

## CHAPTER 1

### **End the Attachment!**

Huddled together on the last block of Tasso Street, in a California town known as Palo Alto, was a pair of humble bungalows, each one a plot in lilies. And in one lived a woman in the slim green spring of her life, and her name was Veblen Amundsen-Hovda.

It was a rainy day in winter, shortly after the New Year. At the end of the street a squirrel raked leaves on the banks of the San Francisquito Creek, looking for pale, aged oak nuts, from which the tannins had been leached by rain and dew. In muddy rain boots, a boy and a girl ran in circles, collecting acorns, throwing them, screaming with delight in the rain. Children did this every day, Veblen knew, scream in delight.

The skin of the old year was crackling, coming apart, the sewers sweeping it away beneath the roads. Soon would come a change in the light, the brief, benign winter of northern California tilting to warmth and flowers. All signs that were usually cause for relief, yet Veblen felt troubled, as if rushing toward a disaster. But was it of a personal nature, or worldwide? She wanted to stop time.

The waterway roared, as frothy as a cauldron, a heaving jam of the year's broken brambles and debris. She watched the wind jerk the trees, quivering, scattering their litter. The creek roared, you see. Did water fret about madness? Did trees?

With her walked a thirty-four-year-old man named Paul Vreeland, tall and solid of build, branded head to toe in a forge-gray Patagonia jacket, indigo cords from J. Crew, and brown leather Vans that were showing flecks of mud. Under her raincoat, Veblen wore items of indeterminate make, possibly hand-cobbled, with black rubber boots. She was plain and mild in appearance, with hair the color of redwood bark, and eyes speckled like September leaves.

They stopped at a mossy escarpment in a ring of eucalyptus, redwood, and oak, and a squirrel crept forward to spy.

"Veb," the man said.

"Yes?"

"I've been insanely happy lately," he said, looking down.

"Really?" She loved the idea of spending time with someone that happy, particularly if insanely. "Me too."

"Tacos Tambien tonight?"

"Sure!"

"I knew you'd say sure."

"I always say sure to Tacos Tambien."

"That's good," he said, squeezing her hands. "To be in the habit of saying sure."

She drew closer, sensing his touching nervousness.

"You know that thing you do, when you run out of a room after you've turned off the light?" he said.

"You've seen me?"

"It's very cute."

"Oh!" To be cute when one hasn't tried is nice.

"Remember when you showed me the shadow of the hummingbird on the curtain?"

"Yes."

"I loved that."

"I know, it was right in the middle, like it was framing itself."

"And you know that thing you do, when telemarketers call and you sort of retch like you're being strangled and hang up?"

"You like *that*?"

"I love it." He cleared his throat, looked down at the ground, not so much at the earth but at his footing on it. "I am very much in love with you. Will you marry me?"

A velveteen shell came up from his pocket, opening with a crack like a walnut. In it gleamed a diamond so large it would be a pill to avoid for those who easily gag.

"Oh, Paul. Look, a squirrel's watching."

But Paul wouldn't even turn, as if being watched by a squirrel meant nothing to him.

"Oh my gosh," she said, examining the alien stone, for which she'd never yearned. "It's so big. Won't I smash it into things, won't I wreck it?"

"Diamonds can't be smashed."

"I can't wreck it?" she asked, incredulously.

"You can't wreck anything. You only make things great."

Her body quickened, like a tree in the wind. Later, she would remember a filament that passed through her, of being glad she had provided him happiness, but not really sure how she felt herself.

"Yes?" the man said.

The squirrel emitted a screech.

"Is that a yes?" Paul asked.

She managed to say it. Yes. Two human forms became as one, as they advanced to the sidewalk, the route to the cottage on Tasso Street.

Behind them, the squirrel made a few sharp sounds, as if to say he had significant doubts. As if to say, and she couldn't help translating it this way: *There is a terrible alchemy coming.*

Such was the engagement of Veblen Amundsen-Hovda, independent behaviorist, experienced cheerer-upper, and freelance self, who was having a delayed love affair with the world due to an isolated childhood and various interferences since. At thirty she still favored baggy oversized boy's clothes, a habit as hard to grow out of as imaginary friends.

That night in her cottage the squirrel paced the attic floor. Rain pelted the rooftop and a low-pressure system whipped the tall trees the town was named for. When his acorn lost its flavor, the squirrel hurled it in a fit of pique, and Paul banged on the wall from below.

*You want a piece of me? Only bottled-up jerks bang on walls from below.*

The squirrel had his resources. All he had to say was *End the attachment* and the leaves would fall. It was an important job in autumn to visit all the ones he'd planted and stare down their boughs. *End the attachment.* The trees went bare. The days grew short and cold.