cheered him. On the third pass he came out on a pony.

It was a Shetland pony. It was dressed in red. Marco Lisi's feet were nearly on the dirt. He looked toward the stable door, and Chaos-Weaver, leaning in the doorway in a squire's tunic with a pitchfork, gave him a thumbs-up.

Marco jousted anyway. He was a professional. He ran that pony at Tyler's horse with his lance down, at a speed I wouldn't have believed a pony had, and the warehouse howled, and Gary laughed so hard his crown fell off and Gloria caught it.

* * *

Conscience-Keeper stood in the middle of the floor with a flag on a pole: yellow on one side, red on the other, and a little rack of the other colours at his feet. He was the Marshal of the Lists, a quiet man in a grey tabard with a face like a deacon at a budget meeting. He didn't move much. He watched.

In the joust the knights ride at each other down a low wooden rail, with lances that are made to break, and points are scored for hitting the other man's shield. It's all choreographed, Tyler told me later, like a dance. Each knight knows when to swing and when to block and when to fall, and it's written down in a binder that Darren keeps in the booth and calls the Book. The choreography only works if the scoring follows it. On Saturday the fifth of December, the Book said Red. On the next pass Tyler's lance hit the Red Knight's shield square, with a crack that came all the way up to the bleachers, and Marco's lance went past Tyler's shoulder, and Conscience-Keeper raised the flag for Yellow.

A voice came over the speakers. It was a man's voice, a deep one, the kind that used to announce bull riders. "Point to Red."

Conscience-Keeper kept the flag where it was.

"It was Yellow's point," he said. He didn't shout it. The barn was quiet enough to hear it anyway.

"Point to Red," said the speakers.

Conscience-Keeper looked up at the booth, which is a box with a window high up behind the Green section, and waited. He waited the way my mother used to wait outside the bathroom door when she knew I'd been into her lipstick. He just stood there with the flag up, for as long as it was going to take.

After a while the speakers said, "Point to Yellow."

Accounts Payable lost its mind. Gloria, who is sixty-eight, stood up on the bench in her red dress and her good earrings. Gary held her by the back of the dress so she wouldn't fall. She didn't fall. He didn't let go for some time afterward, either.

* * *

It went like that all night. Every time the script said Red, Conscience-Keeper looked up at the booth. In the ring pierce, Tyler took three rings and Marco took two, and the flag went up yellow. In the javelin, Marco's javelin hit the target dead centre and Tyler's went into the dirt, and the flag went up red, and the warehouse roared, and our section booed, and Conscience-Keeper looked at us the same way he'd looked at the booth, and we stopped.

"He's fair," said Wade's brother-in-law. "That's the trouble with him."

The final event was the sword fight. All six knights fought, two at a time, and the winners fought each other, and the last two standing fought for the title of King's Champion. If the Marshal says a man's been struck, the man has to go

down. If he says a man hasn't, the man has to keep going. Conscience-Keeper said, again and again, that Marco hadn't struck Tyler, because he hadn't. He'd swung exactly where the Book said to swing, and Tyler, who had never before in two seasons been allowed past the second round, had blocked it, because for once there was no reason not to.

Red's sword broke where it was meant to break. Yellow's didn't. Marco went down on one knee, which is what the Book said Tyler should do at that moment, and then, because the Book was useless now, he improvised. He fell flat on his back in the dirt with his arms out. He stayed there a beat longer than he needed to. Then another beat. He'd won every Saturday night that season, and some of the Fridays. Tyler told me later that Marco said it was the first time in fifteen seasons he'd got to lie down in the middle of a show.

Tyler Dueck stood alone in the middle of the arena with his sword up. Nobody did anything, because nobody had rehearsed this. Tyler had lost a hundred and forty shows in a row. He didn't know where to go.

The lights stayed up. The music didn't start.

Gary climbed up onto the bench in his gold paper crown. "Are we not entertained?" he shouted, with both arms out.

The barn was quiet. Then Seeker raised his scroll.

"'Are *you*,'" he said. "Not 'we.' Maximus. *Gladiator*, 2000. I can show you."

Gary got down.

The King stood up. We all stood up. Somebody in the booth found the right music, finally, and Tyler walked over to the edge

of the floor below Yellow. Each knight carries a rose, and the winner gives it to a lady in his section. That's in the script too. Tyler looked up and down the rows of Accounts Payable and Receivables and Purchasing in our yellow paper crowns, and his eyes went past Brenda and past me and stopped on Gloria, who was the only one still standing on the bench.

He held the rose up to her. She leaned down and took it. And Gloria, who has had two husbands and buried neither, and has said in my hearing that she wouldn't cross the street for a man under fifty, bent all the way down and kissed the Yellow Knight on the cheek, and the Yellow section screamed, and Gary sat down very hard on the bench.

Then Hand brought out the apple crumble. There were no spoons.

* * *

On the bus home Gary sat in the aisle seat across from Gloria. The seat beside her was empty again. Her coat wasn't on it. Her coat was on her lap, and the rose was on top of her coat.

"Give me that," said Gary.

"Why?"

"It'll get crushed."

She looked at him. Then she gave him the rose. He held it on his knee all the way back to Abbotsford, with both hands, by the stem, like a man holding a lit candle in a draft, and he didn't put it down until the bus pulled into the lot on Marshall Road and Gloria stood up and held out her hand for it.

He gave it back. She went to her car. He went to his truck. They were parked beside each other. They always are.

"Les would want to know about this," said Brenda.

"Les is in Yuma," I said.

"Les has email," said Brenda.

III. The Invoice

The invoice from Knights of the Fraser came on Monday at 8:02, before Gloria had her coat off.

It was the balance for the party, which I'd expected, plus two lines I hadn't.

Lance, tournament, broken, removed from premises (1) $185.00

Pony, unscheduled $95.00

I printed it and put it on Gloria's desk, because anything over a hundred dollars that isn't on a purchase order goes to Gloria, and Gloria puts it under her stapler, and it stays there until somebody comes over and explains it to her face.

"Removed from premises," she read.

"Wade," I said.

"Of course Wade."

Wade had taken the broken lance home on the bus. It was in two pieces. He'd held one piece and his brother-in-law from Vernon had held the other, and they had sung most of "Feliz Navidad" into the ends of them like microphones. It was

now, Wade told me when I went out to the warehouse to ask, mounted over the door of his garage in Clearbrook, with a string of lights.

"It was broke," he said. "They were going to throw it out."

"They're charging us a hundred and eighty-five dollars."

Wade thought about it. "Worth it," he said.

* * *

Gary's expense claim came in on Tuesday.

Gary does his expense claims on the paper form, the green one, which nobody else has used since we went to the software in 2019. He fills it out in block capitals in blue pen and attaches the receipts with a single staple in the top left corner, and every receipt is flattened, as if he'd ironed it, which Brenda swears he does.

12/05 · KNIGHTS OF THE FRASER · HALL OF ARMS BAR · DRINKS (2) · $28.50

12/07 · KNIGHTS OF THE FRASER · DEPOSIT · CLIENT APPRECIATION EVENT 12/12 · 40 GUESTS · $1,200.00

I sat and looked at the second line for a while. Then I picked up the phone and put it back down. Then I took the claim over to Gloria's desk and put it on top of the invoice under the stapler, and went back to my desk, and opened a spreadsheet I didn't need, so I'd have something to look at.

Gloria read it. She read it twice, once for the number and once for the attitude. Then she took off her reading glasses and folded them and put them in the breast pocket of her cardigan,

which is what she does when someone's about to be called in. She picked up her desk phone and pressed four digits.

"Gary," she said. "Could you come to my desk, please."

He came. It took him about as long as it takes to walk from his office to AP, which is not very long, but he had stopped on the way to straighten a stack of catalogues on the counter at reception that did not need it.

"Client appreciation," said Gloria.

"Yes."

"Which clients."

"Contractors. Our top forty. Bains Mechanical. Hiebert Plumbing. The Wiebes." He'd stopped at the edge of her desk, by the Werther's, with his hands behind his back like a boy outside a principal's office. "It's a good-will thing. It's the season."

"Forty contractors and their wives."

"Twenty contractors and their wives."

"And you."

"And staff," said Gary. "To host. You'd need staff to host."

"Which staff?"

He looked at the ceiling. "Senior staff."

Gloria let that sit. Then she turned the claim around on the desk so it faced him and put one fingertip, with its red nail, on the first line.

"Drinks, two," she said. "Twenty-eight fifty. At the Hall of Arms bar, on Saturday, before the show."

"Yes."

"You had one drink, Gary. I watched you. You had a rum and Coke and you held it for forty minutes like it was a bus transfer." She tapped the line. "Who was the second drink for?"

Brenda, two pods over, had stopped typing. I could see her not typing. Her hands were up over her keyboard and she wasn't moving them.

"You," said Gary.

"I never got a drink."

"I know," said Gary.

Nobody said anything. In the warehouse somebody dropped a box of copper fittings, and they went everywhere, and nobody in AP looked round.

Gloria picked up her pen. She initialled the claim at the bottom, in the box marked *APPROVED*, in green, which is the colour she uses for things she approves of, as distinct from black, for things she approves. She turned it back around and slid it into her out tray.

"Next time," she said, "deliver."

Gary went back to his office. He walked past the stack of catalogues at reception, which he'd already straightened, and he straightened it again.

Brenda started typing. She typed for a while. Then she sent me an email, from twenty feet away, that said only *LES*, and nothing else.

* * *

I called the barn about the pony on Wednesday.

I got group sales. All-Seeing said, before I'd finished my name, "The lance or the pony?"

"The pony. We didn't order a pony."

"Nobody orders the pony," he said. "The pony is for children's birthday parties, package C. About one adult event in thirty gets the pony anyway. You'll want Darren."

He put me through. Darren Pankratz answered on the first ring and said "Darren," in a voice I recognized from the speakers. He sounded like a man who'd slept in a booth.

"This is Lorna at Valley Pipe. I'm calling about invoice 4502. The pony."

"The pony," said Darren, "is not in your contract."

"No. That's why I'm calling. We didn't order it."

"I know you didn't order it. *I* didn't order it." There was a creak, as if he'd sat back in a chair that didn't want him to. "The pony came out because the pony was in the stable, and the pony was in the stable because I had a birthday at two on the Sunday, and my stables are run by a kid who—" He stopped. "It's not your problem. You know what is my problem? I have run this show since 1999. My dad raised turkeys in this barn. I put in the bleachers myself. I have a binder this thick, and every page of it says who wins, and I have never once, not once, had a show where the person the binder says wins doesn't win. And on Saturday I had a Marshal standing in my arena *telling me no.*"

"I'm sorry," I said. "About the pony."

"I can't fire him."

"Why not?"

"He's the best Marshal I've ever had," said Darren. "He's the only one the horses stand still for."

There was a sound on the line, someone picking up an extension. Then a different voice, slower and lower, said, "Darren. I'll take it."

Darren didn't say goodbye. The line just went to the other voice.

"This is the King," said the voice.

I stood up. I'd been sitting at my desk with my feet on the bar under it and I stood up, with the phone, and the cord pulled the base across the desk and knocked over my pencil cup. Gloria looked up. She saw my face. And then, though she couldn't have heard anything but my end of it, she stood up too. Then Brenda stood up, because Gloria had. Then Darcy from purchasing, who was only passing through AP with a coffee.

"The pony is waived," said the King. "The lance is not. Your Wade has it."

"Yes," I said. "Over his garage."

"With lights," said the King.

"Yes."

"Good. Pay for it," said the King. "I'd like it to be honestly his."

"Can I ask you something?" I said. I don't know why. I'd read the insert three times. Everyone in AP had read it. Brenda had

stuck hers on the side of her monitor. “The eye. In your bio. Is that real?”

“I lost it in a negotiation,” said the King. “I’d do it again.” He paused. “I’d ask for more.”

“Okay.”

“Tell your host,” said the King, “that he may keep his crown. Hosts usually leave theirs on the bus.”

He hung up. I put the phone down. I put it down very gently, in case it was still listening. Then I sat. Gloria sat. Brenda sat. Darcy, who didn’t have a chair in AP, looked around for one, and then went back to purchasing with his coffee.

“Who was that?” said Gloria.

“The King.”

“The King of what?”

“The barn.”

Gloria looked at me over her reading glasses for a while. Then she said, “Huh,” and took a Werther’s from her own jar, which she never does before lunch.

* * *

Jess phoned on Wednesday night instead of texting. She’d seen the barn’s Instagram. Somebody from the Chilliwack accounting firm had posted a video of Gloria standing on the bench in her red dress, and the barn had shared it, and a girl on Jess’s floor at the residence had shown it to her in the laundry room.

“Mom,” said Jess. “Is that *Gloria*?”

“That’s Gloria.”

“She kissed the knight.”

"On the cheek."

"Mom, it has twelve thousand views." Jess was eating something. Jess is always eating something when she phones, because nursing students don't get to eat at normal times, she says, they eat when there's a gap. "Who's the man in the crown holding her dress?"

"That's Gary."

"Your boss Gary? Sad Gary? Truck Gary?"

"He's not sad," I said. "He eats lunch in his truck."

"That's what sad is, Mom."

I was on the couch with my feet up and the TV on mute, and a frozen lasagna in the oven that I had set the timer for and would forget anyway. My townhouse is the end unit off Old Yale Road. I bought it after Rick, in 2012, with my half of the house in Clearbrook, and it has a little patio where I meant to put tomatoes and haven't. Rick left in the spring of 2012 for Candace, who did his dental hygiene. He told me in the car in the Save-On parking lot, with the engine running, because he said he didn't want to make a scene in the house. I said there wasn't going to be a scene. There wasn't. I went in and bought the groceries. I'd come for groceries.

"Are you okay?" Jess said.

"I'm fine."

"No, I mean." She stopped eating. "Mom. You've been in that office nineteen years with these people. Gloria's got a knight. Gary's got a crown. What have you got?"

"I've got the GST number for the squire gratuity," I said.

Jess laughed. She has Rick's laugh, which I've decided not to hold against her. "Are you going to go back?" she said. "To the barn?"

"Gary's booked another night. For clients."

"Are you going?"

"I'm not senior staff."

"Mom," said Jess. "Everybody's senior staff at a turkey barn."

Then she had to go, because somebody on her floor had set off the smoke alarm with a Pop-Tart, and I sat on the couch and watched the Gloria video on my phone four times, with the sound up. You can hear Gary in it. Under the noise, you can hear him say, "I've got you," while he holds the back of her dress. On the fourth time I smelled the lasagna.

* * *

Darren rewrote the Book on Thursday.

We know this because the barn sent an email to everybody on its group list, which apparently included us now, and also, because the barn's database was not good, a woman in Hope who'd booked a birthday in 2014 and replied-all to say she'd moved.

> *SHOW UPDATE from Knights of the Fraser!*
>
> *Effective immediately, the results of all tournament events will be determined by the Marshal of the Lists, on the merits. Choreography will continue as normal. The Court thanks you for your loyalty. Huzzah!*

Underneath, in the signature, it said, *All-Seeing · Group Sales & Bookings*, and then a line I'm fairly sure was not part of the company template.

> *Since the Saturday show, bookings for the remainder of December are up thirty-four percent. Two thirds of new bookings have requested Yellow.*

The *Langley Advance Times* ran a piece about Tyler on Friday. *ALDERGROVE KNIGHT SNAPS 140-SHOW SKID*, it said, with a photo of Tyler in his yellow tunic outside the barn, holding his helmet under one arm, squinting into the sun. He'd been a lifeguard at the Walnut Grove pool for four years, the article said, and had applied to Knights of the Fraser after a birthday party for his nephew, because the Blue Knight at that party had dropped his sword and Tyler had thought, *I could drop a sword.* He'd started as a stablehand. He'd been a squire for fourteen months. He'd lost every show he'd ever ridden in, the article said, as Blue and then as Yellow, because, Tyler explained, somebody has to.

"That's my job," he was quoted. "I'm the guy who loses. I'm good at it. I know exactly where to fall." He'd won on Saturday night, he said, and he didn't fully know how. "I just kept blocking. Nobody told me to stop." Asked what he'd done after the show, Tyler said he'd driven to his mom's place on 272nd and she'd made him perogies at midnight, and he'd sat at her kitchen table in his armour, because he couldn't get the back strap undone himself.

His mother, Carol Dueck, comes to the show every Thursday, the article said. She has come every Thursday since he started. She sits in whatever section he's riding for, and she has never once seen him win. She was not at the barn on the Saturday. She was at a baby shower in Murrayville.

"I'll see the next one," Carol was quoted as saying.

Gloria cut the article out with the long scissors from her drawer, and pinned it to the corkboard by the lunchroom door, beside the WorkSafe poster and the sign about the fridge. She didn't say anything about it. She just pinned it up, and then she went back to her desk, and on the way past Gary's office she knocked twice on the glass, without stopping, and Gary looked up from his monitor and watched her walk the rest of the way to AP, and then he looked at the paper crown, which was sitting on top of his filing cabinet, where he'd put it on Monday morning.

He hadn't left it on the bus.

IV. Client Appreciation

Gary had asked for Yellow. All-Seeing told him on the phone that Yellow was sold out for the rest of December, and that seventy percent of groups who asked for Yellow and didn't get it took Red.

"We'll take Red," said Gary.

"Most do," said All-Seeing.

So the client appreciation night was in Red, under the banner Accounts Payable had booed a week before. There were forty-three of us: twenty contractors, nineteen wives and one husband, and the senior staff, which turned out to be Gary and Gloria and me. The deposit said forty guests, which left the three of us off it. Gloria had circled that in green. I'm not senior staff. But Gloria told Gary she wasn't going to sit through three hours of Harjit Bains on backflow preventers without someone to look at, and Gary said, "Lorna's senior," and I was senior.

Harjit Bains bought everyone a round in the Hall of Arms before Gary could. Ed Hiebert of Hiebert Plumbing bought a plastic sword and spent the night pointing at things with it.

Gloria wore green. She wears red to staff parties, and this was clients.

Gary came up to the bar beside her with his gold crown on.

“I’m getting you a drink,” he said.

“Are you.”

“I’m delivering.”

“Good,” said Gloria. “Vodka soda. Lime.”

Companion had already poured two. She’d done it while they were talking, before either of them had turned to the bar: two hot mulled wines in heavy clay mugs, a cinnamon stick in each, steam coming off them. Then she’d gone down to the far end of the bar with a cloth.

She was a broad-shouldered woman with grey in her hair and sleeves rolled to the elbow. She didn’t come back to explain the drinks. She wiped the bar.

“We didn’t order these,” Gary called to her.

“No,” said Companion, and kept wiping.

Gloria doesn’t drink mulled wine. She says it’s what Anglicans drink when they’ve given up. She picked up one of the mugs with both hands and held it under her chin and breathed in over it, and then she drank, and put it down with a cinnamon-coloured mark on her lip.

“Delivered,” said Gary, and picked up the other one.

“It’s hot,” said Gloria.

“It’s mulled.”

“I meant in here,” said Gloria, and walked off into the arena with it, and Gary stood at the bar with his mug and his gold crown for a moment, and then went after her.

* * *

The second insert was blue. *MEET YOUR COURT · No. 2*

Chaos-Weaver · Stables & Squires

Chaos-Weaver has been asked to leave every place he has ever worked, and most of them were glad he came. Former posts include a hall in the far north, where he was very nearly forgiven several times; the court of a king who asked that everything he touched turn to gold, and who was not, in Chaos-Weaver's view, specific enough; deckhand on a ship of fifty heroes looking for a fleece; a mead-hall; the Bloor-Danforth line; and the PNE. He once tied himself to a goat to make a giantess laugh, and she did. He is good with horses, having been one, briefly, for reasons he describes as a scheduling conflict. He has a son with eight legs who is doing well at a sanctuary near Prince George. At Knights of the Fraser since 2024. He is not responsible for the goat.

"What goat?" said Shirley Wiebe.

Nobody knew. We found out in the ring pierce.

* * *

Gary sat beside Gloria. He walked down the front bench of Red and stopped at the place beside hers and sat, and said to Harjit, on his other side, "Client coverage," as though Harjit had asked. Harjit hadn't asked. Harjit was talking to Ed Hiebert about the Canucks.

The bench is built for a turkey barn's idea of a person, and they sat with their hips touching from the soup to the crumble, and neither of them moved over, though there was room at both ends.

When the chicken came, Gary took off his wedding ring and put it in his blazer pocket. He did it quickly, the way he takes his keys out before he sits down, and then he picked up his chicken.

At some point, with her own thumb, Gloria wiped a smear of chicken off Gary's chin, and then licked the thumb, and went back to her potato.

Harjit's wife, Manpreet, on my left, leaned toward me and said very quietly, "How long?"

"Thirty-two years," I said.

"Oh," said Manpreet, sitting back, satisfied. "So they're nearly there."

* * *

The goat came out during the ring pierce.

Tyler was riding for his third ring when a small brown goat with a bell on a red ribbon walked out of the stable door, in no hurry, and stood under the post and looked up at the ring. Tyler pulled up. A squire ran out, and the goat moved off a little way, and the squire ran back, and the goat came back to the post.

Conscience-Keeper lowered his flag. He walked out across the dirt and stood beside the goat, looking down. The goat looked up. They stayed like that. The booth said, over the speakers, "Clear the arena, please," and Conscience-Keeper

didn't look up at the booth this time. He looked at the goat. After a while the goat walked off on its own toward the stable door, and Chaos-Weaver, leaning there in his squire's tunic, stepped aside to let it pass.

"Where did the goat come from?" Seeker asked, into his microphone. He asked it as if he expected to be able to answer it. Then he didn't answer it. "I'm not certain where the goat is from," he said, at last. "I'll have to come back to you."

Later I found myself beside Chaos-Weaver at the gift shop, buying carrots for the horses. I said, "Is it your goat? The one in the bio?"

"That's not the same goat," said Chaos-Weaver. He seemed hurt that I'd asked. "That goat was a thousand years ago. That goat's gone. That goat was a better goat," he said, and went out with his carrots.

* * *

Marco Lisi won. He won all of it, the rings and the javelin and the joust and the sword fight, and every time Conscience-Keeper raised the red flag, nobody in the booth said anything, because there was nothing to say. Marco is the best rider in that barn and the best with a sword. For fifteen seasons the Book had said so. Now Conscience-Keeper was saying so, and it turned out the two of them agreed.

Red went wild. Gary roared, and Gloria stood up beside him, and the green dress and the reindeer tie were the loudest two things in Red.

Tyler went down in the last exchange, beautifully, exactly where he meant to, and got up grinning and shook Marco's hand.

I talked to Marco after, in the Hall of Arms, while he signed a paper crown for Shirley Wiebe. He had a face like a saddle and a white scar through one eyebrow, and he held the Sharpie as if his wrist hurt.

"That's the first one I've won," he said.

"You won every show before last Saturday."

"No, I didn't," said Marco. "I was *given* every show before last Saturday." He capped the Sharpie. "Last time I won anything? Williams Lake, 2009, team roping, with my brother. Pickup man doesn't win. Pickup man rides in and gets the bronc rider off the bronc before he dies. Then I come down here, and Darren gives me the Book, and the Book says I win. Fifteen years I win. You'd think it'd be nice." He shook his head. "It's like getting a medal for showing up to your own birthday."

"And tonight?"

"Tonight I won," said Marco. "I'm sore as hell."

* * *

Marco came to the rail below Red with his rose and looked up, and Gloria, who had been standing for the last five minutes, ran a hand over her hair.

Marco gave the rose to Manpreet Bains.

Harjit was so proud you'd have thought he'd won it himself. Gloria sat down.

"Well," said Gloria. "She's younger."

"She's sixty-one," I said.

"She's younger," said Gloria. She looked into her empty mug. "I didn't want it anyway. Where would I put two?"

She'd kept the first one. It was pressed in her mother's old hymnbook from Ponta Delgada, which is the only book she owns heavy enough to press a flower, though she isn't, she says, a hymn person.

On the bus Gary sat beside her. Not across the aisle. Beside her, after she'd moved her coat off the seat. On the long dark stretch of 264th, with the contractors singing at the back and Ed Hiebert conducting with his sword, Gloria fell asleep, or said she did, with her head on Gary's shoulder, and Gary sat there all the way to Marshall Road without moving his arm, though I could see it had gone dead by Mount Lehman.

V. Year-End

The week before Christmas is year-end in Accounts Payable, and nowhere else in the company. The fiscal year at Valley Pipe ends in January, but Gloria closes AP on the eighteenth of December, because she isn't going to spend her holidays wondering whether Darcy has a receipt for anything.

Year-end means accruals. It means phoning vendors and asking them to please send us a bill, which is the only time of year vendors are surprised to hear from you. It means the yard in Hope, which had sent in seven invoices that December for fence repair from a man who signs them all *Jerry* and seems to repair the same forty feet of fence every month.

It means shredding. Valley Pipe keeps its records six years, as the law says, and then Gloria shreds them herself in the big Fellowes by the window, because she once saw the shredding company's truck at the Tim Hortons on Sumas Way with the back unlocked. So on the Wednesday, while I sat at her second monitor doing the Hope accrual, she stood at the shredder with the boxes for 2019 and fed it a few sheets at a time and told me about the Ramada.

* * *

Gary had gone for pizza. He stays late every year-end to sign things, signs maybe four, and goes for pizza. That night it was veggie for me and, for Gloria, a medium pepperoni, which she eats two slices of and takes the rest home to nobody.

So Gloria and I were alone in AP, with the desk lamps on and the Fellowes humming.

"You've heard it from Brenda," she said.

"Some of it."

"Brenda has it from Wade, and Wade has it from Les." She fed in three sheets. "Les was at the bar until they closed it. So you have it from a man who didn't see it."

"What happened?"

"We danced," said Gloria. "Three songs. 'Lady in Red' was the third, which I want you to know I didn't pick. Then I told him I'd lost an earring in the parking lot. Which was a lie. The earring was in my bra. I put it there in the ladies' room, before I asked him."

The shredder took a sheet. It sounded like somebody clearing their throat.

"It was December," said Gloria. "Raining. I had a Pontiac Sunbird. We sat in it with the heater on." She looked out the window at the dark warehouse. "We did not look for any earring, Lorna."

"No," I said.

"The windows fogged up. Les says forty minutes. It wasn't forty minutes. I've never in my life been anywhere forty minutes

with a man and had it be that short." She fed the shredder. "He was thirty-one, on the counter, with a mullet. I was thirty-six with a divorce lawyer in Mission and two hundred dollars in my chequing account, and I'd just got out of fourteen years with Tony Medeiros, who fished out of Steveston and came home once a month smelling of halibut and Molson. I'd married Tony at twenty-one because he had a truck and my father didn't like him. I wasn't going to marry a counter kid at thirty-six because he was sweet to me in a Sunbird."

"So you didn't."

"So I married Doug," said Gloria. "Doug sold real estate. Doug had a Lincoln Town Car and a condo in Palm Desert, and he told me on our second date that he'd never once raised his voice, which turned out to be true. He also never once raised anything else. That was ten years." She stopped and looked at the shredder for a moment. "Make that eight. I was asleep for two of them."

I laughed. She didn't.

"Gary called me twice," she said. "After the Ramada. I didn't call him back. Then he met Linda at a Bible study at Central Heights and I was glad. I want you to hear that. I was glad. She was good for him. She ironed his shirts with starch and she bought him golf clubs, heaven knows why, and she made him go back to school for his business diploma, nights, and he'd never have done it without her. He'd still be on the counter. She thought he was wonderful, and he was. He was wonderful at being married to Linda." She fed the last sheet from that folder into the shredder and closed the folder. "And I was at

the funeral making four hundred sandwiches, and cutting the crusts off every one, because if I'd stopped, I'd have had to stand there."

* * *

Gary came back with the pizzas at seven, through the warehouse door, with the boxes balanced on one hand like a waiter, which I didn't know he could do.

"What did I miss?" he said.

"2019," said Gloria. "Shredded."

"Anything good?"

"Darcy's mileage," said Gloria. "He drove to Hope and back three times on the same day."

"He has family in Hope."

"I know he has family in Hope. I shredded it anyway."

We ate. Gary ate standing up by the printer, the way he eats everything at work, as if he's on his way out. I asked him how he'd met Linda.

"Bible study," said Gary. "Central Heights. Thursday nights. We were doing Ruth. She sat beside me and said I was holding my Bible upside down, which I was. I'd borrowed it. I wasn't much of a Bible person then. We got married in ninety-six. Twenty-seven years. She had a heart thing. They found it in January and in March she was gone." He said it the way you'd read a packing slip. Then he said, with his finger on the edge of the pizza box, "She knew about the Ramada."

Gloria, at her desk, didn't look up. She was writing a note to Jerry in Hope, and she kept writing it.

"Everybody knew," Gary said. "Les had told everybody on the counter by Monday. Linda heard it at our engagement party from Les's wife. She came and found me in the kitchen and asked me if it was true, and I said yes, and she said, 'Well, did you find it?' And I said, 'Find what?' And she said, 'The earring,' and I said, no, we never found it." He folded the pizza box shut. "And Linda said she'd marry me anyway, because a man who'll look for an earring in the rain for forty minutes will look for anything."

Gary took the empty box out to the warehouse. The door banged shut behind him.

Gloria finished her note to Jerry and sealed it.

"It wasn't forty minutes," she said, to nobody, and put the envelope in the out tray.

* * *

It was nearly ten when I went out to my car for my phone charger. Jess texts at ten on Wednesdays to tell me she's alive, and if I don't answer she phones Rick, and Rick phones me, from the boat.

It was raining. Gloria's Buick and Gary's Silverado were side by side under the one light. I got the charger and came back in through the side door, which comes out behind AP by the photocopier, and I stopped there.

The desk lamps were on. Gary was standing at Gloria's desk, at the Werther's end, with the green form in his hand: his claim for the twelfth, which I'd processed that afternoon, with the bar

tab and the forty paper crowns he'd ordered for the contractors, which nobody had asked for.

Gloria was sitting back in her chair. She'd taken off her reading glasses. She was holding them by one arm, folded, against her bottom lip.

"You stapled it," she said.

"I always staple it."

"You staple it in the top left corner, with one staple, and you iron the receipts first. Brenda says you iron them. Do you iron them, Gary?"

"I flatten them," said Gary. "Under a book."

"Which book?"

He didn't answer.

"Which book, Gary?"

"Linda's Bible," said Gary. "It's the heaviest thing in the house."

Gloria looked at him for a long time over the top of the glasses that weren't on her face.

"Mine's my mother's hymnbook," she said.

Gary put the expense claim down on her desk. He didn't let go of it. She put two fingers on the other end of it, on the bar tab, and she didn't pull it, and he didn't pull it, and they sat like that, him standing and her sitting, with the green form flat on the desk between his hand and hers.

"You don't have to expense it, Gary," said Gloria.

"It's a business expense."

"If you want to sit beside me, sit beside me. You don't have to call it client coverage. You don't have to put it through on the

green form. You don't have to buy forty crowns." She put the glasses down on the desk. "And if you want more than that, you don't expense that either. I'm not approving it. I'm not putting it in the accruals. You just come and ask me."

Gary didn't say anything for some time. I stood behind the photocopier with my phone charger in my hand, and I didn't move, and the photocopier made the little click it makes every few minutes when it's warming itself up for nobody.

"I'm asking," said Gary.

"You're standing at my desk with a green form."

"I'm asking anyway."

Gloria picked up the claim. She stood. She walked past him, close enough that her shoulder went across his chest, which was not necessary in an aisle that size, and she went to the Fellowes by the window and fed the green form into it, stapled receipts and all.

The Fellowes took the top inch of it. Then it hit the staple and stopped. It made a sound like a dog that's eaten something, and the red light came on, and the motor ran backward and forward, and the form stuck up out of the slot like a tongue.

"Gloria," said Gary. "That was my claim."

"I know what it was."

"I need that for the—"

"Gary," said Gloria. She was trying to pull the form back out. It wouldn't come. Gary came over and put his hand on top of hers on the paper, and they pulled it together, and the Fellowes went backward and forward, and the red light blinked, and

they stood there with their hands together on the end of the paper, and neither of them was pulling very hard by then.

That's when my phone buzzed. It was Jess. *alive*, it said. It buzzed again. *u up?*

They both looked round. I came out from behind the photocopier with the charger.

"Forgot my charger," I said.

"We've jammed the shredder," said Gary.

"I can see that."

Gloria let go of the paper and went back to her desk and put her reading glasses on, and looked at her screen, and didn't move her mouse.

Gary got the form out in the end with needle-nose pliers from the warehouse, in two pieces, and laid them on Gloria's desk side by side, as if he were laying out a map.

"I'll redo it," he said. "On the software."

"You don't know the software."

"Lorna can show me."

"Lorna's going home," said Gloria, without looking at me. "Aren't you, Lorna."

I went home. At the corner of Marshall Road I looked in the mirror, and the desk lamps in AP were still on, both of them, and the overheads were still off.

* * *

The next morning, the seventeenth, I came in at eight and Gloria was already at her desk, in yesterday's cardigan, with her coffee. Gary's office blinds were shut. Gary's office blinds are never shut.

Brenda came in at eight-fifteen and looked at the blinds and looked at Gloria and looked at me, and I looked at my screen, and Brenda rolled her chair very slowly back to Receivables and didn't say a word, which in nineteen years I've never seen her do.

At eight-forty an email came round from Wade, to everybody in the company, in capitals.

WAREHOUSE DEMANDS REMATCH. RED V YELLOW. SAT 19TH. KNIGHTS OF THE FRASER. WE'RE PAYING.

And underneath, a minute later, from Wade again:

(GARY'S PAYING.)

And under that, a minute after, from Gary, the first email I've ever seen him send with a capital letter in it:

Approved.

VI. The Rematch

Wade booked forty-four seats for the rematch, twenty-two in Red and twenty-two in Yellow. When All-Seeing told him Yellow was sold out, Wade said, "Then unsell it," and All-Seeing said that about one booking in twelve that asks for something to be unsold gets it, and this was one of them.

So the warehouse sat in Red and we sat in Yellow, facing each other across the dirt, and the warehouse had brought a cowbell.

Gary walked past the Red stairs and came up into Yellow and sat down beside Gloria and put his crown on. Wade rang the cowbell at him once, sadly, from across the arena.

Carol Dueck was two rows behind us, in a yellow fleece and a paper crown she'd brought from home with *TYLER'S MOM* on it in Sharpie. It was the first Saturday she'd come.

"He doesn't know I'm here," she told Brenda, who introduces herself to everyone. "I told him I had a shower in Murrayville. I didn't want to jinx it. Thirty years at the Aldergrove credit union, I know a jinx when I see one."

* * *

The insert was green. *MEET YOUR COURT · No. 3*

Hand · Feast Service

Hand has made everything he was ever asked to make, and some things he wasn't. Former commissions include armour for a young man who wanted to live forever and was given, instead, very good armour; a shield with a city at peace on one side and a city at war on the other, both of which he still thinks about; a throne with a trick in it, for his mother; a net fine enough to catch two people in a bed, for a husband who wanted proof (he got it, and wished he hadn't); several thunderbolts; and, since 2022, a few hundred thousand half chickens. He walks with a limp. He would prefer you didn't help.

Gloria read it out loud, in her safety-minute voice.

"'A net fine enough,'" she read, "'to catch two people in a bed.'"

Gary was eating garlic bread. He breathed in at the wrong moment, and Gloria hit him between the shoulder blades, twice, hard, and then left her hand there, on his back, for the rest of the soup course.

"'For a husband who wanted proof,'" she read on. "'He got it, and wished he hadn't.'" She folded the insert into her purse. "Well, that's men."

"That's one man," said Gary, when he could talk.

"That's the one in the program," said Gloria.

* * *

Brenda finally got a time. This time she pressed start when the first bowl touched the counter at the end of our row and stop when the last one touched down in front of Gary.

0.00, said her phone. Zero point zero zero seconds, in big white figures.

Brenda turned round and showed it to Carol Dueck, who said, "My Tyler was a lifeguard. You'd be amazed what you can do when there's somebody drowning." Brenda took a screenshot. Then she drank her Dragon's Blood out of the bowl, both hands, like a child.

* * *

When the chicken came, Gary raised his hand. Hand came back up the bleacher steps one at a time, limping on the left, and I stood up to take the tray from him, as I would for anyone, and he looked at me.

"I'd rather you didn't," he said.

"Sorry."

"It's all right." He set his tray down on the end of our counter and looked at the stairs he'd come up. "I was thrown off a mountain once," he said. "By my mother. For being born like this. I fell for a long time and landed in the sea, and two women who lived there picked me up and looked after me. I paid one of them back, years later. Armour for her son." He picked the tray back up. "It didn't save him. I'd rather not owe anybody else."

He said it as if he were telling me which bus goes downtown. Then he turned to Gary. “Sir?”

“Could I get a fork?” said Gary.

Hand took a fork out of his apron and gave it to him, a plain steel restaurant fork.

“You can get a fork?” said Gloria.

“Silverware is available on request,” said Hand. “It says so on the back of the program.” He went off down the steps.

Gloria turned her program over. It did, under the fire exits.

“I’ve been eating chicken with my hands for two Saturdays,” said Gloria, “for nothing.”

“Not for nothing,” said Gary.

He put the fork down on the counter beside his plate, very carefully, the way he’d laid out the two halves of his expense claim on her desk, and picked up his chicken in his hands.

Gloria never asked for a fork. At one point she held out a piece of the breast to him on her fingers, across the little space between them, and he took it, with his mouth, from her fingers, in front of most of the Yellow section and some of the Red. The warehouse rang the cowbell.

Carol Dueck, behind us, said, “Oh, my,” and fanned herself with her program.

* * *

Hand fixed Tyler’s girth strap in passing.

Wade’s brother-in-law saw it from across the arena in Red. He’d come back from Vernon for the rematch. Tyler had stopped at the rail below Yellow to wave, and Hand was coming along

the edge of the arena with an empty tray, and as he went past the horse he put his hand under its belly for a moment without stopping, the way you'd touch a doorframe going through a doorway in the dark.

"Buckle had a crack in it," he told Wade, and Wade told everybody at the Monday huddle. "I saw it from the bench. Then it wasn't cracked."

Wade had asked him what would have happened.

"Saddle goes round," the farrier had said. "Kid goes under the horse."

After the show the buckle was just a buckle. Tyler said it had always been a buckle.

* * *

Tyler lost. He lost honestly, the way Marco had won on the twelfth, all the way through. In the joust he hit Marco's shield once, square, and Conscience-Keeper raised yellow for that pass, and our section screamed as if it were the Stanley Cup. Every other flag that night went up red. The warehouse rang the cowbell for every one until Conscience-Keeper looked at them across the arena, and then they put it under the bench.

The sword fight came down to Red and Yellow. Darren had written them six ways to go, he told us later, and they used all six, and a seventh that wasn't in the Book. At the end Marco got in under Tyler's guard and touched him on the chest with the flat of the blade, and Conscience-Keeper raised the red flag.

Tyler went down where he meant to. He lay in the dirt with his arms out.

And Carol Dueck stood up behind us in her yellow fleece and her Sharpie crown and shouted, “THAT’S MY BOY!”

It was what she’d have shouted if he’d won. Tyler’s head came up off the dirt, and he looked straight up into Yellow and found her. He’d thought she was in Murrayville. He lay there and looked at her and started to laugh, lying down, with his helmet still on.

Marco helped him up and gave the Red rose to Wade’s brother-in-law, who put it behind his ear. The King stood. We all stood. He looked at Tyler for a while with the one eye, and then at Carol, and then he sat, and the music came.

* * *

After the show they take photos in the Hall of Arms by the cardboard throne. Tyler kept his mother by him for every Yellow photo, so she’s in all of them, small and yellow and laughing.

Gary and Gloria went up together.

“Closer,” said the photographer.

They moved closer.

“Closer,” said the photographer. “Little closer. You’re married, right?”

“No,” said Gloria.

“Well,” said the photographer, looking at her screen. “You’re standing like you’re married.”

They were. They were standing closer than the frame needed, closer than the photographer needed, closer than Tyler, on Gary’s other side, needed, so that Tyler had to lean in. Gary had his arm round her. Gloria had her hand in the back pocket

of Gary's good grey trousers, flat, to keep her hand warm. The flash went. Gary blinked. Gloria didn't.

"Two," said Gary.

They were twenty-five dollars each. Gloria paid for them herself, cash, and gave him one, and told him not to put it under the Bible to flatten it.

Brenda, in the line behind me, said very softly, "I'm going to have to email Les."

"Les knows," I said.

"How?"

"Gloria emailed him," I said. "On Thursday. She cc'd me."

Brenda looked at me as if I'd taken the Werther's.

VII. The Account

The barn's statement didn't reconcile.

AP closed on the eighteenth, but the barn's December statement came in on the twenty-first, a Monday, and it said Valley Pipe owed Knights of the Fraser $3,214.60, and by my records we owed them $3,029.60, and by Gary's records we owed them nothing at all, because Gary's records were in the Fellowes.

"Go sort out the barn," Gloria said.

"We could carry it into January."

"I'm not carrying a turkey barn into January." She didn't look up from her screen. "Go out there and sit down with them. Take the cheque book. Take the invoices. Don't come back with a difference."

"It's a hundred and eighty-five dollars," I said. "It's the lance."

"Then it's the lance," said Gloria. "Go and find out."

So on Wednesday the twenty-third, the day before Christmas Eve, I drove out to Aldergrove at ten in the morning with a manila folder on the passenger seat and the cheque book in

my purse, and parked in the gravel lot in front of the plywood castle, which looks a good deal less like a castle at ten in the morning in the rain.

* * *

The group sales office is behind the gift shop. It's a small room with no window and a space heater and a desk with nothing on it but a phone. All-Seeing was sitting at the desk. He was an older man with very pale eyes and a cardigan, and he looked up as I came in, though I don't think he needed to.

"Valley Pipe," he said. "A hundred and eighty-five dollars."

"Yes."

"Your account is correct in total," he said. "To the cent."

"I have it as a hundred and eighty-five dollars less."

"You have it correct by line," he said. "I have it correct in total. They don't always agree." He moved the phone an inch to the left on the desk. "Of accounts that differ at year-end, sixty percent differ by exactly one invoice. Of those, about a quarter are an invoice that one side has paid and the other side has lost."

So I went through them. I sat at the corner of his desk with my folder and the barn's statement and went line by line, while he sat across from me and did nothing at all, as far as I could see, but every so often he said a number, like "seventy-one percent," or "about one in four," as if he were reading the weather. It took forty minutes. It was the lance. The statement carried the original lance and then, as a separate line, *LANCE*

(REPLACEMENT), because Darren had ordered a new one from a supplier in Ontario and charged us for that, too.

"There," I said. "Double-billed."

"Yes," said All-Seeing. "One in six statements has a double-billing in December." He took the statement from me and crossed out the line with a pencil. "Thank you."

I asked him then, because I'd been meaning to ask him since November. "Do they last? Couples who come here together? The staff-party ones?"

"Of couples who sit together at three staff events in one December," said All-Seeing, "sixty-one percent are still together at Easter. Forty percent at the next Christmas. That's higher than you'd think. It's higher than for couples who meet at weddings."

"What about Gary and Gloria?"

"Sixty-one percent," said All-Seeing, and turned his pale eyes back to the empty desk.

* * *

Seeker found me in the Hall of Arms. He had a sheaf of proofs under his arm, pink and blue and green and yellow, the inserts for the New Year's Eve program, which goes to the printer on the twenty-eighth, and he was checking them against something, a notebook or a ledger, I couldn't see which.

"You're Valley Pipe," he said. "Lorna Penner, Accounts Payable, nineteen years. Before that, a feed mill in Matsqui. Married, for all of the first and five years of the second." He lowered the proofs. "I have it from your company's newsletter, the spring 2016 issue, which says you enjoy gardening."

"I don't garden."

"No," said Seeker. "The newsletter was wrong. I've noted that." He made a mark in the notebook. "Would you like to see the barn?"

I said yes. I had the cheque written and the folder closed and nothing left to do but drive back to Abbotsford and tell Gloria it was the lance, which she already knew. But it was raining, and Seeker had the proofs, and I followed him.

He took me through the arena, empty, with the house lights on. It looked smaller empty. The bleachers were wiped down and the benches stacked and the dirt raked into lines, like a Japanese garden, and the throne on its platform at the far end had a dust sheet over it.

"Pankratz Poultry," Seeker said, walking. "Abram Pankratz bought the land in 1971 from a dairy family called Vander Zalm, no relation. He raised turkeys here for twenty-seven years. At its height the barn held fourteen thousand birds." He pointed up at the rafters. "Those are the original trusses. The ventilation fans were there, and there. You can still see the bolt holes. In 1998 Abram sold his last flock, and in 1999 his son Darren, who'd been announcing rodeos in the Interior for twelve years, came home and built the bleachers himself with lumber from the Aldergrove Home Hardware. I have the receipts. Darren keeps everything." He stopped by the booth stairs. "The first Book was a Hilroy notebook. Darren wrote the first show in it at his mother's kitchen table. Red won. Red has won most of the shows since. Darren's father was Red's first knight."

"His father?"

"Abram rode for three seasons, starting at sixty-eight, on a work horse. He won every show. Darren wrote him to." Seeker looked up at the booth window. "Abram died in 2004. Darren has kept writing Red to win since. I don't believe he's ever said why. I've noted that I don't know."

* * *

In the corridor behind the stables he handed me two of the proofs. "These go in on New Year's Eve," he said. "Two in one program. Darren is short on paper stock."

MEET YOUR COURT · No. 4

Seeker · Herald of the Lists

Seeker has carried messages between people who should have been speaking to each other directly. Former posts include messenger (winged sandals, returned in good condition); guide of travellers, and of the dead, to wherever they were going, which he found by asking; and patron of roads, merchants, shepherds, thieves and liars, a portfolio he did not choose and has spent a long time trying to cite correctly. He invented the lyre on the day he was born, from a tortoise, and has apologized to the tortoise. All claims in this biography are sourced. He can show you.

MEET YOUR COURT · No. 5

Conscience-Keeper · Marshal of the Lists

Conscience-Keeper has weighed hearts against a feather, kept the ledger at a number of gates, and sat as assessor

on several benches whose decisions were final. He has been offered, at various times, a kingdom, a river, a daughter (declined, with apologies to the daughter), and, on 5 December, a twenty-dollar bill from the Red section. He accepted none of these. He has no particular friends among the losers, and not many among the winners. At Knights of the Fraser since the first of November. The horses stand still for him. He does not know why.

"The twenty dollars was Wade," I said.

"It was Wade," said Seeker. "I have it from the Marshal. He doesn't keep the money. He keeps the record."

"Can I ask you about the dead part?"

Seeker looked at me with the patience of a man who has been asked directions for a very long time.

"I used to walk people to where they were going," he said. "After. It was a long way, in some places. Most of them knew the way. Nearly all of them. They just wanted somebody to walk beside them while they went." He put the proofs back under his arm. "I'd ask them about where they'd been. They liked that. It passed the time."

* * *

Marco was in the stables, on an upturned bucket, with a bag of frozen peas held to his right shoulder by an Ace bandage. He'd done it on the nineteenth, in the seventh way to go that wasn't in the Book. He didn't look sorry.

"Torn something," he said. "Rotator thing. I can't lift it past here." He showed me, with his left hand, where *here* was, which was not very high. "No show for me on New Year's."

"Who rides?"

He nodded down the row of stalls at a squire, a skinny young man with a ponytail mucking out the end stall, with Chaos-Weaver beside him leaning on a pitchfork, telling him something that was making the squire laugh so hard he'd had to stop shovelling.

"Jordan Sidhu," said Marco. "From Surrey. Nineteen. Been a squire two years. Best hands on a horse I've seen since mine." He shifted the peas. "Darren's putting him in Green and moving Kyle to Red. Darren wants Jordan to lose his first night. You lose your first night. That's how it's done. It's in the Book."

"And?"

"And Darren hasn't got the Book anymore," said Marco. "Darren's got a Marshal." He grinned. "Don't tell Jordan I said he's good. He'll get a head."

At the end of the row Conscience-Keeper was raking the dirt in the empty stall. I said, as I went past, because I'd been wanting to say it for nearly three weeks, "Why didn't you give Red the point? On the fifth? When Darren told you?"

He stopped raking. "It wasn't Red's point," he said.

"Darren pays you."

"Darren pays me to keep the lists," said Conscience-Keeper. "A man in Thebes paid me to keep the lists once. A long time ago. When it was his turn, he asked me to weigh his heart a

little lighter. As a favour, after all those years." He leaned on the rake. "I told him what I told Darren."

"What did you tell him?"

"That it wasn't his point," said Conscience-Keeper, and went back to raking.

Seeker was waiting for me at the stable door, with his proofs. "Your Gary Toews," he said.

"He's not my Gary."

"Your company's Gary Toews," said Seeker. "There's a record you might want to see."

He took me into the booth office. Darren wasn't there. Darren was in town, at the Costco in Langley, buying paper stock. The booth office has every booking Knights of the Fraser has ever taken, in grey filing cabinets from the turkey days, and Seeker opened the third cabinet without looking and took out a folder and opened it to a single carbon-copy booking form.

> *Name: Linda Toews. Date of booking: 14 August 2013. Event: 50th birthday (surprise), Gary Toews. Party size: 12. Section requested: YELLOW. Status: CANCELLED 2 September 2013.*

And at the bottom, in the notes, in ballpoint, in a round hand:

> *He will say he doesn't want to go. He does. He'll say it's silly. Please put him near the front. He'll pretend not to cheer and then he'll stand on the bench.*

And under that, in a different hand, Darren's, I suppose: *Cust. called. Husband found out. Cancelled. Refund deposit.*

I stood there and read it twice. Once for the words and once for the attitude.

"Linda knew him," I said.

"Linda knew him," said Seeker. "Gary was fifty in 2013. He's sixty-three now. Thirteen years. He came on the fifth of December in Yellow and stood on the bench." He closed the folder. "That's all. I thought someone should know it's on file. It's a provenance. He doesn't need to know he's in it."

"Do I tell him?"

"I can't tell you that," said Seeker. "I only find where things come from. I don't decide where they go."

He put the folder back in the third cabinet and shut it.

* * *

I got back to the office at two. Gloria was at her desk. Gary was at Gloria's desk.

"It was the lance," I said. "Double-billed. I've got it reconciled."

"I know," said Gloria.

Gary was holding a booking confirmation. He'd printed it. Gary prints everything. It was from Knights of the Fraser, and it said *NEW YEAR'S EVE GALA · THURSDAY 31 DECEMBER · 2 GUESTS*, and under *Royal Upgrade (Host)* there was a check mark.

"Two," Gloria said to him.

"Two," said Gary.

"You booked two seats for New Year's Eve at a turkey barn."

"It's the gala," said Gary. "There's a midnight toast. There's a buffet. I thought—"

"Book three."

Gary looked at the confirmation. "Three?"

"Lorna's coming."

I hadn't known I was coming. I had plans for New Year's Eve. Jess was coming home from the residence and we were going to watch the Vancouver fireworks on the TV and fall asleep before midnight, as we have since she was ten, and I'd bought the good chips.

"Gloria," I said.

"You're coming," said Gloria. She took her reading glasses off. She looked up at Gary with them off, folded, held against her bottom lip, which was the second time I'd seen her do it, and the first time it hadn't been ten at night. "I'm not sitting alone with him in a barn at midnight," she said. "I'm sixty-eight. I know exactly what I'd do."

Gary turned red from his collar to his hairline, which without the paper crown is a long way, and went to book a third seat.

VIII. New Year's Eve

Gary drove. He picked me up first, at my townhouse off Old Yale Road, at five-thirty, in the Silverado, which he'd had washed. Then we went for Gloria. She lives in a rancher in Clearbrook with a carport and a holly bush she's been trying to kill since Doug planted it, and she came down the front steps in a black dress I'd never seen and her good coat, and Gary got out and went round and opened the passenger door for her, and I moved over to the middle of the bench seat, because it's a bench seat, and there are three seat belts on it, and I was senior staff.

So I sat between them all the way to Aldergrove, with my knees against the gearshift, and nobody spoke, and on the radio CBC played something with cellos, and Gloria's perfume was on one side of me and Gary's aftershave was on the other, and somewhere around Mount Lehman Road they met in the middle, which was me.

"You could have taken your own car," Gloria said, to the windshield.

"You told me to come."

"I told you to come. I didn't tell you to come in the middle."

"It's a bench seat," said Gary.

"I know what it is," said Gloria.

* * *

The New Year's Eve Gala at Knights of the Fraser is the regular show, with a buffet instead of the four courses, and dancing after in the arena, with a DJ in the booth, who is Darren, and a champagne toast at midnight, which is not champagne. It's a sparkling wine from a winery in Langley that Darren's cousin owns. It says so on the program.

The programs were gold. *MEET YOUR COURT · Nos. 4 & 5*, it said, on two inserts, and then a third insert, folded small, white, and the shortest.

MEET YOUR COURT · No. 6

Companion · The Bar

Companion has kept company. She has poured for kings and for shepherds, for both sides of most wars, and for a great many people on the last night of a year. She remembers every one of them. Last call is 12:30.

There was no section seating for the gala. You could sit where you liked. Gary sat in Yellow, at the front, and Gloria sat beside him, and I sat on Gloria's other side. Two rows behind us, in her Sharpie crown, which she'd had laminated, was Carol Dueck. It was Thursday.

"Every Thursday," she said, when I turned around. "New Year's or not. It's what I do."

* * *

Most of that night happened at the bar. There's a long time at a gala before the show, and a long time after, and the Hall of Arms was where everyone was for most of it, three hundred people in paper crowns and good clothes queuing at the turkey-feeder bar, and behind the bar was Companion.

She was the same woman. Grey in her hair, sleeves to the elbow, the cloth over her shoulder. On New Year's Eve the barn puts two extra bartenders on, a young man and a young woman from the Kwantlen hospitality program in black vests, and they rushed up and down and dropped things. Companion didn't rush. She went down the bar from one end to the other and back, and wherever she stopped, someone laughed. A man from a Surrey insurance brokerage, standing beside me in the queue, said, "She's good," and his wife said, "She's *listening*," and that was all either of them said about it.

When Gary and Gloria came up to the bar, she'd already poured. Two clay mugs of mulled wine, with cinnamon sticks, steaming, set on the bar in front of a gap where nobody was standing yet. Then Gary and Gloria came into the gap, and there they were.

"We didn't order these," said Gary.

"No," said Companion.

"You did that last time."

"Yes," said Companion. She wiped the bar. That was all. She didn't wink. She didn't say *enjoy*. She wiped the bar beside the

mugs, and moved off down to the young man from Kwantlen, who'd broken a glass.

Gloria picked up her mug. She said, over it, to nobody, to the bar, "Thirty-two years ago I told this man I'd lost an earring."

Companion, ten feet off, stopped wiping.

"In the parking lot of the Ramada on the Fraser Highway," said Gloria. "In the rain. In my Pontiac Sunbird. The earring was in my bra."

Gary put his face in his hand.

Companion came back up the bar. She stood across from Gloria and put both hands flat on the bar and said, "How long were you in the Sunbird?"

"They say forty minutes."

"Was it forty minutes?"

"It was longer," said Gloria.

Companion laughed, low, the laugh you'd get from a sister. It went up the bar and down it, and the people on either side of Gloria laughed without knowing why, and then Gary laughed, behind his hand, and took the hand away, and was still laughing, and Gloria was laughing, and for a moment the three of them were laughing over the bar together like people who'd been to the same school.

"It's always longer," said Companion.

Then she went off to see about the glass.

* * *

I went to the bar on my own, later, during the break before the sword fight, when Gary and Gloria were up in Yellow and Carol Dueck had them looking at photos of Tyler as a lifeguard on her phone. I wanted a Diet Coke. Companion poured me a glass of the Langley sparkling wine instead, and set it down, and I didn't say I hadn't ordered it.

"You came for her," she said.

"She asked me."

"Yes," she said, and wiped a ring off the bar where somebody's glass had been.

I asked her, I don't know why, the way I'd asked all of them. I'd asked All-Seeing about couples and Seeker about the dead and the King about his eye. I asked her if she got tired of it. Pouring for other people's evenings. Standing behind a bar while everybody else had the night.

She thought about that. She didn't stop wiping.

"I sat up once with a woman who was weaving," she said. "A shroud, for her father-in-law. She'd told the men in her house that she'd marry one of them when it was done. So she wove it every day, and every night she unpicked it. Three years, nearly four, until a maid told on her. Her husband had been gone twenty: away at a war, and then lost at sea, and she waited for him. I sat with her at night, while she unpicked. I held the lamp." She put the cloth over her shoulder. "Everyone remembers him coming home. Nobody remembers who held the lamp."

"Did he come home?"

"He came home," said Companion. "She'd just gone to bed. I woke her up."

Then a man from the insurance brokerage needed a rye and ginger, and she went to get it.

* * *

The show.

Chaos-Weaver brought the horses out in the right order. Every pass. Every knight on his own horse, in his own colours, in the order printed in the program. It was the first time in December, and the knights didn't know what to do with it. The Blue Knight came out, found himself on his own horse, and looked back at the stable door as if he expected it to change under him. The Black and White Knight pulled up at the end of the first pass and checked his own saddle. Tyler rode out on the white horse and looked down at it and patted its neck, very carefully, the way you'd pat a dog you'd been told doesn't bite.

Chaos-Weaver, in the stable door, leaned on his pitchfork and grinned at all of them.

The Green Knight, the program said, was making his debut. Seeker walked out to the middle of the floor with his scroll.

"The Green Knight! Of the House of Green! Born Jordan Sidhu, of Newton, in Surrey! First night! Two years a squire, before that a stablehand, before that, a busboy at his uncle's restaurant on 72nd Avenue, where he dropped, by his uncle's count, four hundred plates, and by his own count, *very* few!" He lowered the scroll. "I've spoken with his uncle. His uncle is here."

His uncle was there. His uncle was in the Green section with what looked like forty Sidhus, and a grandmother in a shawl in the front row, who stood up and waved a green scarf, and the forty Sidhus roared.

Jordan rode out on a bay horse with his ponytail coming out of the back of his helmet, and he was so skinny and so nervous that Carol Dueck, behind us, said, "Oh, that poor boy," and then, without seeming to decide to, began to cheer for him as well as for Tyler.

He won.

He won the ring pierce, with all three rings. He took second in the javelin. In the joust he and Tyler broke both lances on the same pass, and Conscience-Keeper raised both flags at once, yellow and green, which nobody had ever seen, and the barn didn't know whether to cheer or not, so it did. And in the sword fight Jordan Sidhu went through the Blue Knight and the Black and White Knight and the Red and Yellow Knight and Kyle Banman, who was riding Red that night in Marco's place and wearing Marco's tunic over his own, and then it was Jordan and Tyler.

Marco was watching from the stable door, beside Chaos-Weaver, with his arm in a sling.

Darren had written Jordan to lose. Marco told me that later. *You lose your first night.* And on the night, in the booth, Darren never said a word over the speakers. He let it run.

Tyler fought the best I'd seen him. At the end, when Jordan got under his guard, Tyler saw it coming, Marco said, and could have blocked it, and didn't, or didn't quite, and went down.

He went down where he meant to. And Conscience-Keeper raised the green flag.

The Sidhus came down out of the Green section onto the dirt. You're not allowed on the dirt. The grandmother came down too, with her green scarf. Jordan took off his helmet and his grandmother took his face in both hands, and Tyler got up off the ground and shook Jordan's hand and then hugged him, armour and all, and Carol Dueck behind us shouted "THAT'S MY BOY!" though Tyler had lost again. It was the same shout as before, exactly the same.

Jordan gave his rose to his grandmother.

The King stood. We all stood.

He didn't say anything.

* * *

After the show they cleared the dirt with a tractor and laid plywood over it in the middle and that was the dance floor. Darren played music from the booth. He played the Bee Gees and Shania Twain and "Hotel California," twice, which I don't think was on purpose. The lights went down and the coloured lights came up, red and green and yellow and blue from the section banners, and people danced in their paper crowns on plywood laid over a turkey barn floor, and it was one of the better New Year's Eves I've had, and I've had one on a houseboat on Shuswap Lake.

At half an hour to midnight I went up to the booth.

Gloria has asked me since, more than once, and I've told her it was Darren's idea. It wasn't Darren's idea. I went up the

stairs behind the Green section and knocked on the door of the booth, and Darren opened it, in his headset. Behind him on the desk, beside the binder, a Hilroy notebook lay open at the first page. I asked him if he had "Lady in Red."

He looked at me. "Everybody has 'Lady in Red,'" he said. "Nobody's asked for it since 2006."

"I'm asking," I said.

He played it at twenty to twelve. The coloured lights went to red. Gloria was at the edge of the plywood with her mulled wine, and Gary was beside her, and when the first notes came, she put her mug down on the edge of the throne platform, very slowly, and turned and looked up, straight up, at the booth window. She couldn't have seen me. The booth window is dark from outside.

"I didn't pick it," she said to Gary. "I want that on the record."

"Noted," said Gary, and took her hand, and took her onto the plywood.

They danced. They danced very close, and not very well, and only at each other. The Sidhu grandmother danced past them with Jordan, and nodded to them, as if they'd been introduced. Carol Dueck danced with Tyler. Seeker stood at the edge of the plywood with his scroll under his arm and watched, as if he were taking it down. Hand went round the edge with a tray, collecting mugs, all of them, at once.

When the song finished they didn't stop. Darren played "Lady in Red" again.

* * *

At five to midnight Darren stopped the music and the house lights came up halfway and Hand came round with the Langley sparkling wine in plastic flutes, three hundred of them, and I didn't even see him start.

The countdown was on the screen over the throne. Everybody faced it. Everybody had a flute. Gary had his crown on, crooked. Gloria had her hand in his back pocket again, flat. I was a step behind them, at the edge of the plywood, by the throne platform, with Carol on one side of me and Seeker on the other.

TEN, said the screen, and three hundred people said it.

The King was on his throne. He'd been there all night. He'd been there, as far as I know, all month.

THREE. TWO. ONE.

The King stood.

Everybody stood, though everybody was already standing. You'd have thought it wasn't possible to stand up more, but three hundred people managed it. I felt it. It came up through the plywood.

And the King said, in a voice that I can still hear if I'm in a quiet room, "Let the tournament begin."

It was the first time I'd heard him say it. I don't know what he meant by it. The tournament was over. The tractor had raked the dirt and the horses were in their stalls, and Jordan Sidhu was champion, and the new year was ten seconds old, and the King of Knights of the Fraser stood on his platform with his one

eye and his grey beard and finally said his line, and then he sat down.

Everybody cheered. The sparkling wine went everywhere.

And Gary kissed Gloria, or Gloria kissed Gary.

I was a step behind them. I've been asked since, by Brenda, by Les in Yuma, by email, and by Gloria herself, who says she knows perfectly well who started it and wants to hear what I'll say. And I can't tell you. One second they were facing the screen with everybody else, and then they weren't. Gary's flute went down on the edge of the throne platform without either of them looking. Gloria's hand came out of his back pocket and went up the back of his neck, into his hair. His went round her waist and pulled. It was not a kiss for the middle of a crowded dance floor at a turkey barn in Aldergrove, and it went on for longer than anyone in the barn was comfortable with except the two of them, and Carol Dueck, who said "Oh, *good*," out loud.

Gary's crown fell off. It came down off the back of his head, and I caught it. I've still got it.

* * *

They left at twenty past twelve.

Gloria came and found me at the bar. She had her coat on. She had her purse. Her lipstick was gone. Gary stood behind her holding his car keys and looking at the floor of the Hall of Arms as if he'd lost something there.

"There's a shuttle," Gloria said. "The Safe Ride. Darren runs it to Abbotsford. It leaves at twelve-thirty, from the front."

"I came in the truck," I said.

"I know what you came in," said Gloria. She looked at me. Then she did something she'd never done in nineteen years, which was take a Werther's out of her coat pocket and give it to me. "Happy New Year, Lorna."

"Happy New Year."

"Don't tell Brenda."

"Brenda knows."

"Don't tell her *tonight*," said Gloria, and went out the front door, and Gary went after her, and I watched through the window as the Silverado pulled out of the gravel lot under the floodlights and turned onto 264th Street, and there was one person in the cab, sitting very close to the driver, in the middle of the bench seat.

I turned back to the bar. Companion was at the far end with her cloth. I asked her for a Diet Coke. She poured one and set it down in front of me, and I was drinking it standing up, all of it, in my good dress, when my phone buzzed. It was Jess, from a party in Mission, which she'd told me on the phone she'd rather be at anyway. *happy new year mom*, it said, and then, *u alive?* I wrote back *alive*.

I hadn't told Gary about the booking form. About Linda's note. I haven't since. Seeker said it was on file, and that he doesn't decide where things go. Neither do I. I'm payables. I process things. Somebody else approves them.

The shuttle came at twelve-thirty. It was the Chilliwack coach again, the same one, with *The Santa Clause* still on the DVD player with the sound off. I sat at the front, because the front is where you sit. Through the window of the Hall of Arms, as we pulled out, I could see the bar. The young man and the young woman from Kwantlen were putting their coats on. Last call had been at half past twelve.

Companion was wiping the bar.