



HOT AIR

AN
ARNOLD
FALLS
NOVEL

CHARLIE SUISMAN

Prologue

The fact of the matter is, somebody stole the statue of Hezekiah Hesper, and for months nobody noticed.

Leader of the gang that settled Arnold Falls, Hesper was a man with few virtues, fewer admirers, and no memorial until 1903, the town's centenary, when it was reluctantly agreed that a statue of the man should be commissioned, if not generously funded. The result was a shabby affair — sheets of tin crudely assembled, promptly rusted, with a plaque describing Hesper as a “foundering” father.

The old rogue had then languished in a corner of Benjamin Arnold Park, ignored by all except the dogs, fine judges of character, unwavering about the sort of tribute Hesper deserved. When the statue was removed from its stand one moonless night in March 2018, Hesper was in people's thoughts the same as he ever was, which is to say, not at all.

Chapter 1

Gick-gick-gick.

“That’s —”

“Shhh. Jeebie. Listen.”

Gick-gick-gick-gick.

“It’s the mating call of the northern cricket frog,” Will says.

“Not exactly a sonnet.”

“It is if you’re a frog,” Will points out.

“How can you tell it’s a northern cricket frog?”

“What does the gick-gick sound like to you?” he asks.

“Like two pebbles tapped together.”

“Exactly. That’s how you know it’s a northern cricket,” Will says.

It’s a mild Friday afternoon at the beginning of June and Will and I are sitting on a large rock by the small, marshy pond at the eastern end of what will be Van Dalen Park.

Looking west, you can see the Hudson River; to the north is the spot where the historic

Dutch House stood until it was destroyed one morning last year by a developer.

“I love summertime because nothing ever happens in summer, except some frogs hook up,” I say.

“But —

“Summer encourages living in the present tense, that’s why people like it.”

“Except —”

“Not so much thought. Just the moment.”

“Jeebie, this is...something big,” Will says, looking at me.

“What is? Us?”

“No. Well, sure. Obviously.”

He gives me a kiss.

“But the northern cricket frog? It’s endangered. This habitat needs to be protected.”

If you haven’t been following along, Will and I have been together since last fall. I’m not entirely sure how it all came to pass — seems there were a lot of cooks involved in that broth. I’ll probably never know because Will refuses to name names. One thing I do know: I’m extremely glad it happened. Anyway, after a series of events unfortunate and fortunate, the town is getting a new park, Van Dalen Park, right where we are.

Ointment, meet fly. When Will says the northern cricket frog is endangered, I'm sure he's right. He's starting his masters program at Cornell in Conservation Biology in a few months and he knows this kind of stuff.

"People want a ball field," I say.

"I get it. But they can't infill at this pond."

When he says that, Will's green eyes are fiery.

"Your eyes are fiery," I say.

"If they're so fiery, call the fire department."

He's only saying that because he's a volunteer fireman and he thinks, because of a certain incident, that I like to call in — in his words — no-alarm fires.

"You're thinking about no-alarm fires," he says.

"No."

"No?"

"Yes," I say. "But also...I love your passion about stuff. Like frogs. And going for your masters in Conservation Biology. And the hinky monkeys book."

"We're doing that together," he says.

Will's also a talented illustrator. And he got a book offer out of the blue — something that

just doesn't happen — for his hinky monkeys series.

“Yes, and I love working on it with you,” I say. “But it's your project, Will. You created the whole thing. I'm there to support you. Nelle's planning her album. Jenny's got the town to run and Wilky to care for.”

“Jeebs, you helped stop that idiotic tire factory. You helped save Chaplin. Jenny wouldn't have gotten elected mayor if it weren't for you,” he says.

“All past tense.”

“You're Wilky's godparent.”

“Sinecure,” I say.

“You're a successful voiceover artist.”

“Old news.”

“What happened to loving summer because you live in the present tense?” Will asks.

“That was then.”

“Then, meaning two minutes ago?”

“Yes.”

“Before this sudden midlife crisis,” Will says.

“I’m not having — midlife? Midlife!”

Will squeezes my hand. “Aging gay-man crisis?”

“Preposterous,” I say. “Nothing to do with aging. Everyone wants to feel useful.”

He puts his arm around me, and I lean my head into his shoulder. We stay like this for a while.

“We should call Jenny about your discovery,” I say. “They’re going to have to rethink this part of the park.”

“We’ll see her tonight at Doozy’s birthday.”

“True.”

We look out over the marsh, considering frogs and life. Everything seems warm and peaceful and possible. I know how lucky I am. It’s just...

“Gick-gick-gick,” Will says.

“In iambic pentameter, please. Looking into my eyes.”

“Gick-*gick* gick-*gick* gick-*gick* gick-*gick* gick-*gick* gick-*gick*.”

It has the desired effect. Yes, reader, I swoon.

Chapter 2

The crowd lounging in front of the courthouse is loudly enjoying the inarguably Friday-at-fiveness of the moment, loudly enough that the sound has had the temerity to travel into the courthouse, down the long corridor, and then, unwisely, to disturb the peace of Judge Lionel Harschly's inner sanctum.

Heaving a slow, primordial sigh, Judge Harschly walks toward his secretary, who hands him the document he needs without his having to ask for it.

"Thank you, Vera. Go home. Enjoy the weekend."

"Thank you, Judge. You, too."

"What are you making?" the Judge asks.

"Cacio e pepe."

"Spaghetti?"

"Bucatini. Homemade."

"Your husband is a lucky man to have you," Judge Harschly says.

"Stating the obvious," Vera says.

Judge Harschly chuckles as he strides out into the hallway, still in his robes, the wiry

seventy-two-year-old making short work of the corridor to the lobby. The judge swings open the front door of the courthouse and sees the source of the noise problem: at least a dozen layabouts laying about on the steps, including the former mayor, Rufus Meierhoffer, and his invariable sidekick, Dubsack Polatino. He also spots the newly installed, bushy-bearded town hermit, hired by Rufus in one of his last acts before leaving political life.

The judge, who is also president of the town council, had sat through the arguments for hiring an Arnold Falls hermit, airy assertions by then-Mayor Meierhoffer's crew that having a resident hermit would be good for business, catnip for travel writers in need of a punchy hook, another notch in Arnold Falls' tourist-attraction belt. As a practical matter, the hermit would be a caretaker for the shambolic, little lightning-splitter house referred to as 'the hermitage' because, in the 1890s, an ornery fellow called "The Old Hermit" inhabited the place without showing the slightest interest in either his fellow man, or more damningly, the goings-on of his Arnold Falls neighbors. Wisest possible strategy, the judge thinks approvingly.

Apparently, several towns in European countries had hired hermits in recent years, and that was seen as sufficient proof of concept for the council. Judge Harschly had snorted at the idea then and snorts again now, this time inhaling an unmistakable waft of Clagger, the local hooch, which he figures is fueling the elevated noise level.

"*Bupbupbup!*" Judge Harschly says vigorously. He has their attention. Looking down at the document in his hands, he reads in an assertive voice:

"Our Constitution, and various lesser documents therefrom derived, chargeth and *commandeth* all persons, being assembled, *immediately* to disperse themselves, and peaceably to depart to their habitations, or to their lawful business — although I doubt many of you have a lawful business if I know how to read a crowd — upon the pains contained in the act for preventing *tumults* and *riotous assemblies*. God Bless this land!"

“Not the Riot Act, Judge!” Dubsack says.

“Yes, the Riot Act! I’ve read it, now disperse ye.”

There is grumbling along the lines of ‘Oh, well, he’s read us the Riot Act’, ‘no arguing that’, ‘we better go home’, and the crowd does in fact disperse in all directions. Before returning inside, Judge Harschly looks back to survey his jurisdiction, noting that the hermit has yet to summon enough get-up-and-go spirit to actually get up and go.

“Say, you’re not much of a hermit, are you?”

“Why’s that?” parries the hermit.

“Well, you seem pretty sociable to me.”

“Takes all kinds to be a hermit,” the hermit says.

“I wouldn’t have thought so. That strikes me as counterintuitive. Seems like it would take a *particular* kind of person. But I don’t have a great deal of experience with hermits, so I’ll take your word for it.”

The hermit stands and stretches, picking up his bindle.

“What’s your name, anyway?” Judge Harschly asks.

Over the years, Judge Harschly’s ears had become highly reliable tuning forks, sensitive to the merest wisp of a tendril of off-note prevarication. A Rolls Royce of b.s. detectors, as his wife says.

When the man doesn't answer in the exact meter expected, there is a flutter in the air and his tuning fork hums before the man answers, "Marvin. I'm known as Marvin the Hobo."

"Little bit of an accent of some kind?"

"I've been around," says Marvin.

"I'd say that a hobo and a hermit, strictly speaking now, aren't the same thing at all," the Judge says.

"You're right about that...I'm sorry I didn't catch your name."

"Judge Harschly."

"Judge Harschly? Seems unlikely, but I'll take your word for it. I *was* a hobo who had been riding the rails since I was eleven. After seeing so much of the country, I've now transitioned into hermitude."

"Strangely enough, that makes a great deal of sense to me."

"Do you happen to know where I can find whale blubber?"

"Sure I do. Just go down to the harbor. But you'll have to bring your time machine with you because Arnold Falls hasn't processed whale blubber in over a hundred years. Mind me asking why?"

"To lay in for a long winter."

“It’s June,” Judge Harschly says.

“Gotta walk a mile in my shoes.”

“Possibly germane, without answering the whale blubber question. I’ll let it stand. Well, I have a wife who will read *me* the Riot Act if I’m late. Welcome to Arnold Falls. I hope you find what you’re seeking here, Marvin.”

They shake hands and Judge Harschly watches Marvin walk away, before the Judge returns to his now Vera-less chambers. He’s looking forward to the weekly Friday date night with his wife, Elena, a tradition of nearly forty years. He hangs up his robe, grabs his crumbling briefcase, and turns out the lights.

Waving goodnight to Hamster, who is mopping the floors, Judge Harschly exits back onto the courthouse steps, from which he sees several things happen in quick succession.

First, he observes a woman being chased by a turkey across the park, and hears her shout, “No, Keaton! It cannot be!”

Something is familiar about this and Judge Harschly does one of his squint-and-peers to try to make sense of what is taking place. Is that Bridget Roberts? Gave her a warning for Clagger intoxication a while back. Officiated her wedding to that lovely gal last Thanksgiving. What the devil is she up to now?

He then watches the turkey make a beeline for Bridget’s posterior. Bridget yelps loudly. It feels like a *déjà vu*.

Suddenly, there is a sharp clap of thunder and it starts to hail from the cloudless sky. This thunderhail, as it’s being called, is a new twist on Arnold Falls’ longtime, unexplained

hail affliction.

And after that he hears someone say through a bullhorn, “Cut!”

Ah, yes. The television series *Merryvale* has just started filming. Not Bridget. That must be an actress *playing* Bridget. Or a character like her. Gadzooks, the last thing Arnold Falls needs is more characters.

Fayette de la Nouille, the star of *Merryvale*, the forthcoming series for Campfire, is back in her trailer, having sought refuge from the hail along with the assistant director, Trevor Aitken.

“I could do without the hail, but I’m falling in love with this little town,” she says, sitting at her makeup table. “So ADORABLE I could squeeze it to DEATH in my ample BOSOM!”

Trevor is standing behind Fayette’s chair, looking at her through the mirror. Given his British-bred preference for understatement, Fayette’s rhetorical flourishes, the all-caps overemphasizing, strike him as not entirely authentic. Perhaps they’re a defense against shyness or insecurity. They make Fayette seem open and direct, but he has the feeling they’re a kind of *misdirection*.

“Everyone falls in love with Arnold Falls at first sight, Fayette. Give it some time.”

He tries to identify her perfume, which she has applied liberally. As she types on her

iPad, he scans her face. Fayette de la Nouille. He doesn't have a read on her yet. When Christine Baranski had bowed out of the production a few months before shooting began, they considered dozens of people to take over the role of Luba. Fayette is an offbeat choice, without a long resume for someone her age (which he puts somewhere around the fifty mark), and he's just caught up with the handful of indie films she's done. She certainly has presence.

Trevor wasn't in on the casting, in any case. Arnold Falls' wunderkind director, Giles Morris, had only asked him in April to dust off his directing chops as assistant director of *Merryvale*. The show is based on the series of portraits in *The New Yorker* by Alec Barnsdorf about a hapless little town in the Hudson Valley that bears some resemblance to Arnold Falls. It was a break from Trevor's usual work for the Nyqvists (of Hullabaloo Circus fame) and they had been their usual, gracious selves in letting him take the opportunity.

"Give it some time? Time marches ON! I want a house here," Fayette says. "I already have a real estate agent."

The thunderhail turns fierce. Fayette glances upward and says, "Oh, what a CHEAP portent!"

"You've only been here a few days."

"What's your point, love?"

"Which realtor did you go with?" Trevor asks.

"He has a long name. I picked up his card somewhere." She rummages through a pile of papers next to her makeup tray. "Rufus..." She hands the card to Trevor.

“Rufus Meierhoffer? He’s in real estate now? He used to be the mayor.”

“Wonderful,” she says. “He’ll know all there is to know!”

“That, Fayette, is unlikely.”

“Well, I want to learn EVERYTHING I can about this town and everyone in it.”

“Inadvisable,” Trevor says.

Ignoring him, she says, “I’d love to meet the person that my character is based on, too.”

“Alec says there aren’t any exact parallels,” Trevor says.

“But I was told that my character, Luba, was similar to someone called Bridget.”

“Honestly, Fayette, I don’t think that’s a good idea. Best to make her your own.”

“No harm can come of it, surely,” Fayette says.

A large chunk of hail thumps the trailer window.

“HA!” Fayette shouts to the window. “You don’t scare me!”

Bridget Roberts and Trudy Bettenauer had decided, after their wedding last Thanksgiving, to keep their own last names and skip all the hyphenating. But they'd merged nicely in other ways, alternating their time between Bridget's home in Arnold Falls and Trudy's in Blue Birch Corners, six country miles between them, also known as a fifteen-minute drive through twisty roads.

Trudy is out on Bridget's back porch, finishing the Friday crossword puzzle, having a gin and tonic to celebrate the end of the week. Gussie, Bridget's dog, is lying on his back, legs splayed, while Delphy, Trudy's dog, rests her head on her paw, close to him.

Bridget sees both dogs wag their tails when she returns from a walk in the woods to forage the last of the ramps this season.

“Oo will boy moy ramps? Fancy a bunch, guvnor?” Bridget says.

Trudy smiles. “Sustainably harvested?” she asks, putting down her book.

“Only the leaves, not the bulbs! I am an evolved human being! Had to wait out the hail storm. I brought in the mail,” she says, leaving it on the wicker table next to Trudy. She turns to the seated figure in the corner. “Sorry, Martha, no fan mail today.”

Bridget remembers first seeing Martha in the car on that freezing, late fall morning, thinking a lovely old lady had frozen to death. She had turned out to be a realistic-looking mannequin, the Martha Washington model, made for use in first-responder training. After Bridget dropped countless hints, Trudy had given her her own Martha as a wedding gift.

“There's a package for you on the hall table,” Trudy says.

Bridget goes to put the ramps in the kitchen and comes back out with the package and a

Clagger and tonic, sitting in the chair next to Trudy.

“We’ve had a lot of squirrels visiting today.” Trudy says.

“I left Corn Nuts for them over there by the azaleas. They go like hotcakes,” Bridget says as she opens her package.

“*Merryvale* was shooting around town,” Trudy says. “I’m glad Jenny was able to get them to film here instead of Blue Birch. That never made sense to me.”

“I think they tried to get permission when Rufus was mayor but...Oh, look! It’s here!”

Bridget pulls a white cloth object out of the parcel. “I love it! Martha’s actual mobcap. A piece of American history!”

“It would be if the provenance were clear.”

“‘May have belonged to Martha Washington’ is good enough for me,” Bridget says, placing the mobcap on Martha’s head. “Much, much better. A lot of money, but she’s worth it. Oh, and I borrowed a book for her from the library.”

“When you say borrowed...” Trudy asks.

“I did not lift it from the library, if that’s what you’re implying. That would be taking candy from a baby. Where’s the fun in that?”

“What did you get for her?”

“*U.S. History for Dummies*,” Bridget says. “I thought she might want to catch up.”

“Thoughtful of you.”

“I wonder what Martha was really like, don’t you?” Bridget says as she sips her cocktail.

“I read a biography of her ages ago. Capable, I think. Good at managing things.”

“That sounds right. Though there can be a big difference between who we are and who people think we are.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Trudy says. “What’s on your mind, sweetheart?”

“Watching Wilky come into his own so quickly with Jenny is lovely. It’s just —”

Bridget feels Trudy’s eyes on her.

“Go on,” Trudy says.

“It can be so confusing for an adopted child. Oh, well, you know what I mean.”

Trudy raises her eyebrows.

“I sent in for a DNA test,” Bridget says.

“Did you really?”

“I did. For the second time. There was a problem in the lab with the first test. I should get the results sometime in the next few weeks.”

“Then I think we should drink in honor of your adoptive and your biological parents, whoever they may be.”

They clink glasses.

“And to the pride of Ashtabula,” Trudy says.

“Oh, I don’t know about pride. Queen of Ashtabula, maybe. Or First Lady.”

“How about Empress?”

“Yes, that works, too,” Bridget says. “I like Empress of Ashtabula. Sounds like a tarot card.”

Jenny has a few minutes to chill on her BarcaLounger, footrest extended, before she and Wilky head over to Nelle’s for Doozy’s birthday celebration.

It’s been a good week: they’ve finally got the plan for the new baseball field in Van Dalen Park and *Merryvale* has started shooting in town with no complaints, at least not yet. But it’s Wilky who’s made this week, as he does every week, indeed every day.

She takes off her glasses and looks down at him: he’s lying on the floor, wearing her Red Sox cap, reading *The Goblet of Fire*. Tishy, Jenny’s assistant at City Hall, had loaned Wilky her treasured Harry Potter books and had gotten him hooked on the series.

“Wilks, do you want to go to Boston next month?”

“Okay,” he says.

“To Fenway Park? Red Sox play the Blue Jays?”

He lets out a yelp, jumps up, and does a little dance. “Thank you, Mayormama!”

His recent nickname for her, Mayormama, has stuck because people (herself included) think it’s funny and that’s enough for Wilky. He has a knack for getting people to laugh. She doesn’t know if it’s his nature or if he’s trying to combat a lifetime’s worth of sadness already meted out to a nine-year-old boy. Maybe it’s both.

“It’s a long drive to get there,” Jenny says.

“I will be perfect. I promise!”

Jenny smiles at him, thinking you *are* perfect, my sweet child, but not daring to say it out loud. It had taken over a year and four trips down to Haiti before she could bring Wilky home and she’s reluctant to do or say anything to tempt fate. It had gone smoothly, as these things go, though she had found out that Wilky was actually two years older than the orphanage had claimed. They had fudged the number because they thought he would be more likely to get adopted if he were younger. She didn’t care either way.

Her restless nights before bringing him home were driven by worry that she was taking on too much, especially as a single, working mom. Yet from the moment they had left the orphanage together to go to the airport, it was a different and vivid apprehension that insinuated itself: that Wilky would be left alone again. Jenny’s dad was gone, her mom was not in good health, and she had no siblings. During the flight home, she had started a

mental list of potential godparents.

“Wilky?”

He looks up at her and smiles with that little gap between his two front teeth and with those big, brown, almond-shaped eyes.

“Come on, we’ve got to get ready for Aunt Doozy’s birthday party.”