

1

IT WAS BEN AVERY who introduced me to Livvy, Livvy and her haunted family. This was in 1971, when Ben and I were sophomores in college. A lifetime ago, another world, but it seems like I can still remember all of it, every motion, every color, every note of music. For one thing, it was the year that I fell in love. But for another, I don't think that anyone who experienced what I did that year could possibly forget it.

Ben had gone to Berkeley early in September, before classes started, to find an apartment for us. He'd seen Livvy's sister Maddie in a play and they'd started dating, and when I got to Berkeley he couldn't talk about anything else. Now we were going to visit her family up in Napa Valley, in the wine country, for a couple of days.

Back then Ben drove a humpbacked 1966 Volvo, a car that seemed ancient even though it was only five years old. It smelled of mold and rust and oil, and to this day, whenever I find myself in a car like that, I feel young and ready for anything, any wild scheme that Ben or I would propose. The car went through a constant cycle of electrical problems—either the generator didn't work, or the regulator, or the battery—and on this trip, as on so many others, the battery warning light flickered on and off, a dull red like the baleful eye of Mordor.

We got on the freeway and headed out of Berkeley, then passed through the neighboring suburbs. As we crossed the Carquinez Bridge Ben started telling me about the last time he'd taken the car in, and the Swedish mechanic who told him the problem was with the “yenerator.” He did a goofy imitation

of the mechanic, who I was sure was nothing like Ben portrayed him, but I barely paid attention. I was thinking about my upcoming classes, and about this sister of Maddie's he wanted me to meet.

"Tell me again why I'm coming with you," I said, interrupting him in the middle of the story.

"You'll like them," Ben said. "They're fun. Come on, Will, have I ever disappointed you?"

"Disappointed, no," I said. "Frustrated, enraged, terrified—"

"Terrified? When were you ever terrified?"

"That time you took your mom's car out for a drive—"

"Every kid does that—"

"You were twelve."

"Yeah. Well."

"And you haven't gotten much better since then. Slow down. Ah, God, you're not going to try to pass that car, are you?"

The Volvo rattled over into the oncoming lane for a terrifying moment, and then Ben swore and moved back. "Where did all these cars come from all of a sudden?" he said. "It's like they grow them around here or something, along with the grapes."

"A bumper crop," I said.

"Give me a brake," he said, not missing a beat.

"Don't be fuelish."

"Have I ever steered you wrong?"

"Yes. Yes, you have," I said, returning to my first theme. "My very first day at your house, when you gave me that chili pepper and told me it was a yellow strawberry—"

"They're fun, I told you," he said. He could usually keep up with me like this; it came of knowing each other since kindergarten. "You'll like them. And Maddie has a sister—"

"Not as pretty, you said."

"Well, I would say that, wouldn't I? Maddie's beautiful, and talented, and creative, and Livvy's..."

"A pale shadow."

"No. No, they're different, that's all. Livvy's a chemistry major."

"Chemistry? What have you gotten me into here? We'll talk about the

chromium molecule or something. *Is* chromium a molecule? I don't even know. Stick close to me, Ben."

"Can't. Maddie and I have plans."

"Oh, great."

The sun was setting, throwing long shadows across the road. We'd reached the farmlands by this time, and I could see cows grazing in the fields on either side of us, and long rows of grapevines.

We left the freeway and started up a twisting mountain road. Trees stood along either side, just starting to turn autumn red. A truck carrying a load of grapes crawled in front of us, then finally turned down a driveway and was hidden by the trees.

"Look, you'll like it," Ben said. "It's this huge farmhouse, that they've added to every generation—you get lost just looking for the bathroom. And acres of vineyards, and their own wine label...Livvy plans the dinner around the wine. Last time she made—"

"Livvy cooks?"

"Yeah, didn't I tell you? She's a terrific cook. Interested now?"

"She cooks in the kitchen, right, not over her Bunsen burners? Adding chromium to the meatloaf? Because I think I have a chromium allergy or something..."

"Ah," Ben said. "Here we are."

He twisted the wheel hard and we headed down an unpaved road. The road had a brief argument with the car, shaking it back and forth; then finally they seemed to resolve their differences and we continued on. A few minutes later he parked, and I looked out.

The house we'd come to looked as if Hansel and Gretel's witch had taken a correspondence course in architecture. The front was the Craftsman style so common in California, with deep eaves, a wide porch, a gabled roof, a couple of stone chimneys. Behind that, though, was another house, attached halfway along its front to the first; this one was Victorian, with curlicues and gewgaws and a round, pointed turret with a weathervane on top. Stepped back behind that was yet another front, timbered and plastered like a Tudor cottage. Balconies stuck out at weird angles, and stairs went up and down connecting them, and small windows peered out wherever there was room for them. Somewhere in the midst of all of this a cathedral tower lifted high

above the other buildings, looking as bewildered and out of place as a man who had lost his glasses.

The front door opened and two dogs ran out, barking. Then a girl who looked about thirteen came out onto the porch and hurried after them.

I turned to Ben angrily, wondering if this was one of his jokes—though it seemed a lot more mean-spirited than they usually were.

“Oh no,” he said. “No no no. That’s Rose, the third sister. The rest of them should be around here somewhere.”

We left the car and got our duffle bags out of the back seat. The front door opened again and Maddie stepped down to meet us.

I’d met Maddie before, of course, with Ben; I’d even gone to see her in her play. It was true, as Ben said, that she was beautiful, but after a while you saw that a lot of her beauty came from the way she presented herself. She was dramatic, vividly present, with long hair the color of polished mahogany, and brown eyes that seemed lit from within, like a lantern behind smoked glass. Her teeth stuck out slightly, the result, she’d said, of refusing to wear her retainer when she was younger. At first glance she seemed tall; then you’d realize, with a start of surprise, that she was actually less than average height, that it was all an illusion caused by her long legs and the graceful way she carried herself.

“Ben!” she said, hugging him. She gave me a hug next, much shorter. “I’m so glad you could make it. Livvy, this is Ben’s friend Will Taylor.”

I turned, startled. I hadn’t seen Livvy come out. She looked a bit like Maddie, but darker, with black hair tied in a thick braid down her back and nearly black eyes. And she seemed different from her sister in other ways too—more self-contained, self-sufficient, as if she carried an important secret. Maddie was always open; she would say anything to anybody. In contrast Livvy seemed exotic, mysterious.

Maddie pulled her shawl around her. It had bright blocks of color, red and yellow and green, from Mexico or South America somewhere. “It’s cold out here,” she said. “Let’s go inside.”

“That’s my shawl,” Livvy said.

“I’m just borrowing it,” Maddie said.

“The way you borrowed my boots. And my embroidered blouse. And—”

“Here—you can have it back.”

“No, no, you take it. I just want to say goodbye. Goodbye, dear shawl, it

was good knowing you for the little time we had together.”

Livvy reached out for the shawl. Maddie slipped away and ran for the porch, laughing.

By the time Ben and I caught up with them Maddie was holding the door open for us, and we went inside. The living room was in the Craftsman style too, huge and dark, with wide plank floors and wooden rafters. One wall held a fireplace big enough for Ben to have parked the Volvo in. A small fire burned inside it, seeming to shiver within the vast space. Around the fireplace was a flowery pattern of jade-green and gold tiles, with writing in black Gothic letters just under the mantelpiece. There were built-in bookcases to either side, the shelves crammed with books, some standing, some lying down or leaning diagonally against their fellows. The smell of garlic and roasting meat wafted out from somewhere within the house.

“You can leave your bags here,” Maddie said. We set them down near the door, under a line of pegs that held coats and scarves and dog leashes, and then followed Maddie past some overstuffed couches and chairs.

There was a fireplace in the dining room, too, and another built-in cabinet, the kind most people would put their best china in, although Maddie’s family seemed to use it as another bookcase. A wooden table ran the length of the room, with benches on either side.

The table was mostly set, but Livvy came out of the kitchen carrying some napkins and silverware. “Do you need any help?” Maddie asked.

“Great timing, as usual, Maddie,” Livvy said. “No, I’m pretty much done here.”

Maddie straightened a few napkins. A heavy terracotta pot stood in the middle of the table, with a pine tree in it half as tall as I was, and I went over to pick it up.

“No, leave that there,” Maddie said, and Livvy said at the same time, “No, that’s okay where it is.”

I set it down, and Livvy carefully moved it back a few inches. “I thought it would get in the way,” I said.

Maddie and Livvy looked at each other. “Our mother would have a fit if anyone moved it,” Maddie said.

“Okay,” I said. I wondered, uneasily, what other family customs I would violate in the next few hours.

Suddenly I realized I didn't even know their last name. "What's the mother's name?" I whispered to Ben.

"Sylvie."

"I can't call her Sylvie, can I? Sylvie what?"

"Sure you can. Sylvie Feierabend."

What the hell, I thought. "What kind of name is Fire Robin?" Ben had told me the family were hippies, but I wasn't expecting one of those pretentious pseudo-Indian names.

"It's Feierabend's name, sir." This was one of the phrases we passed back and forth, the way other people quoted baseball statistics. It's from *Catch-22*—someone says it whenever he's introduced to Yossarian.

Usually it made me laugh, but right now I was too nervous. Still, I realized I hadn't heard the name right. "Fire...whatsis?"

"Feier," Ben said. "Abend."

"What does it mean?"

"It means quitting time in German," Livvy said, coming out with more napkins and stuff. "Getting off work. Festive evening."

"Really? How'd you get a name like that?"

"Maybe we had a really lazy ancestor," Livvy said, heading back to the kitchen.

Rose came in, followed by her dogs, and then Mrs. Feierabend. The mother had dark hair, streaked with gray and piled on top of her head, and dark eyes behind black-framed glasses. She was plumper than her daughters, and she looked tired, a bit vague about everything, as if she'd suddenly found herself having dinner with no idea of how she'd gotten there. That could have been because of the glasses, though; the thick lenses made her eyes look distant, blurred, like fish in an aquarium.

We sat down to eat, and I have to admit that the food was everything Ben said it would be. Terrific pork chops, homemade bread, bean salad, pasta with pumpkin sauce instead of tomato, three or four kinds of wine—and this was long before nouvelle cuisine, this was just Livvy making up a dinner out of whatever she'd bought that day.

"How long have you been here, Mrs. Feierabend?" I asked. She was sitting across from me, and I could only catch glimpses of her face through the pine needles. At this point I wasn't going to move the tree, though, not for anything.

"Here? Oh, I got here a few minutes ago, didn't I, Livvy?"

Livvy and Maddie looked at each other, trying not to laugh. "No, I meant—how long has the vineyard been here? When did your family start making wine?"

"It belongs to my husband's family, really. They came to the United States, oh, sixty years ago, something like that. Seventy."

"Rose knows," Maddie said.

"Rose supposes she knowses," Livvy said. It sounded like something they repeated a lot, a private family nursery rhyme.

"I *do* know," Rose said. "The Feierabends came here in 1888, from Germany." She turned to me and said, very serious, "I'm writing a history of the vineyard."

I wondered where Mr. Feierabend was, but it didn't seem like something I could ask. Yet another thing Ben hadn't told me. I felt as if I'd been dropped over enemy territory without a map. Hell, without a parachute.

"This is a wonderful dinner, Livvy," Mrs. Feierabend said.

That seemed a safe enough subject. I turned to Livvy, who sat next to me, and said, "It's delicious. Where did you learn to cook like this?"

"We just started experimenting," Livvy said. "Maddie and I, when we were kids."

"So you cook too?" I asked Maddie.

"Not really," Livvy said. "Mostly she just played around with the spices."

Maddie laughed. "I liked their names," she said. "They sounded so exotic—tarragon, turmeric, cardamom. I put in anything that sounded good."

"She made sweet hamburgers one night," Livvy said. "What was in that one? Cinnamon?"

"I don't remember. I wrote a poem about it, though. About all the names of the spices."

"Can I read it?" Ben asked.

"Of course not. I was twelve."

"Do you still write poems?" I asked.

"Oh, Maddie's a complete Renaissance woman," Ben said, looking at her admiringly. "Actress, writer, dancer... What else?"

"She used to recite poetry when she was ten," Livvy said.

I'd felt the rivalry between the sisters all evening, and I thought this was

just one more example of it, Livvy making fun of her sister's younger self. But to my surprise Maddie pushed her hair back and looked out at us, her face serious. "The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas," she said. "The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor—"

"And the highwayman came riding—riding—riding," Livvy joined in. "Up to the old inn door."

"You left out one of the 'riding's."

"He put too many in," Livvy said. They laughed.

"Will and I are thinking about writing a movie," Ben said. "It's called *Theater Closed for Repairs*."

We'd told this joke before, of course. It was part of the routines we did, our two-man band. People either got it or told us we were idiots. This time Livvy and Maddie laughed, though Mrs. Feierabend looked a little confused.

I started to relax, to eat without worrying about making conversation. "Pass the chromium," I said to Ben, and he grinned and sent over one of the wine bottles.

Rose went off somewhere after dinner. Ben took a joint out of his shirt pocket and lit it. All through high school and college Ben had had the ability to smoke dope without attracting any attention, a sort of superpower that had served him well on many occasions. This time, though, I couldn't see how he could possibly get away with it.

"Hey, man," I whispered urgently, nodding at Mrs. Feierabend. The smell—a combination of burnt rope and skunk—drifted out over the table.

"It's okay," Ben said. He sucked in the smoke and held it, then passed the joint to Maddie. When she was done she passed it to her mother, and I watched, faintly scandalized, as Mrs. Feierabend toked as if she'd done it all her life.

I don't remember much of the rest of the evening. The room grew dark, and Livvy set out silver candlesticks along the table and lit the candles. We talked about the horrible war in Vietnam, and the elections the next year, which we hoped would get rid of Nixon. We talked about the draft lottery, and how Ben and I had both, miraculously, gotten high numbers and so avoided the draft. We got hungry again, and Livvy went back to the kitchen for second and third helpings. Maddie told us about her latest audition, which was for an experimental play about Joan of Arc.

Finally Mrs. Feierabend stretched and said she was going to bed.

"Where's Will going to sleep?" Livvy asked.

Mrs. Feierabend blinked. "I thought he was with you, dear," she said.

I was too stoned to feel embarrassed, though I sensed I would have been, under other conditions. I thought Livvy blushed, but it might have been the candlelight. "We could put him in the Moaning Bedroom," she said.

"The Moaning Bedroom?" I said. "I don't know if I like the sound of that."

"She doesn't really moan very often," Livvy said. "No one's heard her for a while now."

"Who doesn't?"

"Our ghost." Livvy smiled at me, then seemed to see something in my expression. "Okay, what about Aunt Alva's room?"

"Is Aunt Alva another ghost?"

"I don't think so. I'm not sure who she was, to tell you the truth. Some German ancestor or another. Rose knows." She looked around blearily, then seemed to remember Rose had gone.

"Okay," I said.

Livvy and I stood and went back out into the living room. I got my duffle bag and followed her down a hall and up a grand polished staircase. Black-and-white photographs hung on the wall over the stairs, groups of unsmiling people in old-fashioned clothes, those German ancestors probably. We went down another hall, stopped at a closet to gather sheets and blankets, took another turn, and then Livvy opened a door and motioned me inside.

We made up the bed together, first the sheets and two pillows, none of which matched, then a heavy goose-down comforter, and finally a threadbare quilt covered with patchwork stars. "The bathroom's down this way," she said, heading back to the door.

I memorized the twists and turns to the bathroom, remembering what Ben had said about getting lost. "Good night," she said.

"Good night," I said. "Thanks for dinner."

I got up in the middle of the night, needing to pee. After the warmth of the comforter the air in the hallway seemed arctic. I traced the steps carefully to the bathroom—turn to the left, three doors down on the right—stood for a long time in front of the toilet, getting rid of all the wine I'd drunk, and then headed back. The way back looked different somehow, and after a while I found myself in what seemed like another house altogether, one

with carpeted floors and flowered wallpaper. Moonlight shone in through the windows, and I remembered uneasily that I hadn't seen any windows on my way out.

Something stood ahead of me in the hallway, a tall apparition with glowing red eyes. I screamed. A door opened, and light streamed out into the hall.

A cat jumped down from a table and ran off. I leaned against the wall, breathing heavily. A few working neurons in my brain shouted "Cat! Cat!" to the rest of my body, which ignored them and continued to panic. My palms were damp; I wiped them on the jeans I'd worn to bed.

"What is it?" someone said.

It was Livvy, coming out of the open door. "Sorry," I said, finally starting to calm down. "It was just a cat. I didn't know you had cats."

"A few," Livvy said. "Along with the dogs."

She looked at me with those dark eyes a while longer, saying nothing. Her hair was unbraided, and she was wearing a loose white nightgown that fell to her ankles. Her feet were bare. I had the feeling that I could walk up to her, kiss her, take her into her room, and that she would welcome it. I was very aware of Ben and Maddie in their own room, somewhere in the house. We stood still for a long moment, and then one of us said, "Good night," and the other repeated it: "Good night."

I found my room easily after that. I opened the door and went in, cursing my cowardice. But what had I seen, after all? What if I had been wrong?

The next morning I used the shower, an ancient contraption made out of pipes and valves and pressure gauges; it looked like a cross between medical equipment and a place to hang your coat. Then I got dressed and went downstairs.

The long table was already set for breakfast, with cereal and rolls and half-full pitchers of milk and orange juice. Dirty plates and cups lay scattered across the table; I was probably the last one up.

I looked around for coffee, and found a nearly full pot on the sideboard. I poured myself a cup and sat down, feeling the silence of the house gather around me. So Ben was keeping to his plan of spending the weekend with Maddie, I thought, and I would be left to my own devices. I couldn't say I blamed him.

I picked up a blue bowl painted with bright red and yellow flowers. None of the dishes matched, I noticed; they all seemed to have come from different sets. I had been too nervous to see that at dinner. There was even a cup of nearly transparent porcelain, which I vowed to stay away from; it would be just my luck, after last night, to break it.

Livvy came in and started to stack the dirty dishes. "Sorry about last night," I said, pouring out some cereal. "Hope I didn't wake you up."

"Don't worry about it," Livvy said.

"Oh, God—I screamed like a girl, is that what you're saying?"

She laughed. "No, really—it's all right." She picked up a final bowl and headed for the kitchen. "Is there anything you want to do today?"

"We could see the vineyards, I guess."

"Well, they're down on the flatlands—we'd have to drive there. But we could take a walk. Let me just finish here."

I ate breakfast while she washed up, and then we headed outside. The land around here seemed very changeable, going from dry yellow grass to shady trees and then back to grass again.

"Here—let's take the Moon Bridge. This way," Livvy said.

With that name I expected something curved and fanciful, but the bridge turned out to be broad and flat, with a stream below that had dried to a trickle. "Why is it called that?" I asked, but she didn't know.

Still, we talked easily, as if the embarrassing moment of last night had never happened. She told me about studying chemistry, sometimes being the only woman in the class, about living off campus with roommates—and I got a promise that we would see each other in Berkeley, that we would exchange phone numbers.

We followed a path under a stand of trees, almost a small wood. Birds chirped all around us. I was telling her about being a psych major, and trying not to sound too boring, when I heard some people talking up ahead of us. "Quiet," someone said, or I thought they said. "They're coming."

A flurry of wings sounded, and birds flew up all around us. I went on ahead of Livvy and came out of the trees. There was no one there.

"What was that?" I asked, heading back toward her.

"What?" she said.

"There were some people here."

She frowned. "I didn't hear anything."

"You sure?"

"The acoustics are pretty weird in here. You can hear all kinds of strange things."

It probably wasn't important. I let it go, too focused on Livvy.

One other odd thing happened, though I didn't make too much of it at the time. We went back to the house, and Livvy took me into the kitchen to make that day's bread. The kitchen looked as old as everything else, the floor and counters made out of chipped black and white tiles. There was a wooden table in the middle, a smaller sibling of the one in the dining room. The stove was one of those ancient white monsters up on four legs, with two ovens, a griddle, and a shelf above the burners with an overhead light. A frayed rag doll sat on the shelf, next to salt and pepper shakers, and looked out at us with one button eye.

Livvy mixed the dough, then scattered flour along the table and started to knead it. "This is the most relaxing thing I know," she said. "If I was a psychiatrist I'd tell my all patients to make some bread if they felt unhappy. Here—you want to try it?"

She tore off a lump of dough and gave it to me. Our fingers brushed as I took it, and a small, secret burst of fireworks went off inside me. I started to push the dough flat, but it was more difficult than it looked.

"Use the heels of your hands," she said. She wiped her face with the back of her hand, leaving a smudge of flour on her cheek. "Work your wrists."

We kneaded the bread side by side for a while. "She's getting ready to drop him, you know," Livvy said suddenly. "You might want to warn him."

"What?" I said, startled.

"Maddie. She doesn't keep men around very long. She manages to get rid of them quietly, though, without any fuss. Almost as if she loses them and can't remember where she put them."

It was only then that I heard footsteps in the dining room, and I realized that whoever it was must have heard the last part of the conversation. A moment later Ben and Maddie and Mrs. Feierabend came into the kitchen.

"Were you talking about me?" Maddie asked. "I heard my name."

"Of course," Livvy said, not looking at all embarrassed. "About all the men you've broken up with."

“Livvy,” Mrs. Feierabend murmured. “That isn’t very nice.”

“I might be keeping this one, though,” Maddie said, putting her arm around Ben.

“Maybe she just had to kiss a lot of frogs to find her prince,” Ben said.

Everyone fell silent—a shocked silence, as though Ben had said something dreadful, broken some taboo. Then Maddie laughed. “Livvy’s more like that other fairy tale, ‘The Frog King,’” she said. “She throws them against the wall to see if they’ll turn into princes.”

“Maddie!” Mrs. Feierabend said. Her vagueness disappeared suddenly, like a movie snapping into focus. “Stop it!”

“All right,” Maddie said. “Sorry, Sylvie.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Livvy said. She turned to me. “Don’t listen to her.”

This was the moment, I think, that I realized that there was a lot about the family I didn’t understand. It wasn’t just private jokes and phrases, like Ben and I had. It was something deeper, something they didn’t share with anyone.

I didn’t care, though. I was already charmed, as Ben had said I would be. I was half in love with this batty, disorganized family, so different from my own—Livvy’s cooking, and Maddie’s poetry, and all the mismatched sheets and dishes. I even liked it that they called their mother by her first name, something I would never have dared to do with my own parents. So there were mysteries here—so what? I was intrigued by Livvy, wanted to know more about her. I wondered what it meant that Livvy cared what I thought about her. At this point there was really only one mystery I wanted to solve—what would Livvy be like in bed?

We left early the next day, to spend Sunday back in Berkeley studying. Ben kissed Maddie one last time in the living room and, for something to do, somewhere to look, I tried to read the black spiky letters on the fireplace. “Spinne am abend,” it said, German, probably. Abend was evening, Livvy had said; feierabend meant festive evening. So—“Spinner in evening”?

“Spider in the evening,” Ben said, coming up behind me.

“What?” I said. “When did you learn German?”

“Rose told me. She doesn’t know why it says that, though—none of them do.” We went outside and got into the Volvo. “You ever hear of anything like that? A nursery rhyme or something?”

"Tsy bitsy spider?" I suggested.

Ben looked at me, disgusted. We said nothing while he turned the ignition, each of us praying in our own way that the battery hadn't died. The car started, and we cheered. Ben pulled out the choke to give it more gas—I'd never seen a car with a choke before, and was never to see one again—and wrestled the car out onto the road.

"So?" he said, once we'd gone past the rough patch of road. "What did you think?"

"I wasn't adequately briefed, man," I said. "There's a lot you forgot to tell me."

"Like what?"

"Like where's the father? Are he and Sylvie divorced?"

"I don't know. I don't even think they know. He disappeared a few years ago, I think."

"Disappeared?"

"Yeah. Sylvie had a hard time around then—she sort of collapsed."

"Collapsed?" I was aware I was repeating everything he said, that we sounded like a call-and-response for some bizarre religious sect. "What do you mean?"

"A breakdown or something. Remember when Livvy said that she and Maddie had started cooking? They had to—Sylvie couldn't do anything for a while. She's still not over it, not completely."

I felt briefly ashamed. People had started talking about Women's Lib around that time, and I thought I was all for it, and yet I hadn't realized how much work Livvy had done that weekend. I'd just sat back and enjoyed it, oblivious as a lord. My only excuse was that I was used to it; my mother had cooked for us every evening, and then cleared the table and washed up afterward.

"So the three of them do all the housework?" I asked. "Along with school, and—and Maddie's acting?"

"No, it's not as bad as that. They have someone who cleans for them, I think. The vineyard does pretty well, I guess."

"But how? The father's gone, and Sylvie can't be running it—"

"I'm not really sure—they have people to run it, probably. Maddie once told me that the family's been lucky, that everything they do goes well. That's

why she thinks her acting career will take off.”

That sounded pretty freaky to me, but I wasn’t going to say so to Ben. “What do you think?” I asked. “About her acting?”

“Well, she’s good. I mean, you saw her.” He sighed. “I don’t know, man. It’s a hard business.”

“And what about that weird reaction yesterday, when Maddie said something about the Frog King?”

“What weird reaction?”

“When we were in the kitchen, remember? Everyone looked shocked. Even Sylvie woke up for a minute there.”

“They were probably just mad at Livvy, for saying Maddie’s going to break up with me. She’s jealous of Maddie—you probably noticed.”

“Yeah, but Maddie’s jealous of Livvy too.”

“There’s something going on with those two, that’s for sure. Probably best not to get into it. So anyway. How did it go with Livvy?”

“Well, she gave me her phone number.”

“All riiight!” Ben said, and punched his fist into the air.