

THE STORY BEGINS

CHAPTER ONE

“Welcome to the Loon Town Cafe.”

“Get me a beer,” snapped back the old woman, all decked out in a big black-and-white bird costume.

What better way to start a chapter of my new life story than to serve an ice-cold Leinie’s to the town loon? I dug out a bottle of the local brew from the cooler. “So what’s with the garb, Claire?”

The woman dolled up in a north woods loon outfit was accompanied by Bromley Bastique, the rotund, full-of-himself, self-proclaimed mayor of Thread, Wisconsin. As usual, he was quick to dismiss any question of mine as nonsense. “Wally, you should know the answer to that god darn question. Claire’s the town mascot for the Loon Fest. Always has been. Always will.”

Bromley had quite the knack to exasperate me by lecturing on things I already knew. “Of course. It’s Loon Fest. I was just wondering why Claire is already in costume.” Did the town mayor really want his town mascot wandering the streets lugging an opened beer bottle? “Loon Fest is why I’ve been working like a dog to get this place ready for its grand opening. Everyone tells me it’s the best weekend for tourists. Miss this weekend and you miss the summer. That’s what you tell me.” And yet here I was, sitting in my otherwise empty cafe with the mayor and a woman dressed as a giant loon who had wandered in before I had a chance to turn my sign from closed to open.

“Quit your bellyaching,” said Claire. “It’s not like you get snapped at every morning before the sun comes up by those spindly little men.” Bromley took advantage of my confusion with Claire’s statement to go behind the bar and open his own bottle of Leinenkugel’s.

“Hey, where’s my beer?” asked Claire. I slid the opened bottle down the bar. She picked it up, took a swig, then stopped and looked around. “You know, I like this place. I remember when Al Capone stopped here, back in ‘33, or was it ‘34. Over fifty years ago, but I can still remember the meanness on that man’s face. You remember, Bromley?”

“You weren’t even ten then. How could you remember?” Bromley asked with a dismissing tone. “Just a little kid, and Capone was here for ten minutes. It’s not like your supposed spacemen who stop by every morning to chew the fat.”

“They have never chewed my fat, just collected it. And there’s nothing supposed about them.” Claire turned her attention back to me. “Wally, I’ve been thinking ever since I heard that you were coming back, and I just can’t figure it out. I remember when you were just a kid. Kinda pudgy and short, as I recall. Never liked Thread either, if I remember right. Seems to me you wrote some kind of article in that school paper about how every single kid should leave this town and run off.”

“And where would one run off to?” A newcomer had just walked through my restaurant door. Did no one pay attention to the ‘closed’ sign? The town eccentric Mr. Packer was tall, over six feet, missing an arm, nearing eighty at least, and with a yellowish-white beard that reached to his waist. He wore a heavy knitted red stocking cap, even though the heat of this late June morning was already well into the eighties. “Is there possibly more to the universe than Thread?”

“If anyone knew, it would be you, Mr. Packer. How are your collections?” I asked.

“Passable. Passable. What fool thing have you gotten yourself into, Claire. You look like a giant loon.”

“My God, Mr. Packer, that’s what she is. She’s our Claire de Loon. You know she walks in the Loon Fest parade every year.” Bromley stomped around the bar, his rather ample stomach proceeding him as he turned the polished mahogany corner, and pulled out a second Leinie’s. Our Mayor was a quick drinker. I was just hoping he was planning to pay for them. He wasn’t only the town mayor, he had also been my realtor for this place, and maybe he thought his commission included a lifetime pass to my bar.

“Is it the Loon Fest again? I had hoped to have gotten out of this danged town this year before it came up. All those summer people showing up. Bunch of fools.”

“Well, Mr. Packer, it takes one to know one. What we would be without our fools? Take our young Wally Pearson here. Abandoning the bright lights of Manhattan to come back to our little Thread. Opening up a fine cafe . . .”

“Say, Wally, did you know that Al Capone once drank a beer here?” interrupted Mr. Packer.

“Of course, he knows that,” said Claire. “We were just talking about it. I remember how mean he was. My first gangster.”

“I bet he was,” muttered Bromley.

“Such a nasty looking man. They were on their way to Iron Ridge. He had some actress with him. Beautiful woman.”

“Frances Farmer,” said Mr. Packer.

“She was going to be in that movie they made about Iron Ridge. What was it called again?”

“*Come and Get It*,” said Mr. Packer.

“Get what?” asked Bromley.

“The movie. That was the name of the movie,” he replied.

“I remember Frances Farmer. She was quite the looker,” Bromley said. “Do you remember her in *King Kong*? What a movie.”

“You got it wrong. That was Jessica Lange in *King Kong*.” For some reason, I felt compelled to interject and correct Bromley.

“Bromley’s right. It was Jessica Lange before she went crazy and had all that electroshock therapy. Just like they did to me,” said Claire. “I remember her in that movie. They made a movie of her life, too, you know. And someday they’re going to do the same for me. Jessica and I are so much alike. Beautiful women. Misunderstood.” She glared at Bromley.

“You’re confusing Frances Farmer, an actress from the ‘30s, with Jessica Lange who played her in a movie,” said Mr. Packer, providing a perfectly reasonable fact that was completely ignored by both Claire and Bromley.

I polished the bar counter as this conversation flowed, and questioned my sanity in coming back to Thread. I had known Bromley, Claire, and Mr. Packer when growing up. Bromley had acted as mayor for years. Claire Moon, once the beloved town tramp, now just beloved, had slept with so many men for so few dollars that many wondered if she had lost a little bit of her mind each time she claimed to have lost her virginity. But that was so many years ago. And Mr. Packer had his own

story, although that story was as unknown as Mr. Packer's first name. Even the Mayor called him Mr. Packer, and Bromley never referred to anyone without using their first name.

My little cafe was filled with warmth and I liked it. The late June sun streamed in through large plate glass windows facing onto the Square. White painted letters, Loon Town Cafe, cast short morning shadows across my square tables with their varnished birch tops. I had kept much of what had been the Thread Tavern. The great Art Deco mahogany bar was still in place. It looked a bit rough when I arrived, having been kicked by many a lumberjack over the years, but now stripped, restained and properly polyurethaned, it was ready for the eighties. The old vertical board wainscoting along the walls had also been stripped. Much to the horror of the local workman, I bleached the boards until they were nearly white. Manhattan had been dark enough. Coming home was meant to lighten my mood.

"So what you going to serve here?" asked Claire. "Fish fries and beer. You gotta do that or nobody's going to come. But what else?"

I handed her a copy of my menu. "Take a look and try something. I'm not officially open yet, but my new cook's already in back."

"Maybe later. I'm too excited. You don't know what I have to go through to get this costume. Everyone knows that it's always my job to be the town loon for the parade, but that school principal won't let me borrow the team mascot costume. Like that mascot does the basketball team much good."

"Lost forty-five games in a row," said Bromley.

"But the game against Mandarin in February was lost on a technicality," said Mr. Packer. "Only four players showed up for the Thread team."

"Anyway, you see," continued Claire, "each year, I get this idea in my head that it would be great fun to walk in the parade as Claire de Loon. You know, my last name Moon really is Lune in French and that's just the same as loon."

"A homophone," said Mr. Packer.

"Now don't go calling Claire names," titched Bromley.

I went back to looking at my menu for the Loon Fest grand opening lunch. I needed to get my head around officially opening, and this disjointed conversation with three of the town's leaders wasn't helping. "I think Miss Moon was talking about her plan," I pointed out.

"Exactly," she said with a sharp look at Bromley and at Mr. Packer. "As I was saying, it seems a shame not to have a town mascot in our Loon Fest parade. And no one seems to care. But I do. I have to be Claire de Loon. It's a cosmic thing."

"Like your visitors," muttered Bromley.

"And so, just like I've done for the past five years, I break into the Thread gymnasium, and go rummaging through that coach's storage room. He saves everything."

"Coach Shapely is anal-retentive," said Mr. Packer.

"Listen to that man," Bromley said in a near shout. "He can't talk about anyone without calling them a dirty name."

"You're the mayor," I joked. "Banish him."

"So I rummage through this stuff. Basketball uniforms from forty, fifty years ago. Who's going to use them again? He has all this stuff, all disorganized, all the better to hide the costume for Nanoonkoo so I won't find it."

"Nanoonkoo?" I asked.

"The mascot for the Screaming Loons. Don't you remember your childhood, boy?" replied Mr. Packer.

"And don't loons call, not scream." Bromley cupped his hands around his mouth and let out a deep, unearthly shriek that rose from low tones to high only to drop back down into muffled tones.

"That's not how a loon sounds. After all, I should know. I'm the town loon. Listen to me." And with that Claire cupped her hands and began a more melodious and lonely sound. Bromley just continued even louder. Mr. Packer sighed as though he heard this once before and he too put his hands up to his mouth and emitted a sound so plaintive and echoing that both Claire and Bromley stopped their cries and just looked at him.

“Knock, knock” a teenaged girl poked her head just partway through the door. I needed to go turn the sign over to read “open” and make things official

Bromley turned toward me and whispered as though telling me a secret I didn’t already know. “Cynthia Trueheart. Red’s her father. A stingy son-of-a bitch, that Red. Don’t tell him I said so. He always gives me a lot of support at election time. But why shouldn’t he? He owns half the god darn town.”

I nodded to Cynthia to come on in and join the story. She walked in, a big smile on her face, as though she were eager to join up with this crazy bunch of town folk. Claire paid no attention and continued with her tale.

“So I’m in the gym storage room, rummaging around until I find my bird costume, and what happens, but the door slams shut on me. And it’s locked! I’m locked in the school gymnasium. It’s early summer and school just got out. I figure I’m done for. So I put on my Claire de Loon costume, because if I’m going to meet my maker, I want it to be on my best terms. And I stand in that hot little room thinking of all the years I have spent in Thread, good years they’ve been. Lots of fine people have come through here. I liked them all. They’ve all been very good to me. Treated me like a lady. I had no complaints. So in my costume, I laid my head down on the basketball uniforms and said my prayers.”

“And that’s when I opened the door,” squealed Cynthia.

“She squealed just like that,” said Claire.

“What do you think? It’s a storage room, and I thought someone had left a corpse there. Wrapped it up in Nanoonkoo to rot away. What would we have done next year for our cheerleading routines if we didn’t have Nanoonkoo.”

“Won a game?” snipped Bromley.

“Mr. Bromley! My dad wouldn’t like it if he heard you talk like that? You know he thinks you should be more positive about this town and everyone in it. We will win a game. Maybe next year. The boys can’t help it. They’re just outnumbered and outsized. They’ve got the heart.” By now, Cynthia was completely inside the circle and sizing up the look of my cafe.

“This is really neat,” she said. “I like it a lot more than when dad owned the place.” Yes, Red was the former owner of this building, just as he owned so much of the town. As I recall, he had also been my parent’s landlord when I was growing up. “Dad kept this tavern so dreary, don’t you think? These are nice flowers. Did you grow them out back?”

“Oh dear,” Claire said, “I think I hear the band tuning up. It must be time to get in place for the parade. I’m the grand marshal this year.”

“You most certainly are not,” replied Bromley. “You know perfectly well that I lead the parade this year, as I have for the past thirty years. It’s the responsibility of the mayor. You’re not even supposed to be in the parade. In fact, you’re not even supposed to use that costume. The school superintendant forbid you to ever wear it again after last year’s event.”

“If you’re the grand marshal, you better follow me or you’re going to be late.” Claire trundled out on her webbed feet. Bromley waddled after.

“Some say they’re brother and sister,” Mr. Packer observed. “But who knows for sure. Not many left in town who remember those lumbering days. Twins is what they say. They certainly have turned out different, if that’s the case. I think I’ll just follow along and see that they get to the schoolyard in time. Last year, they got into quite a squabble and missed the parade.” He left the cafe, a slight odor of unwashed clothes lingering behind.

“Aren’t they just wonderful,” Cynthia swooned. “I could spend all day with them.”

It’s a peculiar thing that I ended up back in Thread after plotting my escape for all my high school years. During my adult time in Manhattan, Thread was a place in my past, an interesting set of anecdotes and stories. It held no future for me. The locals were too isolated, too strange. I was meant for better places.

But last winter in Times Square, a mugger’s knock on my head forced some sense back into it. All I could think of was how much safer and quieter life would be if I went home. The big city

held too many problems for me. The old home town offered something simpler. True, Mom and Dad had already moved away. Neither my brother nor my sister lived within a hundred miles of the town. And I hadn't kept up with any of my old classmates. Yet as I rose back to consciousness from that mugging, I could smell the Friday night fish fries of my youth in Thread. A nostalgia welled up for the sense of belonging I once had, and I knew I needed those old feelings back.

I never saw a bar in any New York establishment as beautiful as one I recalled in the old Thread Tavern. I never had as much fun writing for the fancy East Coast magazines as I had waiting in local restaurants on those summer jobs as I worked my way through college. Cooking old favorite recipes for my famed dinner parties were one of the few bright spots in my current life.

I mused on setting up a beer with a brandy chaser for the old men in Thread, of dogs waiting outside an ice cream parlor for their young masters to finish a sundae, of women lingering over lunch to finish a cup of coffee and a homemade piece of apple pie with a flaky crust that could only come from a good lard pastry. I was bringing Norman Rockwell back to life, and it was beguiling.

Thread is an odd kind of town. Its last big transformation had been the arrival of electricity in the days of Roosevelt's REA act, or maybe the closing of the last lumber mill just before World War II. Or, if one were really honest, it was probably the dismissal in 1969 of Wanda, the local phone operator, when direct dialing reached the citizens of Thread. Until that year, Wanda kept tabs on the comings and goings of every man, woman and child as they made and received their calls. Red Trueheart had always paid close attention to Wanda. He trafficked in information – along with his groceries, the tavern, a hearty portfolio of mortgages, and women's hearts.

The summer of 1969 also ushered in the final run of the Great Lakes Rail Road Northern Highlands Express. The Express was an old steam-engine, three-car passenger train that worked its way north from Chicago and Milwaukee. Each evening at nine, it would squeal to a stop at the Thread station and a handful of summer people disembarked. The summer resorts' drivers stood patiently by station wagons with wooden sides, ready to whisk the arrivals to their week on the lake. Saturday evenings were the busiest times for newcomers, always keeping pace with the Saturday 10

am departure of the previous week's leisure crowd.

By the time Amtrak evolved into the national service provider, it was clear the vacation tour train ride to northern Wisconsin was no winning route for Federal policy makers. To most Theadites, it hadn't seemed that that many summer people rode on the Highlands Express. Everyone thought that those who did would start to drive instead. But they didn't – even though the car trip would have been hours shorter. Most folks felt it was just too far to drive after working all week. And there were so many other more enticing, livelier towns that had to be driven through before arriving in Thread. Who could blame them if the tired workers of Chicago and Milwaukee stopped short of their original destination? And so Thread became a little lonelier

But the lakes still glistened with clear, clean water. The towering pines still cast shadows over the lapping shores, and the loons still called in the evening light. That was the town to which I would escape back in time.

When I returned to Thread in 1985, little had changed in the 14 years since I had graduated and left. The same stores encircled the town square. The same World War I cannon sat in the middle of an unkempt square.

Founded in 1887 by James Thread, a renegade son of a Vermont dry goods family, Thread followed the layout of its founder's childhood New England villages. He placed the town's center around a square that nearly ran edge to edge of the isthmus separating Big Sapphire and Little Sapphire lakes. This town square connected two broadening triangles of developed land between the lakes, laid out in a series of neat streets in geometric trapezoids, leaving space for parks on the north side fronting Big Sapphire Lake and on the south side fronting Little Sapphire Lake. The old pike road that wandered up from central Wisconsin moseyed along South, turned into the south side of the town square and then marched steadily north through the woods toward Iron Ridge, the next town up the road.

The Great Lakes railroad tracks skirted the other side of the town square. It didn't leave much room for growth from the town square, but then it never mattered much. It took thirty years

from the town's founding just to build up the stores and offices surrounding the square. And in the fifty years that followed, it was a struggle to keep those storefronts filled.

The lumber barons barreled through and stripped the hillsides of their virgin timber, leaving only junk wood in the many marshes and swamps. The copper and iron titans emptied the hills of the Gogebic range of their ore to ship it on giant freighters across the Great Lakes to foundries in Michigan, Ohio, and New York. Workers came and went, as one natural resource boom followed another.

A few foolhardy farmers found their way to the far north of Wisconsin, mostly new immigrants from Finland, who didn't have enough relatives with good sense to warn them away from the weak soil. They struggled at being dairy farmers, but eventually they fled to other endeavors, and their barns eventually caved in after one too many winters of heavy snow.

The hardwood forests, all felled for their lumber, and then cleared of stumps for short-lived farm fields were slowly abandoned. Eventually, the fields grew over with sumac and then poplar. Finally oak and maple returned. The jack pine in the swamps spread up shallow banks to hillier areas, and a mixed forest emerged, holding little memory of the lumber camps and failed farms.

Through the decades of transforming landscapes, the double Sapphire lakes remained the same: large, edged with broad sandy beaches, and fed by fast-moving trout streams. The lower lake flowed in the upper one, which in turn emptied into the Coeur de Lattigeaux river which flowed north to tumble into Lake Superior. And always, the loons continued to sound through the evening wind.

In the distance, the cacophony of the Thread Screaming Loons marching band could be heard. Cynthia Trueheart was still standing in my cafe. She took a wide-eyed lingering look to completely capture the interior space as if trying to decide something.

"Why don't you have curtains?" she concluded. "Don't you think it would be more inviting with chintz?"

"No," I replied. "I want people, especially tourists, to walk by and be drawn in. They need

to see people sitting around their tables, enjoying good food and good talk. The Loon Town Cafe should pull people in.”

“Aren’t you afraid they’ll just get scared away? You know, I really like Claire, Bromley and Mr. Packer, but they’re a bit weird. Even a New Yorker like you would have to admit that,” Cynthia said. She paused, while In the distance, the cacophony of the Thread Screaming Loons marching band signalled the start of the parade.. I paused to ponder how a decade away had somehow made me a New Yorker.

“Don’t you just love that music? It’s so alive. Loon Fest makes this town jump. So many tourists show up. If only all these old folks who once summered here could come back. Dad told me how they used to have great cabins on the west side of Big Sapphire. And they’d throw fantastic parties, bringing in bands from Milwaukee and Chicago. Their guests would come up on the train for the weekend. The wives and the children stayed all summer. The fathers would come up for a week or two and the weekends. They even had servants.” Cynthia sighed. “Those old enormous camps are almost all gone. Burnt down, torn down. It depends.

“But when I was little, some of the old folks still shopped in Grandpa’s store. Grandpa would let me sit by the counter as he rung up their goods. I’d sit there all day long. They’d come in, buy a few things, and say ‘Big John, put it on our account.’ and Grandpa would. Dad won’t do that anymore, but Grandpa would. He knew all those people. And they all knew him. They loved him. I know they did. They’d talk about the way Thread used to be. That’s when I’d hear about the old parties.

“I like hearing about the way things used to be, because they used to be better, don’t you think?” She twirled to the door. “The front of the parade is almost here. Aren’t you going to come and stand with me? You’ll miss the parade standing in the gloom. Come out in the sun with me.”

I followed Cynthia out to the radiating heat waves of the sidewalk. The day was going to be a scorcher, with extremely clear blue skies and just a few billowing cumulus clouds on the southern horizon. The sky suggested a change on its way.

Almost the entire square had people fronting the sidewalk. Close to a thousand people were

probably in town. In places, people even doubled or tripled up.

In the center of the square, a huge temporary dance stage was set up. Tonight, Jerzy Jerzynski and his Jelly Jesters would be playing their mixture of polka and top 40 rock hits.

Colorful red, white and blue bunting saved from last year's festivities decked the sides, masking the rough two-by-four planking that held the level dance floor a good foot above the uneven ground. Some enterprising gardener from the Ladies Guild had cut bundles of red and white gladiola and set them in large buckets wrapped in aluminum foil.

The stores around the square made a token effort to join the holiday spirit. The more thrifty ones followed the town square's approach and simply pre-used Fourth of July garb. Others, like Red's grocery store, took the high road with a loon motif. Black and white birds wrapped in pine greens decked out many a store.

Most of the crowd was in front of Red Trueheart's Piggly Wiggly supermarket. With its parking lot, it took up the entire west side of the Thread Square. The supermarket was the newest building in town. Red took a leap of faith back in 1968 and over his father's objections tore down the old buildings housing the original Big John's Market. In its place was a less-than-marvelous example of '60s architecture with big plate glass windows making up a long transparent wall. True, the parking lot faced part of the square, and the glass and cement block building didn't quite match the timber and brick of the rest of the square. But the townspeople liked the place's fluorescent brightness.

The south side of the square was also well graced with spectators waiting for the parade. South Square had some of the town's more important businesses, like the hardware store, the drug store, and the hotel (where both Claire and Bromley lived, separately of course.)

On North Square, my side, there were fewer people. Since this side of the square had the businesses catering to the tourists, including the ever popular Little Papoose gift shop, this seemed a bad sign. The Loon Town Cafe was at the west end of this street, close to the glamour of Red's super market and the occasional traffic of Highway 17.

On the east side were the fewest people. The only attractions were the defunct railroad

station, the bank which had already closed for the day, and the movie theater, long since boarded up, the tattered posters from a 1971 showing of *Cabaret* peeling away.

“I see Claire,” shouted a local. “Claire. Claire. Claire.” The chant went up. And there was the town’s favorite loon, her webbed feet high-stomping to the pallid march beat of the twenty-person Thread Screaming Loons marching band. Claire grabbed the baton from the drum major and took over the lead. “Claire. Claire. Claire.”

Behind the band came the town fire engine, followed by the only police car in town, looking a bit forlorn in its black and white markings as it was missing a red bubble on top. Then there was the cub scout troop and the brownie troop, walking in perfect disorder. Some of the out-of-towners in front of the Little Papoose were exchanging glances. They had been expecting a parade.

The highlight of the parade pulled around the corner. It was Red’s annual float extravaganza, a wagon pulled by a John Deere tractor, driven by Rueben Cord, the pony-tailed butcher at Red’s supermarket. Covered with a year’s supply of tissue and crepe paper, the float was graced by four of the high school cheerleaders, in tighter garb than normal. [

I turned to Cynthia. “Aren’t you a cheerleader? Shouldn’t you be up there?”

“Dad won’t let me. He thinks it’s undignified.”

“But it’s his float.”

Cynthia shrugged her shoulders.

“I’m going back into my cafe,” I said. “I need to officially open, and maybe I’ll get some business.” Walking back into the place, I ceremoniously turn the sign over, from closed to open.

The high school band from Iron Ridge was now in the square, playing with a precision and volume that had always escaped the Thread Screaming Loons High School marching band. Iron Ridge was the only high school that could always be coerced into supporting the Thread festivities. Bromley had some pull with the mayor there, who knew the school superintendent, who in turn could overrule the band director. As for other schools, not only did they seldom venture to participate in the Loon Fest, but they rarely invited the Screaming Loons to march in their summer jamborees. Bromley, Red, and other town leaders took some offense at that, but Big John, the town

patriarch, always maintained that the only losers were those who didn't ask, and that Thread could get along very well without their leave.

I was wiping down my wooden bar counter for the ninth time that morning, my feet bouncing along to the Sousa march. The parade was nearly over. Maybe a lunch crowd would soon develop. If the tourists weren't interested, perhaps the locals would be curious.

A tall man entered the bar and slid to a seat at the far end of the bar, as hidden as one could be in a cafe with a front wall of plate glass. "What an ass-hole of a town. How I get stuck here every fucking year is beyond me! Can I get a Heineken?"

"Sorry, only got Wisconsin beers."

"Shit. This town's just shit." He paused in his tirade and looked around the place. "What is this place? Reminds me of fucking Manhattan.

"Who the fuck are you anyway? I don't recall seeing you here last summer."

"I wasn't here last summer. Just opened the place. Today's the official opening, at least for the bar. And while I can't give you an imported beer, how about a nice glass of a California Chardonnay. Something crisp, not too mellow."

"Sure, how about a glass of Kendall-Jackson. Got that?"

"Want a bottle. I don't serve that by the glass."

"Yeah, why not. A bottle. Since you have some decent stuff, I might as well drink it. I definitely do not feel like going back to the compound and dealing with my wife and her mother. By the way, the name is Henry Van Elkind."

"You the guy with that huge estate on the other side of Big Sapphire Lake?" I asked.

"My wife owns it. It's about the only big place left in this god-forsaken crap heap. She sends her mother up here for the summer, and I get dragged up for too many weekends. They still live in the thirties. They have to 'summer.' Hell, I'd summer too if it were Cape Cod or the Hamptons. But here!"

"Don't come then."

"Easy for you to say. Besides, I have my plans for this place. Just wait and see. You got here

just in time. You don't know it yet, but we're kind of like partners."

"Mr. Van Elkind," Cynthia shouted as she bounced into the cafe. "We didn't know you were up for the weekend. Dad would love to see you again. You and Mrs. Van Elkind should come over." She turned to me. "They have the most beautiful place, and the roses in the yard are fantastic. They're in full bloom right now. Mrs. Rabinowicz is a wonder with them, isn't she, Mr. Van Elkind."

"A wonder, yeah, that is exactly how I would describe my mother-in-law."

"Hey gang, how about some Leinies?" shouted the headless loon as she waddled in. Claire had removed the mascot's head, and her small-featured face encircled with gray hair beamed. "Did you see me lead the parade, Hank?"

"It's Henry. Henry Van Elkind."

"Oh, you'll always be Hank to me. Hey, Bromley, Mr. Packer," she shouted out the door, "come in and sit down. I'm going to buy you lunch at this fine new establishment. Wally, send over three fish fries to the corner table."

"Fish fries," said Henry Van Elkind with a raised eyebrow. "Maybe this place is not as Manhattan as it looks."

"Then how about a toasted baguette with Wisconsin sharp cheddar and applewood smoked bacon?" I countered.

"Sounds good. I'll give it a try."

Cynthia gave me a wink and formed an A-OK sign with left hand. "The Loon Town Cafe is officially in business," she said.

For some reason, I immediately wished I was still in Manhattan.