

Summer Must End

A Novel

Fran Caldwell

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The Attic (2013)

Uncharacteristic Behaviour (2014)

This novel is a work of fiction

Summer Must End is purely a work of the imagination and all the characters
in this book are fictitious.

Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead,
is purely coincidental.

For Isy

My thanks to the good people of Brighton, Ontario, who left an indelible and delightful impression on me. I miss the Canadian seasons. And AppleFest.

“In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.”

Albert Camus (1913-1960)

It's said that people don't really change. Who came up with that fallacy? Everyone she knew had changed.

Every single one.'

Mel Dwyer, *Summer Must End*.

ONE

So now she'd really done it. The die was cast. She had irrevocably turned her back on everything that was familiar to her. All those late-night discussions with Chris, all the pro and con lists, all the cash flow projections, done. Over. She felt slightly queasy, standing there, knowing how final things were—and how low her bank balance was.

But the house was just as welcoming as it had been that first day. The grass was too long, and weeds poked up through the front steps, but, despite the peeling paint, the dirty windows, and the creepers hanging from the roof guttering, the house looked golden and warm, the mid-morning sun on the cream clapboard contributing to the glow.

Mel had never truly considered living in the country, dismissing it as one of those fantasies, a thing on her dreams-to-possibly-do-one-day list, something that wasn't realistic. There had been many times when the idea of growing her own vegetables, owning a few chickens, and being overtly green had appealed to her.

But she had been younger, defiant, with more drive, and some circumstance, a perceived slight or other irritation, had spurred her to imagine giving up her corporate job and running away. But it was a half-dream, not seriously researched.

And now she owned this run-down six-bedroom farmhouse twenty kilometers north of Belleville on the outskirts of the village of Bursleton. Her old work buddies would never believe it. Melanie Dwyer, country girl.

"Nice old house," the cab driver said, as he put the box with the freezer and fridge food on the porch.

She'd worried that the cold food might spoil had she left it for the movers, or, more likely, that she'd be unable to find it

when they unloaded. In any case, it was all she could carry along with the last-minute bags on the train from Toronto. Mel had been disappointed that Chris couldn't take time off work to drive her (and to share this with her), but she'd managed easily once she was on board.

"I guess. It needs work," she said, pulling the ring of keys from her purse. She glanced at him. "Do you mind waiting until I get the door open? In case it's stuck or something?"

He nodded, grinning. "But you've got a cell phone, don't you? If your phone's not connected?" He glanced around, taking in the nearby fields, the deserted road. "You're a fair walk from Bursleton."

"Oh, sure, I have my cell. I don't expect any problems." The door opened easily. "Thanks. I'm fine now." She smiled at him as he pulled the taxi back onto the road and waved goodbye. She shivered involuntarily as she turned back to the door.

The quiet of the house enveloped her as she stepped inside. The sun washed over the hallway from the open front door and part way up the stairs. She'd forgotten how pretty the house was. Just needed a bit of paint, according to the agent. She'd think about that some more. She wasn't absolutely convinced. It would eventually need new wiring and plumbing work at some point, but the structure was sound and the roof was good for another five years, according to the inspection guy.

She took the box to the kitchen. The power was on as she'd arranged and she put the cold food into the aging fridge. It would definitely have to go soon. She was smart enough to know the amount of power these old things needed, and the environmental effect. She checked her watch. The movers would be there in an hour. Time to decide which was to be her bedroom upstairs, although she'd more or less decided the first time she'd been there.

The room at the front of the house was still the nicest, and she stood at the window a moment looking out over the roadway to the meadows that faced her. As far as she could see, there

were no other houses, except for the one next door that she'd spotted through the trees that first visit, which was reassuring. Nice to have at least one neighbor.

The room was filled with sunlight from the two large windows. How wonderful to wake up there in the morning.

Would she be nervous, once the sun had gone down? This was so totally unlike the area where she'd lived in Toronto, with its noise at all hours, people passing. It made sense that she was safer, away from all that Toronto crime they reported each day on the news, but it would take some adjustment.

Downstairs again, she unlocked the back door and opened it wide. The garden was overgrown, but there were so many perennials (most of which she couldn't name) in bloom, including a large but sad-looking yellow rose bush vying with the long grass close to the house that probably needed more sun. When she had time, she would move it close to the back fence where she could see it from the house. She knew from her mother's gardening that it would do well with animal manure. Her mother used to buy it, but Mel would have her own animals. Jackie, the real estate agent, had suggested that her son could mow the grass and do some weeding, if she wanted him. The lot was large, over 250 feet deep, she recalled from the original real estate blurb. It was all hers to do with as she wanted. She sighed, picturing a pond, and a wild flower area instead of the interminable lawn.

She managed to push up most of the sash windows to let in some fresh air, although a few stuck and would need more effort another time. She wandered around each room, peering in the closets and under the stairs. There was so much storage, and even a box room on the second floor. For the first time, she would have a place for all of her bits and bobs, readily accessible. She was going to enjoy putting everything away, although she had so little, coming from a one-bedroom place, that she'd be

finished in no time. In her mind, she already could see how it would look when she was unpacked.

Chris had squealed when she first told her about the house. “A bed and breakfast? What do you know about doing that?”

“I’ll learn. I’ve been looking at sites online. How hard can it be?” They’d been sitting on Chris’s back deck at her house on Balfour. Mel had always envied her the house, particularly the garden, but her own salary had qualified her only for the Broadview condo. Chris made much bigger bucks.

“Well, you have to enjoy dealing with people, for a start. You can’t bear a lot of people.”

“I’m not that bad. I just prefer my own company most of the time. I like hanging out with you.”

“That’s different.” Chris poured more wine for them. “It would mean being friendly to people you’d never met before. People can be shit, you know that, but you’d always have to put on a smile. You’d hate it.”

“If I knew my livelihood depended on it, I could do it. I’d be working from home, too, and that’s going to be amazing.”

“Well, that’s true—not having to battle your way on the subway each day, dealing with the crowds. But you won’t get to sleep in, if that’s what you’re thinking. You’ll have to get up way early to start their breakfasts.”

“I think I’d enjoy that. Just being in the country, getting up with the sun, knowing I don’t have to be anywhere.” Mel smiled at her. “If you wanted, you could do it too. You could afford a really posh house, nearby, maybe on the water, and make it fantastic. And you know so many well-heeled people. You already have a ready-made guest list. You know you’re fed up with the rat race.”

Chris looked at her. “Me? What would I do? Certainly not breakfast, unless it was cornflakes. Empty the dishwasher maybe?” She laughed. Chris didn’t cook, and had a weekly cleaning lady.

“You should think about it. We could share our experiences. You could finish your book, when you have no guests.” Chris was ostensibly writing a biography of the 16th Century Italian artist, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, whose story she’d adored since university. Although she had a patient agent who had been impressed with her original proposal, Chris hadn’t completed the final draft. She’d been working on the book for almost two years.

“Ain’t gonna happen, sweetie. I hate working downtown, but I like the stores and the restaurants, *and* the men—not too many around there, I’m guessing. I need my city fixes.”

“If you *do* change your mind...well...we could look together.” She didn’t want to sound so needy, but having Chris nearby would have completed her dream.

“Sure, you’ll be the first to know,” Chris said. “And you’ll need a license, yeah? Have you checked out what’s involved?”

“There’s some association that handles all of that, and I guess registering as a small business. But I can’t believe it will be that difficult. They have to inspect me first. I’ll find out at the council.

“Well, my darling, it explains why you bought such a big house. I thought that was weird from the start, with all those bedrooms. Figured you were planning to invite Carol and Co. over for a holiday. Interesting to see if you can handle it,” Chris was using her bossy voice. “You might not last more than a few months living in the wilds.”

“It is not the wilds, Christine. It’s only ten minutes to Bursleton, half an hour to Belleville. There’s a cab company.”

Chris laughed. “Oh, the wonder of it...”

After the moving van left, Mel unpacked the living room boxes and made up her bed (her mother had always drummed the importance of that into her). Then she opened the kitchen box she had marked with the big X. She needed caffeine. Only when the coffee began to drip into the carafe did she release a huge sigh and flop down on a chair. She needed to eat. She had missed lunch. She’d unpack the rest of the kitchen later.

She managed to throw a quick salad together before the coffee was ready, because the coffee maker's drip mechanism was interminable, blocked with lord knows what. (She again reminded herself to run some vinegar through it soon.) She took her mug and plate out to the back steps. The sun was getting low and the birds were tentatively saying goodnight to one another. It was so peaceful, so perfect, just as she had imagined, but she did feel totally alone. She would have to get a dog and a cat. She would need some little live things around here.

"Need a hand with anything?"

The deep, male smoker's voice came from the side of the house. She jumped so hard that some coffee spilled. In the shadow of the trees, with the low sun behind, she could only just make out his form as he moved towards her.

"Um, no...I don't think so." She squinted at him. A tramp. Shit, that's all she needed, sitting there all by herself. Her cell phone was on the kitchen counter

"Sorry to scare you." He stood close to her now, an old man, dressed in shapeless jeans and a stained white shirt, and wearing what looked like army boots. He smiled. "Should have given you a shout out, coming up the side. Thought you might need a hand lifting something. I live next door." He held out his hand. "David Elliot. How do you do"

She studied his face. In his seventies, she guessed, white hair screwed back in a longish pony tail, his skin rough and lined, but she saw that it was a gentle enough face, and not at all scary, and he had a pleasant, fresh linen smell about him, with just a hint of tobacco. Mel relied on her sense of smell in judging people. (Chris said she probably was a dog in a previous life, and nothing much had changed in this one.)

She shook his hand. "I'm sorry," she said. "You took me by surprise. Melanie Dwyer." His hand was dry and gnarled, with dirty fingernails, evident even in the shadow he cast.

"I heard someone had bought the place," he said, glancing into the kitchen, "and then I saw the moving van drive by.

Everything all right here? You don't need any help?"

He was a bit stooped, she noticed. He didn't look particularly strong. "I'm not doing anything else tonight, really, she said. "Nothing heavy. Thanks, though. It was thoughtful of you."

"Ah, you'll find people can be quite friendly out here—some of us, at least. Always ready to offer some help. Where's your husband?—or is it just you?"

She hesitated. For a moment she considered lying, but she liked his face and trusted her nose. "Just me. (*Chris would have said her husband would be back in a minute.*) I'm from Toronto. I lost my job and thought, to hell with it, I'm going to try something completely new." It all came out too easily.

He sat down on the bottom step, rather awkwardly. "Do you mind? Bit of a walk from my place."

"But you said...next door."

"That's right." He laughed, his face crinkling into a thousand lines, visible in the light that now bathed him through the kitchen door. "But I'm almost a kilometer that way." He pointed back towards town. "I don't drive. Well, I do, but the truck doesn't want to. Transmission, I think. Have to see to it soon, before the end of the summer."

"Oh, I thought you meant...well—right next door." She pointed to the roofline just visible above the trees to the right of the house.

"Not that!" He laughed. "That's your barn."

She stared at him. "I have a barn?"

"You didn't know?"

"No! I only ever looked *inside* the house with the agent, and I was sold. She mentioned outbuildings, but I thought she meant a shed, or an outside toilet..."

"Didn't they have it on the agent's specs?"

"Really, I just didn't notice it. I suppose you'll think I'm dumb for not knowing." She felt slightly uneasy about losing her imaginary next-door neighbor, who would have been a comforting presence; but at least she had gained a barn.

“It happens. Nice surprise then. It’s a solid barn, no rot, good roof. You could have chickens.” He chuckled.

She smiled. “What a lovely idea.” She looked over towards the building. “I guess it’s too late to look at it tonight...”

“There’ll be lighting out there, but you might feel more comfortable waiting until the morning.”

“I guess you’re right. A barn... I could sell antiques.”

“You could. Popular with tourists. Do you deal in antiques?”

“No, but I like them. I buy them now and then.”

“Some good dealers around here. Pricey, but cheaper than the city.”

“I always fancied running a coffee shop and selling antiques from a barn.” She was surprised at how easily she was able to talk about it.

“You could do all right in the tourist season.”

She pictured herself operating the coffee shop, dealing with antique buyers, and running the B & B. She’d probably need some staff to do all that. It was beginning to sound a bit too commercial.

“Well,” he said, struggling to his feet, “I’ll leave you to it. Just wanted to let you know I was here—well, down the road a bit.”

“I have coffee, if you’d like some.” She jumped up.

“No, no. Leave you to your meal.” He took her hand again. “Nice to meet you, Melanie. Pop in next time you’re going by.—the house with the stone beaver outside.”

“Sure, I know it.” she laughed, “You can’t help noticing it. I wondered who lived there. Figured they had a sense of humor.”

She watched as he walked away up the side of the house, somewhat bandy, she saw, with a bit of a limp. She went inside to the living room, and gazed after him through the front window. He had turned on a flashlight to illuminate the now darkening roadway. He walked slowly, without urgency. A country man’s walk. Pleasant to have someone like him nearby

—a bit like having a dad around. It had been a long time since she could say that, or even *want* to say that.

It was completely dark by the time she turned back to her salad. She took it into the kitchen to eat at the small round table with the wrought iron legs that she'd brought from her condo, seeing how sadly out of place it was in such a big room. Once she'd re-examined her finances, an old harvest table would be one of the first things checked off her shopping list. It would give her a chance to meet those local antique dealers David had mentioned.

There were other things on her list, of course. The house had those six bedrooms, and she had furniture for just one. The living room was twice as big as her old apartment's and there was also a dining room, equally large. There was no hurry, of course. She would have the rest of the summer and all of the fall and winter to make the house habitable for guests.

After she had washed the few dishes, dried and put them away, she tackled the rest of the kitchen boxes. Mel didn't think too hard about where she was putting things, because she could sort that out later, but it was essential to the organizer in her that the boxes be emptied, flattened, and put in a cupboard out of sight.

She found the bottle of wine that Chris had given her the day before as a house-warming gift. She should have found it before she ate, but had forgotten it. It was expensive; everything Chris did was expensive. She opened it and poured out a large glass. It tasted much the same as the cheaper stuff she usually bought for herself. Chris laughed at her unsophisticated palate, but Mel secretly thought it was all over-done—the wine expertise thing—that it was just *Emperor's-New-Clothes* nonsense. She took her old candle holder with the glass chimney and lit a fat candle for it and went outside to the picnic table she'd noticed a little way from the house. The seat boards were long gone from it, so she carried a chair out from the kitchen along with the wine. Somewhere a loon called and Mel smiled. People thought it a

sad sound, but she had always loved it, hearing it more as a song of joy in gratitude for the water and the beauty of the moon reflected there.

So many people had expressed their envy of her move, but had reservations too. How would she cope alone? Truly alone. She had reassured them that she wasn't worried about that, and could take care of herself. But it *was* eerily quiet. There were odd little rustlings in the long grass near her, and the crack of a twig farther back down the yard. Foxes? Coyotes? Snakes? How alone was she really, sitting there, sipping the wine? Were little eyes studying her now, even as she tried to identify the sounds?

She shivered, blew out the candle, and took the bottle and glass back to the house, walking quickly. As she locked the back door, she took one more look outside just to check. Idiot. There was nothing out there. She congratulated herself on being able to tell Chris about her wine-tipple in the moonlight.

She vacuumed the whole ground floor before calling it a night. There had been dust everywhere, mostly from the moving guys' shoes. She stood in the middle of the living room and looked around at the haphazard positioning of some of the furniture. Tomorrow she'd organize it properly and get some pictures up on the walls. She would need curtains, too; no ugly vertical blinds here, like those at her condo. She pictured cream calico, perhaps, or muslin, something simple. The last thing she wanted for this house was formality. She had a pile of country decorating books. *Passé* it might be in the city, but not out here. She couldn't wait.

She was hungry again—too much physical expenditure for the salad to refuel her for long. She made some toast and hot chocolate and sat in the kitchen eating. Her usual radio station was playing Sting's *Fields of Gold*. She loved all of Sting's work, way back to his Police days. An age indicator, wasn't it? So what? With age comes wisdom. She had plenty of that, she figured. The house felt cozy, settled about her. She'd lived in a lot of places, but this was the first time she could recall feeling

so at home since she was a child. That is, until she was old enough to understand the things that had gone on in that home.

Mel closed her bedroom door firmly behind her when she went to bed. The long empty hallway made her uncomfortable. It would take time for all of the house to feel welcoming to her, so empty and bare of decoration, echoing to her footsteps. It was only natural to be apprehensive the first night.

A Toronto-Montreal train sounded its warning through some crossing in the distance and it was now beginning to sound like an old friend. She imagined that the people who originally created the sounds for the trains also loved loons and had deliberately produced a male-sounding response for them, a pseudo-French horn counterpoint to the feminine flute-like loon call. The trains ran quite a distance from her, yet seemed closer on the cooling air of evening, startling her, as if they were passing at the bottom of her garden. As she drifted off to sleep, she tried to estimate how many trains went through every night. Regardless of how many there were, she slept through until morning, without waking once.

TWO

As soon as she'd finished her first coffee the next morning, Mel headed for the barn. There was driveway access from the roadway, but now she saw that there was also a tiny path between the trees direct from the house.

She stood outside marveling at the size of the building, which had two floors, if the second story windows were any indication. Of course, there could be one of those mezzanine storage areas for hay, or whatever farmers stored up there. The door was stiff to open and she struggled for a minute and then used her hip to nudge it along. A strong smell of old straw hit her when she finally stood inside. There was a little skittering noise from the upper level, and she hoped it was mice and not rats, although she preferred neither. The loft area, a large platform across half the barn, was completely open, supported by huge posts at ground level and with steep wooden steps leading up.

There were crates and boxes of preserving jars, several bales of tired-looking straw, some garden implements, a carpenter's bench, complete with fitted circular saw, a lot of used lumber leaning against the back wall, some old windows, probably from the main house, some old dressers and other pieces, and a couple of wooden chairs, covered with mold, and an old lawnmower. The floor was dirty—a mix of sawdust and straw—and she impulsively grabbed a yard broom near the door and began sweeping. There were spiderwebs around, too, but she'd deal with them later. It was just important now to get the floor clean, for some reason.

It was then she heard the mewing coming from the loft above. She tentatively put her foot on the first step to test it for strength, and then climbed up carefully.

A large ginger cat—a marmalade, wasn't it? —sat in the

middle of the area, almost surrounded by boxes and barrels.

“Well, hi there,” Mel said. “What are you doing here?”

The cat gazed at her steadily, then turned and disappeared behind a crate. Mel crawled closer on her hands and knees. Behind the crate, surprised, but unafraid, were three kittens. Mel figured them to be about ten weeks old, as they looked confident and assured, noisily engaged in wrestling mode with one another. Two were black, and the other was the same golden color as its mother.

Mel beamed. “I’m so glad you’re here. I figured I needed a cat. Four is better.” She reached over to stroke one of the kittens, but the mother hissed at her, and she quickly withdrew her hand. “I’ll bring you some food, although you probably don’t need it. Mouse is nutritionally the best, right? But you might enjoy some tuna, just for a change. Chris left some at my place last time.”

She climbed down the ladder, grinning. The first day and she’d found friends.

She went to the house and brought back a dish of tuna and a bowl of water and placed them at the foot of the steps, trusting it would encourage the family to come down. “Be careful how you bring them down, Mom,” she called up to the marmalade cat who was watching her with interest. “I’ll check back later to see how you’re doing.”

“They didn’t need that,” the voice came from the doorway, and Mel spun around.

A young man in his early twenties stood there grinning at her.

“I know, but I couldn’t help it. My old cat loved tuna.” Mel walked towards him. “Are you Jackie’s son? She said you’d be over. I’m Mel.”

“Yeah, I’m Jack. Mom said you needed some gardening.” He offered her his hand, which was a nicety Mel hadn’t expected from one so young. He was tanned and ruggedly handsome, with deliberately mussed-up hair in the *I-don’t-give-a-damn-how-I-look* kind of way that so many young men favored. Her mother

would have called him scruffy. He knew he looked cool.

“There’s a mower there,” she said, pointing.

“I’ll use the weed whacker first.” He looked at the mower. “Probably better to use ours.” He glanced up the drive and she saw there was a rider-mower on the back of his truck.

“My, how professional. You’ll be finished in no time.”

“Won’t take long.” He pulled on some sturdy garden gloves.

“You run your own business?” she said. “Do you work full time at this?”

“Yeah. I started right after school. I needed a break from studying.” He smiled. “I mean, I was good. I got good grades, but I was tired of it all.”

“How old are you, Jack?” *It was okay to ask; he was so young.*

“Twenty-four.”

“You’ve tons of time. You might even reconsider college down the road.”

“Maybe. Dad’s okay with it. He just wants me to be able to earn a decent living. He’s hung up on security. You know—it’s his age.

She smiled. Jack’s father probably wasn’t much older than she was. “Can you be careful with the flowers? There are some perennials and shrubs I don’t want to lose.”

“That’s okay. I used to do it for old man Sutton. I know where they all are.”

“Sutton? The previous owner?” She couldn’t recall the name on all the paperwork she’d dealt with to buy the place.

“Yeah. Some time back now. Place has been empty for two years. People seem to want new houses these days.”

“Oh, I see. I never thought to ask. He died?”

“It’s okay,” he said, smiling again. “He was in a nursing home when he went. He didn’t die here. He was really old.”

She was relieved. It was one thing to be alone in an old house, but quite another to know someone had died in it.

“His wife did, though,” he said brightly, as if she might

appreciate some drama in the history of the house.

“Oh? When was that?” She felt slightly sick, imagining that it had happened in the bedroom she’d chosen.

“Back in the Seventies” He pointed out across the road. “They owned all that land then. They say she worked as hard as he did. Tractor rolled on her. He found her. He never really got over it.”

Mel was embarrassed to find she was relieved. *Better out there in the field than in her bedroom.* “How awful,” she said, with little conviction.

He looked up the steps to where the mother cat was peering down at them. “You can tame them if you take your time. Even barn cats like their comforts, especially in the winter. My girlfriend has one and you’d never know it used to be wild. Totally spoiled.” He smiled at her. “I’ll get started.”

“Right. Thanks. I’m going in to make some breakfast.”

“You know where to find me,” he said.

She smiled at him. “Can I get you a coffee?”

“No, it’s fine. Thanks.”

“Well, yell, if you want something.”

“Will do.”

As she left, she saw that the mother cat was making her way down the steps, her nose twitching in the direction of the tuna. “I’ll leave you alone, Peaches,” Mel said, knowing the name would stick. “Call me if you need anything, Mom.”

Mel could barely wait for her to answer. “My phone’s on, Chris. Don’t use my cell number any more. It costs too much.”

“Yeah, I see the number.”

“I just had to let you know what’s happening. It’s amazing, really. I have a barn!”

“Is that good?”

“You can do things with barns” she said, trying not to sound impatient. “It’s huge, and has stuff in it. I even saw some old furniture in back. I’m going to see what I can do with that. Oh,

and I have cats. A mom and three babies.”

“Christ. Cats. My best friend has become a cat lady.”

“I need animals here, Chris. It’s so quiet, especially at night. I’m going to get a dog, too.”

“Now that I could handle. You know I love dogs.”

“And some chickens. Jackie, the real estate woman, has a son who cleaned up my garden, and he’s going to help me build an enclosure in the barn, with a little opening through the wall to a proper run with chicken wire and stuff.”

“You’re turning into a farmer.”

“Well, it *was* a working farm years ago, when it had more land.”

“And the B & B?”

“I’m still doing that, but that’s ages away. When can you come up?”

“Surprise, babe. This weekend!”

Mel was delighted. “Chris, that’s fantastic. I already have things more or less in place, and it looks great.

“Is there a liquor store nearby?”

“There’ll be one in town. Just ask someone.”

“Wow, Mel! It’s going to be a wild weekend!”

“Well, bring old clothes, too. We won’t be sitting on our butts drinking the whole time. You can help me with things.”

“I just had my nails done.” Chris didn’t like physical work.

“Too bad. Bring gloves. Love you.”

She looked around the living room. Already it was homey. The four white bed sheets she’d found at the tiny local thrift shop yesterday now hung on rods at the windows. She’d spotted a dozen rods in the corner of the shop and bought all of them, along with bags of wooden rings. The taxi driver was a bit frustrated, trying to fit everything in the back, but managed in the end. She spent the evening stitching the curtains to the rings, congratulating herself on how much she’d saved by not getting everything at a mall—even had there been one nearby, which she

doubted.

All of her books were now unpacked on her four bookshelves. Ornaments she'd been collecting over the years had been so much clutter at the condo (Chris said, anyway; Chris preferred the Spartan look), but now were displayed properly on the many windows and ledges throughout the house.

The kitchen was amazing, tired paint work and all. In fact, *because* of its paintwork, which was a deep cream color, chipped in places, it had the perfect vintage look she'd admired so much in decorating magazines. She found a screwdriver and took the doors off one pantry cupboard (there were so many cupboards!), and arranged her collection of blue and white porcelain there, and some of her mother's silver, most of which was sterling. In fact, many of the silver pieces had been her grandmother's and great-grandmother's. The Brits were big on silver. She was proud of them.

She had picked up six blue-checked dish towels at the local hardware store and some café rings, and hung them at the halfway mark of the kitchen window. With her blue china and red pots and pans, the room was inviting and pretty. She couldn't wait to hang up some pictures.

"Knock, knock." Jackie stood at the back door, sharply dressed in a navy suit with black high heels, as all good real estate agents should be, even so far from the city.

"Hi, Jackie! Come in. See how nice it's looking."

"Goodness, Melanie. You only moved in four days ago."

"Well, I haven't stopped. I can't sit down."

"Amazing." Jackie peered into the living room. "It's lovely. And the curtains. What a knack you have. We could hire you as a stager."

"And I have cats. In the barn."

"Well," Jackie smiled, "a lot of folks do. Don't feed them, whatever you do."

"But why?"

"Well, you'll never get rid of them, will you?"

“But I don’t want to get rid of them. I want to keep them. I’m getting to know the mother, and I think she’ll let them come in here soon.”

Jackie stared at her, frowning. “You *want* them?”

“I like cats.”

“Well,” Jackie shrugged, “rather you than me. The ones we get usually end up feeding the foxes at our place,” she said, a little too casually.

Mel stared at her. “Foxes? And you let them?”

“Nothing to do with me. They just disappear, one by one. It’s nature, isn’t it? Mother foxes need to feed their young as well.”

Mel was appalled. She was going to ask Jackie if she wanted to sit down, but now had second thoughts. “Country people have a different agenda, I guess.” She didn’t say what she was really thinking.

“Right. It’s not the same as the city, that’s certain.” She gave Mel a little smile. “I’m not cruel, Melanie. I like animals. But barn cats are wildlife to most people out here. You’ll see.”

Mel didn’t offer her coffee and she didn’t show her what she’d done with her bedroom. She watched as Jackie drove away. Jack was such a sweet guy. How could he have such an awful mother?

She took her lunch out to the table in the garden. It was a perfect day, not too hot. The garden smelled delicious with the grass freshly cut, and she smiled as she ate her sandwich. How lucky was she? All that time spent worrying after she was fired, tormented by the idea that she’d end up a bag lady, or—God forbid!—having to borrow from her mother, and now she owned this beautiful place.

It wasn’t as if she liked her job that much, but she’d been there for years and there were few surprises. The only new challenges that ever presented themselves were when new people were hired, and she helped them to assimilate. Her mother had constantly told her to keep her eyes out for something new,

something with more depth to it, but she had been lulled by the increasingly generous salary, the independence in her role as human resources manager. No one questioned her, or formally assessed her. Mel had been there ‘forever’, they said. Ask Mel. Mel would know.

And then the lousy economy shattered it all. When they closed her branch she had been stunned, unable to digest the news. Most of the staff were young, would find other work, but she was well over forty. Everyone knew it was harder at that age.

“That’s *men* over forty, Mel,” Chris had said. “Women don’t have the same problems with ageism.”

“So *you* say. But I’ll need new clothes for interviews, *and* I’ll have to brush up on my computer skills. The main-frame program at work is over fifteen years old, never upgraded. I’d been saying for years that we should replace it. No prospective employer will want someone as behind the times as I am.” She knew she was sounding like a hurt child, but she *felt* like that. All her confidence was gone.

“Try something totally new. People do that all the time these days. You can afford to start again. You have money saved, I know. Take a base-grade job in a new field. You’ll quickly get back into management and be far more stimulated by the work. I mean, medical supplies can’t be the most exciting thing in the world to work with.”

“I don’t mind it.” She’d grimaced. “I *didn’t* mind it, I mean. I did a good job, and was proud of my work. Everyone thought I was great.”

“Not enough to give *me* job satisfaction,” Chris had continued her lecture. “I need more to sink my teeth into. I like the idea of not knowing what to expect one day to the next.”

Chris owned, along with her bank, an event management company. She had a staff of ten who arranged seminars at posh hotels, nationally and worldwide, for many of the top 500 corporations. The company took care of travel bookings, speakers, webinars, print materials, TV promotion, press

releases, and expensive gift baskets for attendees. (Sometimes Chris would give one to Mel.) She was a highly-paid concierge, she joked, when asked what she did for a living, the consummate all-rounder with experience in all kinds of exciting industries. The nature of her business meant that she also met a lot of high-powered men.

“We’re not all as adventurous as you,” Mel had said. She wasn’t adventurous at all, even hanging onto boyfriends long after she’d lost interest in them (in the old days), rather than embarking on another relationship hunt.

“I think this is your opportunity to re-think your life, girl,” Chris had responded. “*If life hands you lemons...you know.*”

“I didn’t know my life needed re-thinking,” Mel had said, wishing Chris would just shut up about it.

“Oh, girl,” Chris had shaken her head, “are you ever in denial.

And, of course, she was. She half-heartedly sent off resumé after resumé for similar jobs, phoned and emailed, and didn’t get one interview in four months. She became very disheartened and anxious, temporarily slipping into a depression she found hard to shake. And then one day, at her lowest point really, she looked around her neighborhood, which was more industrial than residential, and realized that she’d never liked the area, but it had been convenient to work. It occurred to her that there was no longer a need to live in that part of Toronto, or *in the city itself*.

She’d watched some English TV program about tossing everything in and starting totally afresh. Some of the show’s participants even changed countries, buying up derelict French farmhouses and growing gourmet things for the export market, or turning abandoned Italian villas into hotels, things like that. She loved the series and could barely wait for each new episode.

That was when she went online and started researching country properties at home. She had a year’s salary as a severance package, and, once the mortgage was paid off, the