

## DEAD OF WINTER

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## Chapter 1

### Dead of Winter

I hugged a duffel bag filled with all I owned against my chest to keep warm and took cautious steps on the salted icy pavement. Iowa City had gained weight with new storefronts since my visit ten years before. I, on the other hand, had lost weight along with everything else: a partner, a job I liked, a home, and a city of familiar faces and streets. Now that there was no turning back, I had no idea why I was freezing in the heartland.

In the overcast afternoon, fluid in my nostrils was nearly solid. Puffing along several streets lined with leafless trees, I recognized the two-story clapboard house. To the alley side of the front porch where no one had shoveled, my ankle-high desert boots

sank into crusty snow that seeped over their tops. Five more brutal steps led to a door that opened with a turn of the knob.

Squishing in the boots, I fought my possessions down nine steps but fell on the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth steps—the canvas bag cushioning my landing on the cement floor.

“I could have stayed in New York for this.” Shouting helped. Not ten minutes prior, stepping off a cross-country bus, I’d slipped on a money clip and landed on my ass. At least then I had the wit to palm the find and pocket it as I got up. I had nothing to show for this fall.

I shifted to the bottom step, took off the wet boots and tossed one after the other against the cement wall. Rummaging in the duffel for dry socks, I replaced my wet ones. Icy toes made it too risky to kick the bag again. Up gingerly. A wall switch flipped on a light in metal housing. It hung from an extension cord hung over a series of J-hooks screwed into beams. Obviously designed to be moved and shed light where needed.

“You and me, baby,” I said to the caged bulb.

Everything in the basement was unpainted wood: benches, shelves, stools, and a pallet bed. A canvas curtain hid a utility sink, a toilet, and a rudimentary shower graded to a floor drain. A key on one of the workbenches anchored a note. I carried it to a stuffed chair that sank almost to the floor when I sat.

*January 4, 1972*

*Happy New Year Sandra. Welcome to the dead of winter. Daniel and I have no idea if the key opens or closes anything. We’ve never used it. The place is yours for as long as you can stand it. The renters upstairs know you’ll be around. They access the other side of the basement as a tornado shelter. Your area is pri-*

*vate.*

*Wear anything of mine (or of Daniel's) that fits (in the shelves over the "dining room" stools.) We stored some winter things there for you. Once you're settled, check out a place called the Kitchen. Women there will point you to likely employment and action (such as it is in Iowa City.) I'll write if I can. It's doubtful. We're liable to be overwhelmed with doctoring duties once we move from the lovely beaches of San Juan. Haha.*

*Hugs and kisses, Lisa*

I'd counted on Lisa to be in Iowa City to grease my path, but her last phone call explained cryptically that the opportunity to get into Cuba by way of Puerto Rico happened more quickly than expected. Their plans were made; my plans were made. Sorry. Sorry. So they were warm, and I was cold.

My arms hugged the humming furnace under the stairwell. A bicycle wedged behind it caught my eye. If I survived until spring it'd be my ride. Heat from the furnace did not penetrate my parka. Using as little shelf space as possible—a trick learned as a foster kid—I unpacked.

The light cage moved easily from its center hook to a hook over the bench Lisa had called the dining area. My sketchpads and graphite pencils and a Big Ben clock went there. The empty duffle fit on a shelf along with the money clip that had embarrassed me in public. Ignoring the folded sheets on the single bed, I pulled the parka hood over my head, flared two army blankets over me and lay down. The thumping in my chest would pass. I'd found my prison; now I needed to find my crime.

## Chapter 2

### the Kitchen

The university-owned Victorian on a hill above the Iowa River housed women's activities exclusively. Steps leading to the door had been shoveled and salted. At an alcove just inside the entry, a heavy-set woman in her twenties sat at a desk. A hand-printed index card propped on a pencil cup gave warning: *Max's desk. Don't touch anything*. She looked up from her work and frowned at me.

"I'm new in town," I said. "Lisa Denison told me to check out this place. She and her husband are doctors in town."

"I know who Lisa is. She's in Puerto Rico."

"Smart ass," I muttered inaudibly. "Bet you don't know where she's going." I

didn't wait for permission to look around, simply walked into an adjacent sitting room, a relic of 1960 political hubs. Winter boots lay on the carpet in front of a woman in her thirties who sat with her legs tucked under a long gray skirt. Over a turtleneck, the front of a ribbed cardigan wrapped around her chest hid any curves.

"You have amazing red hair," I said.

Her freckled cheeks showed a pink blush as she lowered the newspaper she held. "I'm Sissy Swenson."

If freckles gave her a naive appearance, her eyes contradicted it. Atlantic Ocean blue. Supposed to be for conventionally pretty girls, not sad-eyed girls.

"San-dre-a," I said, as the eyes pinned me. "Sandrea Soriano. Lisa Hernandez, I mean Lisa Denison, sent me. We went to college together."

"Education is a middle class privilege," Max announced, slouching against pocket doors that divided two living areas. Taller than she appeared behind her desk, Max was shaped like a refrigerator. Her bacon brown hair was uncombed, and her ashy complexion needed a slather of oil to restore its color. Or maybe there was no color to restore; maybe she was gray white.

"College does give you a shot at a decent job," I admitted. Returning to Sissy, I added, "I don't have any job at the moment. What do you do?"

"Are you a trust fund baby?" Max said.

"A what?" When she repeated her question, I breathed deeply. "Don't imagine you know anything about me because of college. Okay?"

"Don't be disagreeable Maxine." Sissy's use of Max's given name sent the big woman to her desk. "I work here," she said to me. "Pregnancy and abortion counseling."

"Doesn't Max scare off those in need?"

"She wards off unwanted visitors. She may have thought you were a man."

"I get that sometimes. Am I dead on arrival because I've been to college?"

Sissy shook her head and a strand of red hair escaped its hairpin. Her voice low, she said, "She's repeating what she's heard in meetings. What brings you to Iowa City?"

"Lisa Hernandez—I keep saying that. I knew Lisa before she married Daniel. She told me interesting women lived here. Women independent of men. Said there'd be enough going on to cheer me up. I've been here a few days." I didn't mention I'd slept most of that time.

"How long were you together?"

Sissy's professional voice disarmed me. She didn't mean how long were *Lisa* and I together.

"My business here is to ask touchy questions," she added.

A cough opened my throat. "Nearly ten years. It blew up three months ago." Sissy folded the newspaper and waited. "I think about Catherine every day." More than enough said. I stood abruptly. "I need to look at the job notices."

Sissy let me be and took up her newspaper. In front of a bulletin board that covered an entire wall, I waited until focus came. Several notices advertised for babysitters, not my forte. Two offered unpaid training in auto mechanics and electrical wiring. I needed a paying job; the money I'd come with would last only a month or two.

After I read every notice on the board twice, Sissy said, "What did you do before you got here?"

Her gentle voice was practiced in getting people to talk about what they feared to say. "I taught art in a junior high school. That's out of the question here."

"So your real job in Iowa City is to dust yourself off emotionally."

Damn her. "I'm here because I'm not afraid of the ridicule that comes with stick-

ing up for women." A lie. I favored women in every imaginable way. That was true. But I feared ridicule.

The front door opened and closed with a slam, and someone entered the sitting room, unzipping a thigh-length, hooded jacket and hanging it on a heavy oak coat stand. Dirty blond hair stood on end from the electricity of her hood. Her cheekbones were pronounced and rosy from the cold; otherwise, her complexion was doughy. Deep set eyes looked afraid to come forward and see what she didn't want to see.

"Have you seen the local paper?" she said to Sissy. "Some principal slapped a seventh grade Black girl."

Sissy straightened. "Trudy, this is San-dre-a."

Trudy ignored me and waved the same newspaper Sissy held. "Look at page six." She plopped on the couch next to Sissy, a few feet from my chair. While Sissy flipped through her newspaper, the aroma of pot smoke permeated Trudy's shirt.

After a moment, Sissy said, "He slapped her for chewing gum?"

"Keep reading. He also made her put the gum in her hair."

I was wrong about Trudy being afraid to see; she saw perfectly.

"Is he white?" I asked, my stomach churning sour.

"Most people in Iowa City are white," Sissy said, looking up. "All principals, almost all teachers."

"Does the article give his name?"

"No, but it mentions the school. One of our women teaches there. We can find out who he is. Why do you ask?"

"Short of sticking gum up both his nostrils . . ." I waved away my irrelevance.

"Go for the gum," Max said from her desk. I liked her better for that, though Sissy and Trudy ignored her. And me.



Sissy spoke over her shoulder toward the alcove. "Max, see if you can get Mercedes and some others to come to a short meeting after work." Turning back to Trudy, she added, "We should act quickly."

Max made telephone calls, and Sissy and Trudy talked in low voices. I searched a side table and found a back issue of *Burned Up* among a stack of books and women's newspapers. Lisa's telephone promotions of Iowa City had mentioned *Burned Up* as a magazine of drawings, poems, stories and articles by women published in town and distributed nationally.

When Max reappeared at the threshold, she said, "Mercedes will leave work at 4:00. Brenda can come. Wendy might be late. If Madge comes she'll have to bring the twins."

"Looks like we'll have a meeting this afternoon," Sissy said to me. "If you want to come, you'll meet more of us."

"Us?"

"The women who keep this building open. We also operate a free medical clinic."

"I'm impressed."

"Don't be impressed yet. Our meetings can last for days."

"Literally," Trudy added, almost without moving her lips or a single facial muscle.

Not wanting to overstay my welcome at the Kitchen, I left then and walked downhill and along the river bank to the university library. Since my arrival, if I wasn't hibernating in Lisa's basement, I went to the library and walked up to the fine arts floor. With an armful of art books stacked around me in a comfortable chair, I soaked in a pool of sunlight, looking at one book after another, stopping after a few hours to draw in my pocket sketchpad. The warmth of the building and the soft chair often made me doze.

I'd been unable to shake myself fully awake in Iowa City, but when it was time to walk back to the Kitchen, the uphill climb and the cold air blew away my malaise.

Max grunted at my arrival; it was more than I expected. Sissy introduced me to others in the front room. Brenda, in her twenties, repeated my name and mispronounced it. The other women did not return my smile, but they weren't friendly to each other, so I didn't take the coolness personally. Max slouched at her spot against the threshold.

Brenda caught my eye and said, "What's your sign?"

"Sign?"

"What month were you born?"

Brenda's cheeks were the color of peach flesh; she was a kid. Maybe a freshman in college. "August second," I said.

"I knew she was a Leo," Brenda announced. "The big head."

The cool ones remained cool. Not even Sissy responded. She slipped into business mode. "While we're waiting for Mercedes," she said, "has everyone read the article about the principal?"

Except for Brenda and Max, we were all in our thirties, early forties tops. One of the cool ones took the newspaper Sissy handed to her and read silently. While we waited, I took a wood pick from the pocket of my cords. By lifting my curls, darker and tighter than most of the women present were used to seeing, I got the racial question out of the way.

The entry door opened and closed. Almost in unison, the group greeted Mercedes. She was not the giant I expected we were waiting for. Not much over five feet, her glossy black hair was straight, thick, and professionally blunt cut to her neck. Her angular body movements held tension; she could stab with an exaggerated gesture. I

wasn't sure I liked her, but at least she didn't add to the number of blonds in the room.

"The boss went home sick," she said to everyone. "So I started sniffing and coughing. Then the other secretary caught on and thought she was catching something."

The cool ones fussed over Mercedes's cleverness. She darted a glance at me, and Sissy said, "This is San-dre-a."

"Hi, Santa. Is everyone here?"

Sissy moved her feet to the carpet, about to give the pronunciation of my name another try, but I signaled her with my hand; I could live with *Santa*. The irony pleased me.

Only Mercedes wore make-up, and she alone was dressed in office clothes. She could call me whatever she liked. Despite the flannel and denim most of the women wore, they charged the air. At least they charged it for me who had been more or less in solitary confinement.

Mercedes led the meeting through assignments for writing protest letters. They'd sent similar letters on other occasions, and they agreed on the content, applying earlier language to the current situation.

"We could put something in *Burned Up*." Trudy's lips and face showed no movement. "But we're not scheduled to print for three weeks," she added. "I don't know."

"Maybe an article could segue from our local situation," Mercedes said, "to general educational about paternalistic racism."

"Whoa!" said a woman seated on one of the two mismatched couches in the room. "We may be over-reacting."

She was a smaller version of Max, and she moved her weight forward when she

spoke. "We need to know if the Black girl did something to provoke the principal."

"She chewed gum, Wendy," Sissy said. "You read the article."

"We don't know how mature she was. Some of these Black girls are full-grown women."

"The principal would've been justified slapping a grown Black woman?" I said, visible now and marked for challenging a member of the home team.

"I'm saying—" Wendy turned her shoulder to me. "These people can be rude and intimidating."

Before I could respond to *these people*, Mercedes said, "That's bullshit."

"I'm expressing how I feel." Wendy's pale lips tightened. "Before we do anything hasty, we need to make sure of the facts. I'm not saying he didn't slap the girl, but we don't know if he had a good reason."

Mercedes glared at her. "Unless the girl hit him first," she said, "what would be a good reason?"

"She could be his daughter or his wife," Wendy said, exasperated for not making her point understood: White male authority figures were entitled to slap uppity Black females of any age. At least Wendy couldn't say it nakedly.

Sissy shook her head; Mercedes rolled her eyes. Desperate, Wendy described two of her experiences of Black women's intimidating actions and attitudes.

"Chewing gum in class always resulted in punishment when I was in school," Brenda said.

"We checked that." Sissy's spoke softly. "Max reached Judy who teaches there. The usual punishment is detention. Plus the hair business was pure spite."

"But there was some reason the principal was involved in the first place," Wendy said. "Maybe she talked back to her teacher. Maybe her teacher sent her to the

principal.”

“Maybe she threatened a race riot,” I mumbled. If anyone recognized my sarcasm, no one acknowledged it.

“We’ve discussed this tactic before.” Sissy tone never strayed from gentle. “Saying the girl intimidated the principal or provoked him is a form of blaming the victim.”

“The incident doesn’t need to be cast in racial terms!”

“You’re casting it in racial terms.” Wendy couldn’t ignore me this time.

Simultaneously, red in the face, Mercedes shouted at Wendy before she could speak again. “Stop talking racist bullshit.”

The back of my neck burned at Mercedes’s tone. From a formidable woman, Wendy shrunk into a silent child. “You sound like bourgeois idiot.”

Mercedes’s attack-anger momentarily paralyzed me and everyone else in the room, as it was probably intended to do. What could I have said after I found my tongue? Wendy was talking racist crap, but something was off about Mercedes’s tone. My Catherine would know what it was. That thought was a cold slap.

No one made eye contact as Sissy reviewed the assignments. Mercedes chain-smoked and said nothing. No one mentioned the racism article for *Burned Up*. I could *draw* about the subject in five or six comic book panels if anyone wanted me to. Joining *Burned Up* could give me a purpose.

Standing, Mercedes crushed a cigarette stub in a full ashtray. A flurry of good-byes accompanied her dressing for outdoors and leaving. When she was gone, people mingled and relaxed into their good-byes.

Sissy came to my chair. “Have we scared you off?”

“Not at all.” I stood as she approached. “I gather nothing but letter writing will come of this meeting.”

"We can't go slap his face," Brenda said, nearby and apparently paying attention to what I said. "You Leo types are so impulsive."

"I'd like to burn down his house!"

"Now that's impulsive." I grinned at Max's excess, and Sissy and I drifted toward her. "Can you find out where this principal lives or what type of car he drives?"

Grimace was her way of smiling. She nodded.

"I'm glad you contributed to the discussion, Sandra."

"I should have kept my mouth shut." My shoulders hunched. "Injustice makes me boil. My name's not *Sandra*, by the way."

"I'm so sorry," she said. "How stupid of me."

"Mercedes called me *Santa*. I think I'll stick with that."

"Like Santa Claus," Max said, squashing the *a* sound.

"No, like *santa*, a saint," I said. Turning from Max to Sissy. "Quite a meeting."

"People have different degrees of awareness on issues," Sissy said. "Try not to judge us harshly."

"I'm not judging you at all."

"Of course you are."

My shrug was a confession. "I see you don't treat each other with kid gloves." The comment did not move Sissy to critique Mercedes's behavior.

"Just like the world beyond the Kitchen," she said.

### Chapter 3

#### Getting Things Done

At the top of the basement landing, my head swirling with impressions of the meeting, I stepped out of my desert boots, into slippers, and walked downstairs. Standing in front of the long bench, I emptied my pockets: a squashed loaf of bread, a wedge of hard cheese, my small sketchpad and two books Sissy had pressed on me. Then I walked to the furnace and hugged it.

Catherine would have criticized Iowa City women because they were carelessly groomed, but Mercedes's authority would not have escaped her. Stop seeing everything as though she were beside me! I filled a pot of water and put it on the two-burner hot plate. When it was as hot as it was going to get, I poured it over one of Lisa's tea bags

and carried the mug to my work area.

Drawing rapidly in the small pad, I sketched the women's faces from the meeting; their attire was generic, only Mercedes and Sissy in skirts. My soft black graphite didn't capture the shine of Mercedes's hair. After drawing faces, I blocked-in the sitting room and positioned figures in the large sketchpad. The only job notice I'd removed from the Kitchen bulletin board lay on the bench top. Factory swing shift, three to midnight. Perfect hours to blunt the lack of social life.

I wrote *Sheller-Globe* in shaded block letters on a large sheet. Under it I doodled work boots and a spindling walking figure cranking past a mile marker: How far away was Sheller-Globe? Next I drew a bus with question marks in the side windows: How could I get there? Then I sketched a cartoonish self-portrait with sweat flying around the brow and cheeks: What type of work would I do? Finally, I drew the face of a clock taking up the lower part of a January calendar: When would I start?

Staring at what I'd drawn didn't answer the questions. I opened the package of hard cheese and chewed a bite. Then I opened the bread and bit into a slice. It turned to dough as it mixed with saliva. I slid off the stool and went to spit it into the toilet. It was the cheapest bread in the store, but it should have been edible.

Before bedtime, I took the books from Sissy and sat in the soft chair to skim them. *The Feminine Mystique* ticked me off on behalf of the women it described, but *Sexual Politics* gave me a jolt of recognition; I wasn't alone.

\* \* \*

Loud knocks woke me early next morning. A voice already inside, called out my name. "Are you down there?"

I bolted from the bed to the stairs. "What the hell are you doing here?" It was Max stuffed into a man's overcoat and a plaid hat with earflaps. "How did you find me?"



Be careful on the stairs. They're treacherous."

Max took me at my word and came down slowly. Only near the bottom step did she pull off her hat and sit down to remove her boots. I pulled the parka over my pajamas to protect against the chill she gave off and stared at her.

"What?" she said.

"How did you find me, and what are you doing here?"

"You said you were staying in Lisa's basement." Max stood and looked around.

"Trust fund accommodations, as you can see. I suppose you want coffee?"

"Unless you have whiskey."

At the bathroom sink, I ran water into the saucepan and put it on the hot plate.

"What if I'd lied to you? You'd have broken into someone else's pad?"

In her winter clothes, Max was huge. "It was you or nobody at Lisa's. I heard you talking to Sissy, so I figured you were telling the truth. Anything to eat?"

Her presumption was irresistible. I gestured to the loaf of bread, near my place setting where she now sat. She didn't want cheese, so I found a jar of grape jelly and a spoon from Lisa's supplies. "Serve yourself," I said. "Doesn't Sissy feed you?"

"I don't live with Sissy."

"So what brings you here uninvited?" I studied her.

"Don't you want to know who slapped Christine Johnson, the Black girl?"

She named the girl, so I showed appreciation by nodding.

"The newspaper got it wrong. He's an assistant principal." She took a piece of paper from the pocket of her flannel shirt and passed it to me. "His name and address."

"Have more bread and jelly." I added grandeur to my voice. "I take it you talked to Judy the teacher?"

"She knew his name." Max talked as she chewed, a child showing off masticated

food. Apparently, the jelly helped the bread slid down her throat; she ate three pieces. "I looked up his address in the phone book."

"Not so dumb as you look." I waved the paper. "Where is this?"

"We can find it as soon as you get dressed. I have Sissy's car."

\* \* \*

Off Muscatine Avenue, Max and I found the side street and the number of the one-story house where Slap Happy, as we now called him, lived. "Shall we burn down his house?" Max said.

"You're kidding, I hope."

"What do you think we should do?"

I gave Max a stern look. "Something short of arson. What model car does he drive? Could the teacher find out?"

"Probably. It happened at one of the smaller elementary schools. How many teachers' cars can there be?"

We drove along the principal's street until Max slowed at the corner and glanced at me. "Drive around the block again. Slowly." I drew the street markers in my sketch pad while the Bug crawled along. When the details satisfied me, I said, "Do we want go for breakfast?" Max immediately accelerated the VW. "Slow down. You'll get us killed."

"Wouldn't that be cool?"

"Yes. But not today."

\* \* \*

We didn't wait long at Hamburg Inn before people vacated a booth in the back of the restaurant. A waitress labored over our orders and finally went off. "I want to check out the neighborhood after dark," I said. "Can you get Sissy's car for a rehearsal run?"

"Tonight?"

"Why wait? Keep the retaliation close to the offense."

"We're not going to burn down the house, are we?"

"No, Max. That was your idea. More like trashing his car."

"Can I see your drawings?"

Surprised by the change of subject, I handed over the sketchpad and watched her flip through the pages.

"Hey, this is me," she said. "You're really good. You should join the magazine collective. They print drawings."

"Maybe I will." Truth be told, I'd counted on joining *Burned Up* although I didn't know quite what a collective was.

Midway through her pancakes, Max said, "I don't have money to pay for this, you know?" She resumed chewing.

"I didn't know. You better stop eating." It took a moment for her to grin.

She finished her three-stack and half of mine. When I paid, I said, "I can't make a habit of this."

"You mean letting me eat your pancakes?"

"You know what I mean."

She shrugged. "I'm going to the Kitchen. You want a lift?"

"No. I'll see you later. Don't forget about the car tonight."

I walked to the basement to shower and change clothes. While my hair dried, I cut a chunk of cheese and folded the disgusting bread around it. Then I wrapped the knot of food into a napkin and put it into the peace-patch-pocket of my parka. A wobbly pacifist. I feared getting my bones broken by pigs, or hard hats who set upon anti-war protesters, or by queer baiters—to name only the tip of my fears. These thoughts walked me from my basement to the Muscatine bus.

On foot in Slap Happy's neighborhood, I counted steps from each corner to the front walk of his house, more or less in the middle of the block. No garage or driveway. We could park Sissy's car in a parallel street and walk in opposite directions, arrive at the car at approximately the same time, and damage it in less than a minute. My rule for damaging property—like throwing rocks through store front windows, where people had ridiculed me—came from my teenage years: no danger or risk should last more than one minute.

## Chapter 4

### Getting Involved

The return trip on the Muscatine bus left me near the public library. I entered it and asked a librarian for a telephone book. She stared at me with fish eyes. Like the waitresses at Hamburg Inn who expected me to speak a foreign language, she heard garble when I opened my mouth. "Telephone book," I repeated, without the original *please*.

The phone directory confirmed Slap Happy's street address. He had no namesakes. A city map placed Sheller-Globe nearly fifteen miles from downtown. Buses ran virtually to the door of the plant, but they stopped completely at 9:00 P.M. I returned the phone directory and left.

No surprise, my steps took me to the Kitchen. Needing to plan each day one hour at a time took the heat out of me.

Max balanced the phone receiver between her ear and shoulder and wrote while she talked. Sissy sat in the front room in the same spot as when I first saw her. This time her long corduroy skirt was dark green. Next to her sat a pale teenager. She was speaking to the girl, so I backed out. Max looked up and signaled with two fingers. While I waited, an adult version of the teenager came from the hall bathroom and sat with Sissy and the girl.

"If you come to the clinic tonight," Sissy said. "You can see a doctor and have a pregnancy test. As soon as we have the results, I'll call you."

"This can't be public," the adult said. The girl blew her nose into a tissue.

"Don't use your real name. If you choose to come back here, we'll have privacy to complete the travel details."

The visitors, who had not taken off their coats, were ready to leave. In thick wool socks, Sissy walked them to the door. When they were gone, she looked at me. "Come inside. Are you getting settled?"

"There's not much to settle." I sat in a beat-up wingback chair. "I could help out here if you need something besides pregnancy counseling."

"Can you paint? Walls."

"Sure."

Sissy turned to Max, slouched in her usual spot. "Santa's willing to paint the small office," she said.

"Hurrah. Come on. I'll show you what needs to be done."

Laughing at the speed of the arrangement, I followed Max through the hall to a sparsely furnished room.

"It's waiting for you." Max opened a closet that held drop cloths, a ladder, brushes, trays, and a five-gallon tub of paint. Then she motioned me into the closet and said, "Slap Happy drives a blue Plymouth dented on the left rear bumper."

"Good work." I backed out of the closet because the odor of Max's saturated sanitary napkin nearly gagged me.

"Can you get Sissy's car for a trial run tonight?"

"Tonight's the free medical clinic." Max wavered. "I need to set up tables and chairs and then break them down afterward."

"What time is clinic over?"

"We stop admitting people at nine, but the docs are still seeing patients until 9:30 or so. I don't usually get out of there until 10:00 or 10:15."

"We could take a drive about 11:30 or midnight," I whispered. "Working people will be in bed by then."

"It's just practice tonight, isn't it?"

I walked Max back to the closet and tried not to inhale. "If you don't want to do it, you don't have to."

"I don't want to get Sissy's car in trouble," Max said.

"I'll go to the clinic tonight. After you take Sissy home, you can pick me up. How does that sound?" Despite my reassuring tone, Max rounded her shoulders. "Come on girl. I'm painting this room for you."

Max hadn't answered when we left the room and met Sissy in the hall. "I thought maybe you'd started already."

"Tomorrow," I said. "I don't want to ruin this sweater. It's Lisa's husband's."

Max returned to her desk. "We have used clothing upstairs," Sissy said. "This way." She led up a narrow staircase.

"Lisa was right about this town. You have the magazine, this building, abortion counseling, a free medical clinic, and you provide secondhand clothes. What don't you do?"

"We'd like to offer childcare for the local community," she said, ignoring the compliment. "And we'd love to get our hands on the UCC job."

At the top of the stairs, she opened a door. We stepped into a room of wall-to-wall clothes, over six feet high toward the inaccessible back of the room. In front, the pile was shoulder height. I pulled on the arm of a heavy gym shirt. "This'll work."

Sissy held a pair of coveralls against my shoulders. "How about these? There was a system of where things went, but it's gone to pot."

We carried the clothes down to the closet and returned to the front room, where Sissy settled in her corner of the couch. At the coat stand, I took the cheese out of my pocket and munched on it while we sat together. "You said something about a job?"

"Not for you, I'm afraid. The University-Community Coordinator," Sissy said. "We order supplies from them. The coordinator is good to us, but she's leaving. The university funds the position with a much fatter budget than we have."

"I follow you."

"Mercedes applied for it," Sissy went on, "but the position is very competitive."

"Is Mercedes Spanish?"

"Both her parents are Canadian. She was born and raised in the United States."

"I thought her name—"

"No. Sorry. She's named for an actress."

"Everyone knows everything about everyone in this town."

"For better or worse." Sissy drew her cardigan around her. "You'll paint the little room? Max has put it off for weeks. I need the privacy."



“Obviously.” My head wagged up and down. “I can also help at tonight’s clinic.”

“How are you managing?”

“I’m okay.” Panicked, I folded the cheese into its napkin and stuffed it into my pocket. “Got to go. See you at the clinic.”

## Chapter 5

### Slap Happy

The basement of the Unitarian Church housed a small auditorium with a proscenium stage. Beside Sissy, only Trudy opened and arranged tables and privacy screens around the room. She directed me to set up folding chairs. In locked storage was an examining table with stirrups. Trudy took our tasks seriously and didn't smile or talk. She never smiled. At 5:40, people formed a line.

Sissy approached me and pressed a clipboard into my hands. "Let Trudy finish the set-up," she said. "You sit at the front table please and sign people in. Just be welcoming and show them where to wait." She gestured to chairs near the entrance. "The doctor will be late, but we're expecting a nurse volunteer and two interns from the med-

ical school. They always come, but they push the clock.”

Distracted by a flurry of people entering the auditorium, Sissy didn't hear me ask where Max was. At my post, early patients signed in; then a throng arrived at 6:00. Wendy, the white race champion, came thirty minutes late, along with two other volunteers. She avoided looking my way.

Everyone was sneezing, sniffing, or coughing. Students used medical services at the university; Sissy's operation served local people. The teenager and her mother whom I'd seen that afternoon were better dressed than most of the others in the building. I pretended I didn't know who they were, but as soon as they signed in, I found Sissy and told her they'd arrived.

Sissy did triage. She'd taken care with her appearance, foregoing her worn charcoal cardigan for a bright turtleneck that matched her carrot hair color. The pace was hectic. When she came to my table at eight o'clock to check on the number of people yet to be seen, I'd been too busy to notice the time. "Where's Max?"

"Migraine," she said and went off to other duties.

By nine-thirty the medical team had seen the last patients, and the volunteers carried tables, chairs, and screens into storage. Sissy sat alone on the steps leading to the stage, finishing her notes for the night.

"I need a favor."

She who felt obliged to do for others looked up at me ready to help. "Max was going to drive me to Sheller-Globe tonight. To check it out if I get a job."

"There's nothing out there but the highway."

"I may figure out a way to get there and back if I check out the distance and the route." I added, "But Max isn't here."

"Oh." Sissy brightened. "You need my car?"

"I know it's a lot to ask."

"Not at all. Drop me off after we finish here. I'll need it in the morning." She returned to her paperwork.

I dust mopped the floor and re-calculated the Slap Happy plan. Max might be unnecessary. I'd soon know more.

\* \* \*

I parked Sissy's light blue Volkswagen one street away from Slap Happy's address and walked in the biting cold around the block. The dented blue Plymouth was in front of the correct address; most houses had lights on. Back in the Bug, I drove off to see about Sheller-Globe, which was in the middle of nowhere as Sissy had said. An unlikely site for employment, but I needed money.

Traffic on the highway was sparse. Near a plant door, I parked beyond the beam of a security light. There, I scooped up a handful of gravel and dirt with my handkerchief, tied it closed and put it on the passenger seat.

On my way back into town, I stopped at an all-night gas station and bought three dollars worth of gas and a can of red spray paint in the attached general store. By then it was nearly 11:30.

Slap Happy's neighborhood was familiar now. My watchman's hat covered my eyebrows. Only one or two house lights glowed; the area near the blue Plymouth was dark; its gas cap was on the street side. I unscrewed it and emptied the dirt from my handkerchief into it. One tire pin came off easily. One stab with my Buck knife to the soft part of the tire felt good. The second tire pin finally unscrewed, and I jabbed the second tire. The rattle of shaking the paint can sounded noisy; I should have primed it off site. On the driver's side, I spray painted *Slap You* across the windows. The passenger side was close to a frozen mound of curb snow blocking access the tires. I walked

away grumbling.

On Sissy's dark street, I parked near her house and left the keys on the floor mat as she'd instructed. Cold air stung my cheeks on the walk back to my place. In the silence of houses secured for the night, I felt serenely alone.

## Chapter 6

### Consequences

Max wasn't at her desk when I arrived at the Kitchen to begin painting. Sissy was in her usual spot. "Thanks again for the use of your car."

She waved. "Thanks for putting gas in the tank."

Back in the painting room, I changed my clothes and shut the door when I heard Max come out of the bathroom. Didn't want to talk to her after she copped out on me. I adjusted the drop cloths, stirred the five-gallon drum of white paint, and cut-in the corners and seams. Rolling the ceiling created a pleasant rhythm that moved the time along.

Mid-morning, Sissy came to the door with a mug of coffee. "Break time," she

said and cleared a spot on the floor to sit. "Already looks brighter in here."

"Very strong coffee. Thanks."

"I figured you'd need a boost after being up so late." The slightest pause and she continued, "I put a big towel in the bathroom for you if you want to shower when you finish," she said. "Did you read the books I loaned you?"

I told her what I thought of the books.

"I'll leave another in your parka. Have you read much political theory?"

"Can't say I have."

"Some theorists advise revolutionaries not to get too far ahead of the people."

She waited. I blinked first; no one could stare longer or harder than Sissy. "If you mean me, I'm no revolutionary."

"But you understand?"

She didn't wait for an answer; instead, she stood and took the empty mug from me. "Want more coffee?"

"No thanks." Getting back to my equipment, I started on the biggest wall. When it and a shorter wall were done, I secured the paint and trim brush and washed up in the bathroom.

Maybe Max and Sissy felt the same as I did about not wanting to talk. They were both in the sitting room when I passed through the alcove for my cheese and apple lunch and hurried back to the paint room. I couldn't finish it all in the afternoon, so after eating and trimming out two windows, I quit for the day. Two or three hours of remaining work would give me something to do the next day. Sissy and Max could hear me showering and could ignore me again when I left if they wanted to.

I dressed in the bathroom and carried my work clothes back to the paint closet. Sissy met me in the hall. "I hope you're not in a hurry to leave," she said. "Some of the

women would like to talk to you.”

Nothing to hurry to. I assumed they wanted to thank me for painting. Wendy, Trudy, Brenda, Mercedes and two cool women from the first meeting sat in the front room.

“We’d like to talk to you about last night,” Wendy said, offering a fake smile.

“I was at the clinic.”

“Afterward.” It was peach-faced Brenda. “Why did you borrow Sissy’s car?”

To her credit, Sissy looked into her lap. “To check out what the hitchhiking possibilities were. I’m applying for a swing-shift job at Sheller-Globe.” Crusty tone, but my hands trembled.

“Max says you two were planning a little rehearsal last night,” Mercedes said.

My eyes shifted from the look of death I gave Max and settled on Mercedes. The tremor moved into my chest. My voice had hardly any air behind it. “Max was going to drive me out to Sheller-Globe, but she had a headache and didn’t go to clinic. That was the rehearsal.”

“Let’s stop this foolishness.” Mercedes lit a cigarette. “We know you and Max were planning some action against the principal who slapped the Black girl.”

“Not me.” I held Mercedes’s eyes, counting on the fact that I’d been alone. She couldn’t know for sure.

She showed impatience with my stare and puffed hard on her cigarette. “We know the principal’s car—”

“He was an assistant principal.”

Glaring at Wendy for interrupting, Mercedes continued, “We know what you did. After he arrived late for school this morning, the dumb shit announced over the PA that his car had been vandalized. The police would be investigating.”



A nervous smile broke through my face. My audible deep breath was an effort to open my lungs, but it must have looked like a sigh of disdain. Everyone could see the *dumb shit* had supplied the necessary connection for students. I couldn't have asked for more.

Mercedes's voice started to shake and rise, but she was simply repeating what had already been said, plus a bit about my action putting students under scrutiny. Her shrieking caught me by surprise. "Who do you think you are? No one gives a flying fuck if you have a broken heart. Find some other town to be heroic in. We do things by consensus here."

I sprang to my feet, but so did Max, standing between Mercedes and me.

"Sit down," Sissy said.

If she was talking to me, I ignored her, and Max did not stop me. All the coats toppled when I yanked off my parka and stomped to the door, slamming it with a loud curse.

I breathed harder than walking exertion merited and paid no attention to the usual landmarks that signaled being halfway or three-quarters or two blocks from my warm furnace. Anger gave me heat to burn. At home I kicked off my shoes and nearly tripped down the faulty step again. Screw Mercedes's glossy black hair.

Unable to zone out with my sketchpad, I curled into bed in a funk and turned over and over. It was Lisa Hernandez's fault for leading me into a nest of wasps; also Catherine's fault for leaving me. I needed a new plan. Being part of the magazine gang or part of anything with these women was out of the question. What a jerk to imagine an ideal version of women making decisions together. Stuck in Iowa City, I didn't know the rules, and I was freezing to death.

## Chapter 7

### Hot Biscuits

Knocking woke me in the morning. I sat on the side of the bed and slipped into my coat as the door opened and my adrenalin surged. "Get the hell out of here, Max," I shouted. But it wasn't her stomping tread on the stairs. It was Sissy. She came down, sat on the last step and took off her boots without saying a word.

"What are you doing here?"

"A peace offering." She took from a military attaché bag a dishtowel and carried it to my placemat. "Breakfast."

"Don't want breakfast."

"Yes you do." She opened the towel to show me two large biscuits that had been

cut and buttered. "They're still hot."

I washed up at the sink, and then sulked next to her at the bench. The biscuits were irresistible. I ate both without saying a word.

"I tried to warn you," she said.

"So?"

"I've come to drive you to the Kitchen. You said you'd paint the office for me."

I frowned, but she knew I'd keep my word. "After your room, I'll hack the building to pieces."

"Come back to bed." Without fanfare, she slipped out of her skirt and socks and in one effort lifted over her head two sweaters. She was curvy and freckled in her undies, not nearly as heavy as her big skirts and multi-layered tops suggested. She sat on my bed and swung her legs under the covers while I gawked at her.

"More biscuits?" I discarded my coat. "If this is supposed to soften me . . ." With my arms around her, a sigh escaped me. "You're the first woman in my bed since my ex. I don't know if I can."

"No strings." She returned my embrace. "Just comfort. Just this morning. What happens, happens."

I never considered refusing. Clumsy at first, experience with Catherine guided me. Sissy's breasts were soft, and soon desire made me confident. We took our time. When she was ready, she guided my hand and let me rock her home. Afterward we lay still for several minutes. I massaged her shoulder and back tenderly. She moved to touch me, but I caught her hand and held her closer, effectively curbing her efforts.

"Pleasing you was what I needed."

"Fucking me was what you needed."

"I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't have let you hurt me."

Her red hair under my chin tickled my nose. She used gardenia-scented shampoo or had sprayed perfume on her hair before she left home. Strange girl. Bold. Natural. We got out of bed and dressed quickly without embarrassment or regret.

In her car, we were silent and at ease. She drove to the Kitchen, parked in front and left the motor running while she unlocked the front door. I went to the cold back office to change into paint clothes.

She came to the door. "I've put on a pot of coffee and turned up the thermostat," she said. "I'm going to get Max. Usually no one comes this early, but if you keep an ear out for the door, I'd appreciate it. You can tell people I'll be back shortly."

"Max?" My lips narrowed.

"She admires you. She's trying to win your friendship. Don't be so hard on her."

\* \* \*

I painted Sissy's room with plenty of delicious images of our lovemaking to distract me from the work. I felt disloyal toward Catherine because of Sissy, but disloyalty made no sense. I'd been disloyal only to my perfect heartache. Odd how a thought could feel like a window opening. Feeling non-existent without Catherine was in my hands, so was acting like a lost soul. Now with that window open, I could bumble along; sleep with whomever; vandalize cars. Nothing was stopping me from making myself over.

Foster-family life had not given me a reliable sense of right and wrong. Catherine had been my moral compass. Would she have stopped me from vandalizing Slap Happy's car? She'd be as angry about the provocation. Would she have urged more thought before action? Immediacy was an advantage, but okay, planning was not the same. Anyway, what kind of judge was Catherine who'd wrecked our life together? There

went the liberating feeling as I fell into the daily blues.

Max came to the door with mid-morning coffee; I hadn't heard anyone come into the building. "Sissy says you take coffee black." She put the mug inside the door, like slipping food to a prisoner.

"Thanks," I said, like nothing had happened between us. Strange town. Strange people.

\* \* \*

I rolled up the drop cloths when I finished painting, washed the equipment, and stored it in the closet. A desk and chair were the only furniture, but Sissy would add some welcoming touches. She and Max knocked and entered. "Looks fabulous," Sissy said. "Would you help Max move a comfortable chair in here? The front room has more than enough seating."

We walked behind Sissy to the meeting room, where she selected a stuffed chair for Max and me to carry back. Then Max emptied a metal file cabinet and moved it from her alcove.

"It still needs some decorations," Max said. We all stood in the new office. "Santa could draw a picture for it?"

Sissy tugged on my shirtsleeve. "Don't even answer. We have a more important favor to ask you. Max, let Santa and I have a private word."

"That's what the room is for."

Sissy gestured me to the armchair. She sat in the swivel chair and rolled it toward the desk, pretending to settle into her new digs. "There are five people who will interview and select someone for the UCC job I told you about," she said. "Currently, the committee consists of two women and two men. They need a community member to complete the committee, preferably, someone without university affiliation and without

obvious ties to the clinic or to the Kitchen. You could be on the committee as a Sheller-Globe employee."

"I was thinking of going out there this afternoon," I said. "Since I don't have any reason to come back here." Sissy didn't bite.

"The UCC meetings can be arranged for morning hours," she continued. "The current coordinator will accommodate your work hours if I ask her. If you're hired at the factory that will seal your appointment."

"And you want me to hand this plum job to Mercedes?" Sissy never hinted at her opinion of Mercedes's drill sergeant methods; her focus never strayed from what needed to be done. the Kitchen programs and its allies came first.

"It will do her good to be in your debt," she conceded.

"She won't notice."

"She'll notice. I'll tell her if need be. But she'll figure it out. You'll be interviewing candidates, don't forget."

No satisfaction in that news. I didn't want to see Mercedes ever again.

"So can I tell the UCC coordinator that you want to be on the hiring committee?"

My shoulders moved. "Are you and Mercedes good cop bad cop?"

Sissy shook off the question. "I appreciate your work in the office. The girls and women who come to talk to me will be more at ease. So you've done . . . another community service." She paused again, before adding, "Max tells me you're an artist. If you want to make a drawing for us, I'd love to hang it in there."

More shrugging. "I'll head over to Hamburg Inn for lunch. Do I need to dress to go to Sheller-Globe?"

"No. Be prepared for them to hire you on the spot and start you immediately. They have constant turnover."

I followed Sissy to the front room. At the coat stand, I grumbled, "Go ahead and sign me up for the committee. You can leave a note on the basement door if I need to know anything."

Sissy turned from me to the reception desk. "Max."

Max looked up and grimaced. "See you. Thanks for painting."

I waved and closed the door on the Kitchen and its doings.

\* \* \*

Sissy's information about Sheller-Globe was accurate. I completed a one-page application, handed it in and the woman who took it asked if I could start the swing shift in an hour. I had nothing else to do, but I told her I couldn't start immediately because I had to arrange transportation. We agreed on the next day, and I took the bus back into town.

By the time it arrived in downtown Iowa City, large snowflakes were powdering old snow already mounded against the curbs. A new life was beginning: I'd slept with someone; landed a job simply by turning up and being able-bodied; and made a few enemies.

At home, I wrote a note giving my work details, carried it back upstairs and taped it to the entry door. I could talk to Sissy; her body was comforting. She was the one who said no strings. Buttered biscuits would not be a regular event, but she would contact me or send Max.

## Chapter 8

### Sheller-Globe

I walked directly to the Burlington Street stop after eating my main meal of the day. The bus dropped me near the barbwire fences surrounding Sheller-Globe then looped back into Iowa City. People who lined up in the parking lot moved through the plant door to the time clock. Following the first day instructions, I clocked in and went to the Human Resources office. A supervisor led five new hires to the foul-smelling interior of the plant. Another woman and I were assigned to the first station we came to, where three women worked on each side of a narrow conveyor belt.

Speaking to no one in particular, the supervisor said, "Show them what to do." Then he moved off with the others.



My parka fit under the conveyor belt on a shelf where other coats were balled up. The belt fed out shaggy armrests shaped like telephone receivers. What to do consisted of trimming them with an Exacto knife and packing the pieces into a box that rolled its way to quality control. That was it. In other parts of the country, they'd be attached to car doors. The machinery was so loud no one on the line talked.

At the first break, the woman who was assigned with me took her coat, left the floor, and didn't return. If I walked off the job, I could catch a bus into town before they stopped running. However, something punishing about the ugliness suited me. If others could stand the tedium, the noise and the stench, so could I.

There was no escape during breaks. An area roped off from the cavernous work space housed five tables, two ashtrays to a table. Vending machines lined a wall. The absence of a refrigerator reminded me I'd want a cold drink come summer. So I planned to stick around until summer. Not stick around Iowa City or Sheller-Globe. The big stick around.

Lunch break came. I was sick of cheese before I got the job and had planned to eat at the factory cafeteria that didn't exist. But I already had a headache and felt nauseous, so I didn't use the vending machines. I'd sworn off peanut butter, a staple in foster care, but it didn't need to be refrigerated, so maybe I'd buy a jar and hope it wouldn't gag me. What difference did one gagging sensation or another make?

During lunch break, I bummed a cigarette and noticed only women working the conveyor lines. Behind them, only men fabricated and trimmed bigger dashboard and console molds. Some men loaded pallets on forklifts to dangerous heights. A two-story glassed-in office in the middle of the place resembled a guard tower. Supervisors hung out there when they weren't walking the floors. The domed warehouse and the teetering stacks of boxed products or raw materials loomed over everyone.

Stupefied at 11:00 when I clocked out, I raised my voice and said, "Can anyone drive me into Iowa City or thereabouts?"

A man in coveralls two places behind me on the clock-out line spoke. "I can drop you before I cross the river." He put his time card in its alphabetical slot. "What you need to do in the future," he said, as we walked together, "is get out to the highway before the cars start leaving the parking lot. Someone might pick you up."

His car smelled of tobacco, but after we both lit up, it didn't matter. As we moved bumper-to-bumper out of the parking lot, the driver pointed out where I should stand to hitchhike. "Don't count on anyone picking you up," he said. "You in their car makes the time they're in that hell hole feel longer. Everyone wants to leave it behind as fast as possible."

"I get it."

Neither of us spoke again until Benton Street when he pulled to a curb. I thanked him and left his car with its noisy but effective heater. I was somewhere south of the university campus. Only a few cars passed on the streets. No one on foot. Businesses were closed.

Walking in below zero temperature actually squeezed some of the bad factory air out of my lungs and cleared my head. After midnight, I reached the basement door and took a postcard out of the mailbox next to it. The note I'd taped to the door was gone. A sheet of unsigned loose-leaf paper was stuffed into one of my slippers on the landing.

I took the steps carefully, removed only the hood of my parka and hugged the furnace. Eventually, I took a handful of Cheerios from an open box and gulped them down. Then I put on water for tea. The loose-leaf note told me where and when the UCC meeting would be. I'd have three days to get used to Sheller-Globe. After the weekend, there'd be three or four morning meetings to select a new coordinator.

The post card from Lisa gushed about how she and Daniel hated to leave the beaches in Puerto Rico. I assumed the gushing was tourist-speak to disguise that they'd left for Cuba; I wondered how they'd fare on Fidel's turf. They risked their lives and careers on an international stage. By comparison, I trashed cars in Small Town, Iowa and didn't know how to sneak into Cuba if I'd wanted to go. Even revolutionary choices were class bound. Catherine had taught me that word, but I knew all about what it meant. At least, the swing shift at Sheller-Globe meant less time to fill each day—a marginal blessing that. I drank hot tea, rubbed down the bed to take the chill out of the sheets, left my clothes in a pile on the stuffed chair and got under the covers.

\* \* \*

I slept late the following morning and put off using the bathroom as long as possible. Back in bed, I took a library book of Goya etchings from under my pile of clothes and flipped through it. Holding the book outside the blankets chilled my fingers. When I had enough of Goya's grim social commentary, I got up and puttered around in my parka. Sketching efforts failed. By the time I walked over to Hamburg Inn to eat a hot meal before catching the bus, my personal time was gone.

A vise sensation in my chest squeezed into my face during the ride to work. Waiting to clock-in, I saw the squinty eyes and tight lips on everyone else. I'd noticed sour faces the day before, and mistakenly assumed they were a regional characteristic.

At break time a woman about my age approached a table I occupied alone. "Today's my first day," she said, above the din. "Do you mind if I join you?" I smiled. She sat and opened a wrapped sandwich. "I'm Rebecca. Aren't you eating?"

"This place takes my appetite away." I introduced myself, settling on the saintly title I'd become. "This is my second day," I added. "Which line do you work on?"

She turned toward the conveyor belts, but we found ourselves staring into the

scowling face of a rugged-looking man, his beard cut back unevenly to qualify him to work around the machines. He stood about fifteen yards from us. I looked away and checked my watch to be sure he wasn't glaring at me because I'd taken too long at lunch. "Looks like a supervisor," I said.

Rebecca dropped her sandwich onto its wrapping and folded it. "The supervisors wear short-sleeve white shirts," she said. "One of the girls on the line told me."

"No one told me anything." But looking back at the man, I noticed one of the white shirts gesturing the rugged figure away from his vantage point.

"Don't stare at him," Rebecca said. "He's my ex. Our divorce was final three-months ago. Only he hasn't quite accepted it. Fortunately, our break times are different. I have to be civil to him because his parents look after our kids."

"How many kids do you have?"

"A four-year old girl and a two-year old boy. You?"

I shook my head and considered asking her if she was driving into town at the end of the shift; however, her scowling ex was reason enough to keep my distance. Without her realizing it, Rebecca could be a danger to me.

After shift that night, employees leaving the parking lot ignored me. Traffic was thin on the highway, but the third car that pulled off the road about twenty yards beyond me. When it started backing up, I jogged to meet it. Because I appeared to be a man with my thumb out in the middle of the night, drivers stopped to be helpful, not to mess with a woman. Still, I had rules for hitchhiking: no excessive smell of alcohol on the driver and no exposed penises.

The driver left me on Burlington Street, a short walk to my basement door. No one had left a note or a lifeline on the landing. Downstairs I hugged the furnace for a few minutes then put on water for tea and spooned jelly on two pieces of expensive

bread. After I ate and carried my placemat to the sink to shake out the crumbs, I replaced it on the bench and turned to my sketchpad.

Rebecca's face came easily: big doggy-sad brown eyes, rounded cheeks, an aquiline nose. One of my hard graphite pencils gave the feathered effect of her light brown ponytail. Drawing the ex-husband was all a matter of gristle and menacing eyes though I hadn't been close enough to see his eyes.

In the morning I considered going to the Kitchen in search of additional work pants, but the idea was only an excuse to have a destination. I'd go on Saturday when I wasn't working and really needed a place to land. I had one more day of the week to get through. After two weeks, the UCC committee would be disbanded, and I could quit the plant or opt for another two weeks of work. After 30-days on the job, I'd get a ten-cent-an-hour raise. Big deal. After 45-days, I could apply for any job that came open. Always aiming for the top of the heap—and heap it was—I knew there was no way I'd ever make the glass tower in the middle of bedlam.

\* \* \*

The time in the basement passed quickly while the time at Sheller-Globe passed slowly. Each afternoon as the bus neared the plant, my legs muscles wobbled like jelly. After I clocked in, I walked sluggishly to my workstation. Rebecca waved as she walked to her station. Knowing that she'd sit with me at break helped the first two hours of the shift tick along.

Sure enough at break, Rebecca and I arrived at the same time and picked a table together. "I have news," she said, as we both lit cigarettes. I carried my own pack of Camels now. "My ex-husband moved to graveyard shift." Shouting was unavoidable. "He needs the pay differential to make his truck payments. I have the clunker for as long as it lasts. But at least it's paid for."

Women at other tables in the area seemed to be talking together, but after Rebecca's news and my questions about how that would affect her, she and I sat without straining our voices. We both smoked two cigarettes each in the ten-minute break. I seldom smoked at home; at work it was something to look forward to. I'd never before noticed the living and dying moments of a clock.

Come lunch break, Rebecca beat me to a table, so I joined her this time. Her bologna sandwich was cut in triangles; she'd already eaten one triangle and made quick work of the others. I ate two bites of a caramel-covered nut candy bar from the vending machine then shook the remaining portion into its wrapper. When we lit up, she said, "You know all about me, but I know nothing about you."

"I moved to Iowa City a few weeks ago," I said, speaking under the noise level.

"And?"

If we wanted to be friends, Rebecca and I were obliged to talk over the noise, but that meant using abbreviated thoughts. Like speaking any unfamiliar foreign language, limited vocabularies made for limited substance.

"I needed distance from my ex," I said.

"Did he leave you? Did you run away from him?"

Answering the questions would be too complicated to shout, but unwilling to fudge the pronouns, I added, "Girlfriend."

Rebecca's voice wasn't audible, but I saw the shape of *Oh* form on her lips.

The twenty-minute lunch break was now over. Pity the women who wanted to eat *and* use the rest room. That day limited time worked in my favor. Rebecca could take *Oh* back to her workstation without having to respond.

The next break could be a problem. In fact, it was effortless. I took a table and waited to see if she'd join me or avoid me. She came over; we lit up, and she took from

her pants' pocket a plastic file of photos.

"These are my children," she said, opening the pack. "This is Robert, my two-year old."

There were several shots of the boy, including a formal one with the happy parents. I studied the face of Rebecca's ex, so he couldn't surprise me. Rebecca turned the plastic folder around to show me the four-year-old.

"This is Becky." The photos of the little girl also included a formal one with both parents. In this one the ex was clean-shaven and looked much younger. Hard drinking appeared to ravish her old man.

That night I caught a ride from a co-worker coming out of the parking lot. Never had a chance to put up my thumb. He said he'd noticed me leaving the day before and asked if I wanted to stop for a drink in town. His suggestion bothered me. If he had noticed me, asking about a nightcap showed he didn't pay attention.

"I've got a warm welcome waiting for me at home," I said. Sure. My big, hot furnace. A better response than getting bent out of shape and losing the ride. He accepted my excuse.

The prospect of a weekend without work cheered me. In the basement, my jelly sandwich tasted better, and I drew a good likeness of Rebecca showing me photos. The jumble shaded in behind her was not representational: Barbed wire effects, interlocking angles, and short strokes with my B8 pencil. A few comic strip conventions showed the noise and odors.

Early the next morning after a long hot shower, I bundled up and left for Hamburg Inn, the only place open at 6:00 AM. An inch or two of fresh snow covered everything. I made foxtrot footprints for a short dance, and then packed and tossed a few snowballs at a tree trunk. Catherine's likeness appeared in the snow. I stopped and ex-

haled like I'd been holding my breath. I hadn't thought about her at all the previous day. If I could go one day without her, I could string together two days and then more. She was a dull ache in my chest, nothing specific anymore. Until the snow image, I'd banished her golden brown face, her teasing smile, her long wavy hair. Oh shit. She was back again.



## Chapter 9

### Naked in Winter

Hamburg Inn patrons filled the counter and a few booths on Saturday morning. As a regular, I received coffee immediately and no longer needed to repeat myself when I ordered. After feasting on pancakes and eggs, I walked downhill to the university library, where I passed a few hours drawing and looking at art books.

Late-morning, I walked to the Kitchen. Sissy sat at Max's desk, beamed when she saw me, and blushed. "How was your first week in hell?" she asked.

"Lovely employment opportunity. If it's okay, I'll rummage upstairs for some work clothes. The air at Sheller-Globe corrodes my skin and whatever I'm wearing."

"Go ahead. Max is up there now. Take whatever you need."

"I found the note about the UCC meeting on Monday. Is there anything I need to know?"

Sissy's blush deepened; she fussed with a pencil cup, and shook her carrot-colored curls.

I went into the hall and up the stairs and met Max coming down with an armful of clothes. She grimaced when she saw me. The staircase smelled like her and so did the rummage room.

After an hour of pulling black and navy pieces from the packed hill of clothing and trying them on or holding items against me, I settled on a pair of lined jeans, a pair of heavy corduroys and three turtleneck sweaters.

Downstairs, Max was at her desk in the alcove; Sissy was there with her and took the clothes from my arms and found a paper sack to fold them into.

"Two women from the magazine are having a dance party tonight," she said. "You have to come."

"I don't know anyone besides you and Max. And I don't want to dance with her."

"I don't want to dance with you either."

"You've met people at meetings here," Sissy coaxed. "The woman you don't know on the UCC committee will be at the party. I want to introduce you." Sissy handed me a note card with the address. "Could be weeks before there's another social event."

"I'll go back upstairs." I pocketed the directions. "Passed up a pair of tweed slacks I couldn't justify taking, but now there'll be an occasion."

"Do as you wish, but the party will be casual."

For a New York party, Catherine and I dressed.

\* \* \*

Wearing the tweeds scored that morning, I arrived with two bags of potato chips and a six-pack of beer at one of the town's ubiquitous Victorians. Couples danced close together; Catherine danced far from me now. I snapped free of that thought when two *naked* women passed by. Slow dancing hid their fronts, but the music wouldn't be ballads all night. Other flesh danced by.

Bare breasts the color of milk came close to me. "I'm Katie," she said. "You okay with nudity?"

"So long as you're okay with clothes." Not as casual as I'd hoped.

"We met before at the Kitchen. You're the newcomer who's living at Lisa's."

"Santa." I offered my hand. Beads of sweat formed over my lip as I shook the hand of the arm attached to the naked body.

No one in New York danced naked at a party. Maybe my New York friends were provincial; maybe nudity was Iowa City's form of women's liberation. "Where's the food go?"

"This way."

A glance at her quivering backside, then my eyes focused on her shoulders. In the kitchen, Sissy had her clothed back to me while she talked to Katie's partner, Jan. Jan wore a badly knotted necktie and a man's vest over a shirt and jeans. She leaned against the sink, speaking intently. Katie joined them.

I parked my chips and beer on a table. From the hip pocket of the tweeds, I removed a small flask, dug out of my travel duffel. Maybe two pulls left from my cross-country trip. The quick sip heated my chest, and the naked bodies didn't disconcert me.

Sissy turned to Katie, saw me, and the serious expression on her face faded. She stretched out her hand to me. When I was within arms' reach, she kissed me, long

enough for Katie and Jan to notice.

A moment of awkwardness until Katie said, "Come on, sweetie. Let's dance." Jan followed her naked partner into the parlor where the dancers were.

"Sorry I kissed you like that," Sissy said when we were alone. "Jan had me trapped."

"My pleasure."

Sissy exhaled emphatically. "We just finished cleaning up. Max smashed a beer bottle in Katie and Jan's bathroom. Then she stepped on the glass and bled all over. And she pulled down the shower curtain and shower rod in the process."

"Tell me Max was not naked."

"Only barefoot. It was a fiasco." Framed by the kitchen door, Katie and Jan danced together and talked.

"Is she still here?"

"One of her housemates is a nurse. She drove Max to the ER to have her foot stitched up."

"Are you two together? I get conflicting messages."

Sissy's face changed from annoyance to concern. "I'm the closest thing Max has to a friend. After she broke the beer bottle, she wanted me to take her home. I said I wouldn't. Stepping on the glass and wrecking the bathroom was a tantrum."

"But you're cleaning up after her. Socially, I mean."

"I assured Jan that someone will pay to repair the plaster and paint in the bathroom."

"Wouldn't that be Max?"

"She doesn't earn any real money. The working adults where she lives provide her room and board and a tiny stipend. Max minds their four kids. Everyone is happy

with the arrangement.”

“Max, too?”

“Especially Max. She’s a natural with children. I’m glad you came tonight. It’s been a crummy party so far with her acting like a jackass.”

“The rules in this town baffle me.” I offered a mildly flirtatious smile. “Katie approached me almost immediately. I was afraid she wanted to dance, all *naked* with me.”

“I don’t understand either,” Sissy said. “Especially in the middle of winter, but I pick my battles.”

I opened two cans of beer with the triangular end of a church key that was on the table and handed one to Sissy.

Brenda of the peach complexion entered the kitchen and placed a tray of yellow cheese squares and a ring of crackers between my six-pack and a bowl of popcorn.

“You remember Santa,” Sissy said to her. “She’s the community rep on the UCC committee. Let me find Jenny. Then I want to have some fun.”

“I’m the student rep,” Brenda said, leaning into me. She was tipsy, but fortunately clothed. “You’re the Leo.”

“I know you’re not majoring in horoscopes. What’s your field of study?”

“Political science. I’m a sophomore.” She tossed her blond hair, her head tilting from side to side. If she was flirting, it was my new girl status. No one in Iowa City had seen me with Catherine; her presence or lack of it weighed on me, but as far as others were concerned I was single.

Sissy returned to the kitchen with another clothed woman and introduced her as the staff representative for the UCC committee. The volume on the tape deck blasted “Joy to the World.”

“While you and Jenny talk,” Sissy said, “I want to dance to this. Come on Bren-

da." She handed the beer can to Jenny. "Help yourself."

"Save me a dance," I called after Sissy.

"Sure." She pulled Brenda away from Jenny and me.

"I'll save you a dance too," Brenda said, looking back.

"That leaves us to plot and scheme," Jenny said. Her brown hair was pulled off her face in a ballerina bun. The severity showed off her perfectly proportioned features. The sweater she wore scooped low in front, and her bra created a bit of cleavage. After an unavoidable look, my eyes trained on her face while we talked.

Her carriage impressed me. "I'm not supposed to ask about work or education, but it beats asking about your sign. What do you do at the university?"

Rolling her eyes to show agreement with me over Brenda's horoscope obsession, Jenny said, "Bookkeeping in the Athletics Department."

"Women who work at the university prefer something more attractive than bib overalls and flannel shirts I see."

"You prefer something more feminine?" She was teasing.

"I wear rags to Sheller-Globe where I work, but as an observer, yes." As she sized me up, I added, "The style in Iowa City seems to be overalls or nudity. Only rarely do I see make-up and jewelry adding joy to the world."

"I need to get back to my girlfriend," Jenny said. "Let me fill you in about the meeting on Monday. I'm the second committee member from Athletics. Physical Education is sending a Teaching Assistant as the faculty rep. They also have the ear of the rep from administration who will be there. A former jock or sports fanatic, but low on the ladder. He has a lot to gain from supporting Phys. Ed."

"Like what?"

"Like season tickets on the fifty-yard line. Worth a fortune in this state. He'll

support the team mascot if that's who the TA favors for the job."

"Isn't that small potatoes for them?" Any question to hear more of Jenny's sexy voice.

"Yes, but it's a dotted line from the Athletics Department and a way to buy trinkets for athletes outside of their own budgets and regulatory supervision."

One sip remained in my flask. I chased it with a swallow of beer. Jenny sipped from the can Sissy had left with her.

"How do I use this information?"

"Sissy said you could get our person in."

My stomach flipped. The confidence in me or the flattery, if that's what it was, tickled me. "Anything else to be aware of?"

"Don't act like you know me. The men will expect me to be on their side. You need to work around that."

A few moments of silence sealed our conversation. Jenny left the kitchen. I followed as far as the door to see whom she joined. Damn it! Someone taller than I and twenty pounds heavier. No bullshit farm bib overalls or nudity for her. Black slacks, white shirt, and vest. In size alone she out-classed me. The only thing I approved of was her complexion, a few shades darker than mine. They moved out of my sight line, so I slinked back to the kitchen.

Double damn! She was the first woman I'd met in Iowa City who could compare with Catherine: sexy, smart, shrewd. Sissy was also smart and attractive, but she was a kindly earth mother. I liked high femmes. Just as well there was a girlfriend.

## Chapter 10

### Working the System

One of the buildings on Dodge Street housed a suite of offices for the University Community Coordinator. A few minutes before ten, I walked past a vacant reception desk, knocked on an open door where someone was working and introduced myself.

"I'm Beth Connors, the coordinator," a middle-aged woman said. "If you'll have a seat next door, I'll get us started as soon as everyone is here. There's coffee on the credenza."

Two men were already in an adjoining conference room; both offered overdone smiles when I said I was the community appointee. They knew a token when they saw one. A suit and tie identified the administrator. The square-jawed Teaching Assistant



looked like he could model ties; he wore an off-white cable knit sweater.

"I want your sweater," I said, shaking his hand.

"My grandmother made it for me."

"Lucky you. They cost a fortune. You teach Phys. Ed?"

"Freshmen classes. But my sport is baseball."

"Infield, I bet."

"Third."

"You look like an athlete, too." I fake-smiled at the administrator, who looked soft around the middle like a desk jockey.

"I played basketball in high school." He tilted his head to show he knew it wasn't much. "I wasn't big enough for college."

I squashed my impression that they were both likable. "I love sports," I said. "Played stickball with the boys until they outgrew me. Do you fellows know what the drill is for this meeting?"

Before they could answer, Brenda and Jenny entered the room, followed by Beth Connors who sat next to me and placed a stack of folders between us. Beth led us through another round of introductions.

"HR sent over these criteria to help us evaluate the candidates," she said, dealing copies of the criteria to each of us. "The top five applicants usually interview, but you may decide to interview only three or four people. It's up to you. Do you have any questions?"

"Will you be rating candidates too?" the TA asked.

"No. Once I turn over the applications, the routine is all yours. HR's review is pro forma. You'll want to select a committee member to keep track of the ratings and so forth. HR will need that scoring sheet."

"I don't mind doing the secretarial duties." I pushed the pile in front of me. No one objected to my initiative. Jenny must have noticed how smoothly I'd appointed myself guardian of the process.

The coordinator left us and a discussion began about the criteria. After the men exhausted the topic, Jenny raised her hand. Like me, she acted deferential. "As you say, gentlemen, the task is simple: ten elements to evaluate on a one-to-five scale."

Almost imperceptibly, she included me in a glance that rotated from one man to the other. "A form that scores up simple averages should give us the top candidates."

"Do we want to begin reading now?" the administrator asked. "Let me think how we should handle the folders."

The same questions troubled me as I counted the folders into five stacks.

"Where's the Mackenzie file?" the TA asked.

My heart jolted. This was round one. "Let's look." I pushed a stack toward each of the committee members. Everyone shuffled the folders.

"Here it is," Brenda said.

"I just wanted to see, he's highly qualified," the TA said. "I know his brother."

"The files aren't very thick," the administrator said. "We should be able to do two or three batches today and the remainder tomorrow. We can conference about our results on Wednesday and interview on Thursday or Friday."

"A fabulous idea," I gushed. "I guess we'll keep our own lists of the candidates and the ratings we give them?" I stood and went to the credenza. "More coffee anyone?"

Before the men could answer, I topped off the their cups and my own. Jenny and Brenda declined. I wanted more time; the process was moving too quickly.

"It makes sense to keep our own scores until we read all of the files," the admin-

istrator asserted. "Then we need to pool the results."

"Good point." Jenny's gushing was more dignified, but I had more suspicion to overcome.

Brenda must have noticed Jenny and me being two-faced, but she remained silent. Good sense I hoped and not simply a case of a deer caught in headlights. In Beth's office, I requested paper and pencils for the committee.

Re-entering the conference room, I said, "I can only work until twelve. Sorry. My shift starts in the afternoon." I moved around the paper and pencils.

"Stopping at lunch time works for me," the TA said. "I've got a class at 1:00."

We were ready to begin reading. "I won't accomplish much unless I go to the restroom," I said, catching Jenny's eye on my way out.

In the rest room, I checked to see all the stalls were empty. "Way to go," I said to Jenny, when she and Brenda came in less than a minute later.

"The men took a bathroom break too," Jenny said. "It was a gift."

"What?"

Neither Jenny nor I answered Brenda's question. I put my back against the door. "We need to agree on a plan." I turned to Jenny and rubbed the phony smiles out of my cheeks. "It's not enough to give high ratings to Mercedes. We need to give low, rock bottom ratings to the best of the male candidates." The solution came with a vitalizing flash.

"Is that fair?" Brenda said. "Mercedes is qualified. She should get the job on her own merits."

"Sure she's qualified, but if we don't control the averages, she might not get the job she's qualified for."

"I don't think it's right," Brenda said. "I've never done this before."

"Me neither," I continued speaking rapidly, "But I've never had the power to make a hiring decision before. You understand discrimination against women. What's the problem? Do you want Mercedes to get the job or not?"

"Yes, but only if she's the best candidate."

"We can't afford to be high minded. The men won't be. They want Mackenzie."

"Who's Mackenzie?" Brenda's peach colored cheeks turned coral.

"Let's assume Mercedes *is* the best candidate," Jenny intervened.

"We don't know that until we read all the folders."

"Damn it, Brenda. Stop being a petulant child. We want to assure Mercedes or some other woman gets a job she deserves. How many qualified women do you suppose have been passed over by men with power to make hiring decisions?"

Jenny's stare warned me to curb my tone.

"Unfairness against women happens every day," I whispered, but my whisper sounded like hissing, not moderation.

"It just seems wrong."

"Usually the wrong is against us." I turned to Jenny.

"For this morning," Jenny said, touching Brenda's arm, "read and rank only the women's files. We'll talk later. Santa, go back now, so we all don't march in together."

As I left, I heard Jenny say, "No one wants you to do anything you don't want to do."

Leave that to me. The thought banged through my head. I was born to do what nobody wanted to do.

Back at the conference table, the men had already disordered the stacks. Saved me a task. I hoped the administrator and TA wanted to read the men's folders first. If they did, the charting and scoring would be easier for me to manipulate. If Brenda co-

operated, fudging the tally sheet wouldn't be necessary.

When Brenda and Jenny returned, my cheeks were sore from smiling again. The men hadn't begun reading, but as soon as the women were seated, the TA swept a small pile of folders toward him and the administrator, and both chose their first applications from it. I slid the closest folder toward me. The order didn't matter. No woman would score less than three on any element. No man would score more than two. Even so, I read slowly. On one hand, I couldn't count on Brenda, and on the other hand, racing to a decision would arouse suspicion.

At 12:15, the TA called attention to the time; he had read four folders. The rest of us had read three each. "Can take batches home," he said.

I went to ask Beth, but her office was empty. "Looks like she went to lunch. It doesn't seem smart to leave the folders out where anyone could see them."

Moments later the administrator decided that we take the folders home. He and the TA picked up the files they wanted and said good-bye. I scooped up the nearest stack, grabbed my jacket, and walked out with them. We talked more sports as we waited for the elevator, but when it came I excused myself for another rest stop.

I returned to the conference room, where Brenda was sniffing into tissues, and Jenny sat next to her whispering.

"Is there some other way?" I opened both of my hands and plopped into a chair.

"I don't know," Jenny said. "This is what we have."

"Should we read folders now? I actually have a couple more hours before I get ready for work. Brenda?" She sniffled loudly. "I'm sorry I jacked you up in the bathroom. We didn't have much time."

"I don't think I can stay on the committee."

*No barking.* I took Brenda's hand in both of mine. She was surprised, but didn't

pull away. Jenny sat back. "Talk to me about what troubles you."

"I can't do it." Her blond hair shook from side to side, but since her failure of nerve, she wasn't so cute.

"In the first place, you can't leave the committee." As an after thought, I added, "We need you." Out came another tissue; being needed moved her. "In the second place, why don't you and Jenny go talk to Sissy."

"Good idea," Jenny said.

"You can tell *only* Sissy about our plan."

"Stop badgering her," Jenny said. "She'll come to her own conclusions. Your eyes are all red, sweetie. Go wash your face while I give Santa a piece of my mind."

Brenda found satisfaction in that and left without speaking to me. When she was out of earshot, Jenny said, "What a mess."

"Will you and Sissy be able to salvage her?"

"We have to. I don't like failing."

"Me neither." I slipped on my coat. "How long have you been with your girlfriend?"

Jenny shrugged her shoulder away from my effort to help with her coat. "Concentrate on the job we need to do. Don't you know trouble when you see it?"

"Yes I do. I generally run toward it."

Jenny twirled her finger and pointed at the door. I grinned and did as instructed.

## Chapter 11

### Women's Work

The glow of Jenny's devilish finger twirling lasted only until I boarded the bus for work. The closer the bus got to Sheller-Globe, the gloomier I became. Brenda made me moody. Cajoling men was a strategic necessity; it felt lousy. But cajoling another woman, one who *talked* like she knew the world beyond Barbie Doll attitudes infuriated me. Brenda wanted to be taken care of, if not by men then by the university, by god, by women.

The bus stopped near the barbed wire. I stomped through the entrance of the plant to the time clock. Soon the air thickened with buzzing lathes, other squealing machinery, and stench. Scrunching my face to breathe gave me a headache and dulled the

first two hours on the job.

Rebecca sat with me at break time, a bruise on her face not quite concealed by make-up. "I know you didn't cut yourself shaving," I said.

"It's nothing. I need to find a cheap, reliable sitter for the kids."

"Would your ex-husband kick in money?" I shouted.

"He likes that his parents watch the kids." She shouted back. "It gives him an excuse not to pay child support."

"Does he think the kids don't eat when they're with you?"

Rebecca's eyes filled with tears. My sarcasm seemed to hurt her feelings, like she was responsible for the jerk. "He wants us to get together again as a family." Some pride filled her voice, like she was flattered by her old man's desire. I wasn't expected to understand. She blew her nose gingerly; it too was bruised.

"Sorry. You have enough on your mind without me butting in."

We stopped shouting and concentrated on smoking. We didn't say much at lunch or during the final break either.

At the end of the shift, I walked to my hitchhiking spot on the highway. I stamped my feet and hugged myself between passing cars. Curling up on the side of the road and quietly freezing to death appealed to me. After twenty minutes, a pick-up truck stopped. The driver offered me a toke on his weed. To be polite, I took a light hit, and we chatted pleasantly. He wouldn't hear of dropping me off in downtown Iowa City, but drove me to my door.

I took a scalding shower, sipped tea at the workbench, and sketched Jenny's face. Drawing her without a mischievous smirk challenged me, but I captured her profile—severe and commanding—and I included her hand, gesturing with a pencil. Wide-eyed, bouncy hair, formerly cute Brenda sketched easily. Rebecca's face also sketched well. I



eliminated the bruises on her face, but then with a hard graphite pencil, I shaded near her nose and cheekbone, where a punch or powerful slap would have landed.

I didn't draw as long as usual because the busy day had tired me, and maybe the weed mellowed me. Worries about Brenda screwing up the UCC job faded. Teamwork with Jenny exhilarated me; my exchange with her replayed—sometimes her hair loosening; some times not.

Next morning I thumbed the sketchpad to the earliest drawings of the Kitchen women. Jenny hadn't been in the meetings. Just checking. In the big sketchpad, I doodled a group of faces for Sissy's office wall.

Restless. It was too early for the Kitchen unless I went to breakfast first and ate again before catching the bus to work. The first week's wages were due. Then, I'd be paid every two weeks. I could afford to eat twice a day. Good timing since my stomach growled for food lately. Maybe I'd even open a can of soup for supper after my shift.

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Max was at her desk; we grumped at each other. "Did Jenny and Brenda come here yesterday after I left?" I hung my jacket and warmed my hands under my armpits.

"They said you were mean," Max claimed.

"Jenny said that?"

"No. Brenda."

The front room was empty. "Is Sissy coming in this morning?"

"She's with someone." Max gestured with her head toward the back room.

"They've been in there a while. They can't be much longer. You can wait for her."

"What do you do here all day?"

Max grimaced at the attention. "I read the women's newspapers we get. I help Sissy. I help her a lot. I dust and vacuum the place. If there's heavy work to do like mov-

ing the furniture, I do it.”

“You watch out for her. That’s good.”

Max’s face brightened. “Did you make any more pictures?”

“Pictures? You mean in my sketchbook?”

“I like how you draw.”

“Do you want to see my latest drawings?”

“Yeah.”

I put the sketchpad on her desk and stood behind her. We looked at the drawings until Sissy and her visitor came out. When the visitor left, Max said to Sissy, “Did you ever see this picture of your face?”

Sissy came to stand next to me, squeezing my arm briefly. “Let’s see.” She turned the thick pages and stopped at the drawing that included Sheller-Globe in the background. “That place is vile. Are you going to stay there?”

“For a while. Not much other work in town. Max said Jenny and Brenda came here yesterday.”

Sissy’s eyes signaled to say no more in front of Max. “Want to see my office? I’ve finished decorating it.” She led through the hall.

“Can I draw in your book?” Max asked.

I went back to the desk and took the sketchbook. “No offense, but these little pads are very expensive.” Max might scribble on all the empty pages or destroy the drawings I’d done. “Practice on typing paper first.”

“Typing paper doesn’t feel the same as this,” Max said, rubbing the tooth.

“The paper is what makes drawing pads so expensive,” I said. “You’re getting the bug, eh? Draw on typing paper for a while, and I’ll look when Sissy and I finish.”

“I’m not a child,” she said.

"Max, you've got to be a child to draw well." I'd been patronizing. How to deal with Max's destructive impulses baffled me. Her freak out at the nude party was still in my mind.

Sissy's door was open. A yellow throw pillow on the guest chair, yellow paper flowers in a vase on her desk, and two impressionist posters tacked directly into the wall brightened the room. An empty wood frame hung opposite her desk. "Hint. Hint," she said when I noticed. She exhaled loudly. "I heard Brenda's having pangs of conscience."

"You hear everything?"

"You'd be surprised."

"No, I wouldn't."

"I'm here all the time, like an information clearing house." She motioned me to sit. "Jenny called me after the two of them left."

"Ah." I relaxed in the stuffed chair.

Sissy saw through me. "No, no," she gestured.

"You too with the finger signals?"

Flawlessly, Sissy mimicked Jenny's finger twirling and pointed to the door.

"Close your mouth. You'll catch flies," she said. "I've seen her do it before. Your problems start when that nail-polished finger beckons you."

Max flung open the door. "Someone wants to see you."

"You need to knock before you open a closed door," Sissy said. "Ask her to wait a few minutes. I'll be right out."

Disappointed, Max left us and closed the door.

"Don't be such a heavy," Sissy said. "You might cost us the UCC job."

"Me! Brenda's the one who balked." Sissy let me stew. "Did you fix it with her?"

"For the moment. Even after Jenny and I explained how the numbers worked, Miss Co-ed said she couldn't bring herself to be unfair to capable men."

The hint of disdain was unlike Sissy. I waited for her to continue.

"I feel responsible because I suggested Brenda. We didn't have much choice. Most college girls avoid this place. People call them names. Anyway, we agreed to a compromise. Jenny will rate all the men's files, hers and Brenda's. So you and Jenny will control the bottom end of the scale."

"This is all so Brenda won't soil her hands?"

Sissy twisted her lips showed that the compromise was unavoidable. "It's actually better for us if Jenny rates the men twice. But the longer this goes on," she emphasized, "the more vulnerable Brenda is. And so are we. Plus, you've got to protect Jenny. She has to work with those men when this is over."

"I know." Carelessly, I added, "I'll throw my body over hers at the first sign of danger."

"You're hopeless." Sissy stood. "Anything else?"

"What's the status of the childcare project? A friend at work needs to get her kids away from her in-laws in order to shake loose from her ex-husband."

"Are the in-laws harming the children?"

"I don't get that impression, but the arrangement keeps my friend too close to her ex."

"Max is the only childcare we have, but she does it only for her collective. I better go see who's here. Is there any urgency with your friend?"

"No. I was just doing a little triage of my own."

Sissy led us to the front room where she greeted a woman in her thirties who sat up as soon as Sissy entered. "Shall we go into my office?"

The woman looked relieved to leave the exposed front room. A few minutes remained before the UCC meeting, so I dropped into my favorite chair and picked up a newspaper that came out of Washington, DC. Max hung in the doorway between the entry and the front room waiting for me to talk to her.

“Aren’t you going to look at my drawings?” she said.

“Did you do a drawing?”

“Not yet. I thought you were going to help me.”

“I didn’t say that, Max. If you do a drawing on your own, I’ll look at it. Go draw.” Less coddling than Sissy gave might help Max develop adult relations.

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Wednesday morning at the UCC office, I unrolled five large sheets of newsprint. At home, I’d written the candidate’s names and corresponding ratings for the ten criteria. “If we walk around the table,” I said, dealing the newsprint sheets around, “we could enter our scores and then tally the numbers together. Does that seem fair?” After the session was over, the inane smiling would stop.

The bustle of bodies around the table effectively disguised who was recording which scores. It was an advantage I’d not foreseen. After we entered the scores, I folded the sheets, so the names were not visible, and we calculated averages. Then we walked around crosschecking for accuracy. Brenda had no qualms about doing the arithmetic: the façade of fairness after the dirty work was done.

“What’s next?” the administrator said.

“How many candidates do we have with scores of three or above?” I mumbled. Didn’t want Jenny to be guilty of reeling in the deal.

We separated out the qualifying folders. Three averaged four points; the remaining scores were three-point-five or lower. “If we’re willing to interview three

candidates," I said, "we already have them." I moved the folders with the lower scores into a pile, but they were still not buried.

The TA's brow creased as he fanned the top scoring files. "I don't see how this is possible. We need to do a recount."

"We did the numbers together," the administrator said. Stupidly, so I didn't need to say it.

"We could re-calculate at the criteria level," Jenny said, halfheartedly. "That would take another meeting and push the decision into next week." No one responded. Jenny looked at the TA, her brow furrowed in sympathetic concern, and she gave her professional opinion. "It's doubtful we'd come up with different scores."

Everyone was silent for a few moments. If contention erupted, Brenda might crack. Waiting silently challenged me. After a twenty count, I pushed the rejected folders into a pile. "Should these go to Beth?" Now was the time for consensus.

"It doesn't matter," the TA said, frowning.

I carried the discarded applications into Beth's office while the other committee members stared at the folders on the table: one of the three belonged to Mercedes.

I put the pile on the credenza, and Beth said, "Finished?"

"No, no. But we don't need these. We've picked our top three."

Inside, we *were* finished. We needed to go through the motions of interviewing. If Sissy wanted Mercedes, I'd vote for her. It didn't matter to me. My goal now was to act indifferent to whatever happened and to be invisible at the table.

## Chapter 12

### Mercedes Eats Cake

One night in February, a fresh snowfall greeted me after work. My ride left me in town. When he drove off, not another human was in sight. Stars filled the sky and crisp air filled my lungs. In the stillness, I forgave the universe all my petty complaints and wanted to die right then in solitary peace.

At home I found a note from Sissy stuffed into one of my slippers at the top of the stairs. A party to celebrate Mercedes's new job was scheduled for Saturday night at the church where the free medical clinic operated. Sissy urged me to be there. The organizers had selected a Saturday night rather than Friday so I could attend.

Winters in Iowa City were too long for me to turn down being around women,

even if they weren't friendly. Jenny would be at the party. She might not talk to me, but I could look at her. I could volunteer for security, always a necessary task at women's gatherings to deal with the unexpected. The police occasionally turned up at clinics, but when they walked in on dances, where there was drinking, the children needed to be spirited away. Volunteering for security also meant I didn't need to be sociable.

\* \* \*

Basketball hoops in the all-purpose auditorium held strands of crepe paper and balloons; congratulatory signs adorned the walls. By my count, twenty-seven women and nine children filled the church basement. Women danced to music from a tape deck, or they huddled at tables, or ate pieces of sheet cake. Katie and Jan sat with stone-faced Trudy, like they were her official guardians. Mercedes worked the room hugging people and sitting to chat at each table. She stayed at Jenny's table for ten minutes or more. Jenny's bear of a woman sat next to her with an arm over the back of Jenny's chair. I paid no attention.

Standing with me on security detail, Max rocked from foot to foot, ignoring the rhythm of the music. "How come you don't wash?" I asked.

"I wash my face and hands all the time." She hung her head.

"Other parts of you need washing." Jenny leaned into her woman. "I'm not saying this to hurt your feelings."

"Other people tell me."

"So why do you still smell bad?"

Mercedes left Jenny's table and went to Brenda's table. She kissed Brenda on the cheek and sat with her and a small party of college-age women. She couldn't know how much trouble Brenda had been.

I faced Max. "No one wants to be near us because you stink."



"It's not because of me," she said. "They don't like you."

"Touché."

"They're afraid of you."

"Afraid? I haven't heard that for years. Don't change the subject. You need to take a bath."

"I don't like to take off my clothes or *look*," she said.

I didn't ask why Max would feel that way. "What I do," I improvised, "is keep on my undershirt when I shower."

After a moment, Max said, "Isn't the undershirt all wet and see through?"

"Ummm. Yes, but I close my eyes while I towel off."

Max continued swaying on her feet. The conversation was over until she said, "You're full of it."

By then Mercedes was moving toward us. "Peanut is having a tantrum," Mercedes said to Max. "Her mother left her here. She won't talk to anyone but you. Would you mind? She's sitting under the table in the corner."

"I see her." Max walked toward the crying child.

I moved toward the cake and punch table, sweating under my arms, waiting for Mercedes to come abreast of me.

"The cake is tasty, isn't it?" She said when we reach the refreshments. She lit a cigarette.

"I haven't had any yet." We were side-by-side.

"Me neither, actually." She slipped one hand into the back pocket of her slacks and pulled the cigarette off her lips. "Sissy tells me you're an artist."

"Not an artist. I like to draw."

"Charcoal? Ink? Pencils?"

"Soft and hard graphite lately. What about you?"

"Not me. I'm just curious."

"I taught art to seventh and eighth graders before I left New York to come here."

"Cushy job?"

"Art was cushy because I love it, but I taught in a rough neighborhood of Brooklyn. Shirley Chisholm's district."

"She's amazing, isn't she," Mercedes said. "I'm from Kansas City. Great spare ribs. Good jazz."

"You like jazz?"

"I play piano, though I haven't played seriously in years."

"No kidding." I smiled without meaning to. "Sometimes it's hard to believe people here have a life or ever had a life outside the Kitchen. I know *one* woman at Sheller-Globe. Otherwise, everyone I've met is connected to whatever action comes out of the Kitchen or the clinic or the magazine."

"Pretty soon we'll have a childcare center up."

"This woman I just mentioned could really use childcare. How will you staff everything?"

"That's the problem," she said, smoke from her exhale flowing into her nostrils. "We're stretched thin as it is, but women turn up from all over the country. Like you did. We're so close to Interstate 80, even if people stay only a few weeks, word about what we do spreads. Then others come."

We stared at the remains of sheet cake with most of Mercedes's name intact. We each picked up a paper plate of cake and a fork.

"Glad you could come tonight." She slipped her cigarette between her lips and carried her plate to the table where the magazine clique sat.

Not so bad. Smooth actually. I respected the way she made the rounds of those she felt indebted to without compromising her dignity. Plus, someone in the women's crowd had interests outside of politics, liked jazz and ribs.

"Dance?" Sissy said at my side.

I put the cake plate on the table away from the uneaten pieces and followed Sissy to a space away from the other dancing couples.

"I'm on security. Is dancing okay?"

"You can see everything from here."

A ballad played, and Sissy opened her arms for me to lead. She was my height, about five six, so we danced cheek to cheek.

"I don't see the kids?" I said.

"Max has them in the playroom. The pastor lets us use it, so long as we clean up everything for Sunday services."

"How come the church is so accommodating?"

"They have a strong presence in leftist politics," Sissy said. "I did war protests and rallies with some of the ministers before I moved exclusively to women's issues. That's how I met your friend Lisa and her husband. Mercedes is still active with the local left."

"That explains why politics at the Kitchen seems to be of one mind. Your mind and Mercedes's mind." Sissy and I danced quietly for several measures.

"You weren't part of any political movement in New York?"

"No. Except for marching against the war."

She snuggled close to me. "Don't let it go to your head, but Jenny told me how you handled yourself at the UCC meetings."

"She and I read each other without much being said. She was very smooth."

"She said the men were suspicious finally but didn't say anything outright."

"Probably didn't want to admit they got conned." Sissy's hair smelled of White Rain shampoo.

"I noticed you survived Mercedes's thanks."

"She didn't thank me. I'm relieved it's done. Brenda had me on edge. You and Jenny worked wonders with her."

"She had qualms."

"We all had qualms. I assume Jenny did. Wouldn't it be grand to take the high road whenever we have a chance to exercise power? We could show men how impartiality works and convert them to it by our virtue."

"You've made your point."

"Politics is dirty, period." Snappish like a dog though she hadn't challenged me. "Brenda choked at the sleazy part." I buried my nose near Sissy's ear and felt stupid.

We maintained our dancing position for a few moments after the ballad ended. "Sorry I spouted off. Tell me something about yourself that has nothing to do with politics."

"I could bring over biscuits again some morning. I don't like to come unannounced. Who knows what you're up to?"

Lights in the auditorium flickered on and off. I stiffened, but Sissy waved off my alarm. "Just the signal that we need to clean up. The party will continue at Mercedes's house. Will you come?"

"Are you serious?"

"Just asking."

"We spoke civilly. That's enough for one night."

Sissy moved off to help with breaking down the room. I joined Max at the lip of

the stage where the kids' coats were stacked. She had marched the children there, and we both helped the littlest ones dress.

"Should I check the playroom?"

"No," Max said. "Who put all the games away in the playroom?"

"We did," the children shouted in unison.

"Who pushed all the chairs up to the tables?"

"We did!"

If we had needed to get out of the building in a hurry, the kids would have followed Max without question. Knowing that relieved any worries I'd had about the children's safety in Max's care.

## Chapter 13

### Sissy's Story

Home after midnight, I recognized Sissy's boots on the landing. Too tired to be enthusiastic, I yanked off my boots and went downstairs in the dark. Wrapped in her coat, Sissy was asleep on top of my bed. She woke when I bumped into the furnace for my nightly hug.

"I hope you don't mind that I came in," she said, sitting up and switching on the light. "It was too cold to wait in my car." Anticipating my routine, she went to the hot plate and turned on the burner under my saucepan of water. The ease between us unsettled me.

"Mercedes asked me to give this to you." She pushed a paper sack along the

bench toward me.

I lifted out a tray of twelve drawing pencils, a basic color wheel. In addition, tissue paper protected three earth colored pencils and five neutrals.

“Holy shit. She must have asked somebody what would make a complete set.” At the bottom of the bag was a sketchpad, 140 pounds paper, thick enough for water colors.

“This stuff costs a fortune.” I sat on a stool and fondled the neutral pencils.

“She used the UCC budget.”

I hugged Sissy and kissed all over her face. “This is the best gift I’ve ever received.”

“Now you need to make a drawing for my office, so we can justify the purchase as office supplies.”

“Amazing. Look at this silver pencil. The color appears in many of the blue eyes I’ve been looking into lately.” I kissed Sissy again.

“I’m only the delivery girl.”

“Remember what happened the last time you came bearing gifts.”

She blushed. “You were my first, you know?” She talked through my frozen expression. “Not my first sex, obviously, but my first woman.”

“I’m flabbergasted.” I moved the pencils aside.

“I see that. Lots of us new to the women’s movement say we’re gay before we have sex with a woman. It’s sort of a badge of honor.”

“Not the way I remember realizing I was gay.” I sipped tea and waited. “So, were you married?”

“For six years.” She fingered the wood grain on the bench. “Before I had a chance to be a divorcée, I became a widow. Bill, my husband, went hiking in Colorado, where

his family is from. He never came back. His body was found in the spring thaw.”

“That must have knocked you for a loop.”

“He didn’t intend to come back.” The tears in Sissy’s eyes didn’t spill out. “He left a note.”

I abandoned the tea and stood between her legs while she sat on a stool. I put my arms around her. “You blame yourself?”

“He blamed me. So did his parents. I had to leave his funeral. His mother was hysterical. At the beginning, everyone thought we were a dream team. We went to political rallies, protested the war, attended all-night strategy meetings. Politics was our religion. We were true believers. Inseparable. The bright spot in the insane world.

“I don’t know when I started losing patience with him and other men who made fun of women’s *lib*. Birth control and abortion are life and death issues for me. I am my body. I decide if and when to use it for baby making.”

I stopping rocking her and took a step back; she needed more room to breathe, but I kept my hands on her long skirt draped over each thigh.

“The year I filed for divorce, Bill and I bickered every day. A group of us invited a woman from San Francisco to come here and show us how to do a menstrual extraction. Bill wanted to see the demonstration being done on a real woman. I told him he had no business there. Enraged, he called the meeting ‘pussy politics.’”

“Was it his first experience as a white boy being excluded from anything?”

Sissy’s vigorous nodding showed how traumatic it was for him. “That and the first experience of me standing up to him. What a strange bit of female business for him to want to see.”

“How do you do menstrual extraction?”

“With a very thin cannula inserted in the os.” She shook her head. “I didn’t know



what or where the os was either. It's an opening in the cervical nub you can sometimes feel deep inside the vagina. As you rotate the cannula, the lining of the womb gives way, just like when you have a period. The process takes a few minutes."

"Would it work for shortening my period?"

"Yes, but you can't do it on yourself. Anyway, it's only a step above wire hangers." Sissy found a tissue in her skirt pocket and blew her nose.

"I don't want us to stop talking," I said. "But I'm exhausted. Crashing after work always hits me suddenly. Let's get under the covers. You warm up the bed while I take a quick shower."

The shower always ran hot, but I cut short my usual soak. In pajamas I slipped into the single bed and hugged Sissy for warmth. "I'm not ready to turn off the light," she said.

I pulled the covers over our heads to build heat with our breath.

"When Bill recognized that ridicule wouldn't bring me around—it was so out of character for the man I married to be unkind—he proposed I seek help."

"Did you strangle him?"

"No. But when I refused, he proposed *he* go to a counselor."

"Amazing."

"Especially for a hard line leftist. Personal solutions are a no-no. If he'd recognized our problems as systemic, we might have had a chance. But that's exactly what he couldn't do."

"Did you nibble on his admission that he might be the crazy one?"

"It didn't matter who was crazy. I wasn't going back to being compliant. He forced himself on me one night. The next morning, I was at a lawyer's office. He begged me to forgive him. To stay with him. For the first time in my life, I chose my needs over

his. I paid for that decision with his life.”

We were silent until I moved the covers so we could breathe the chill air.

“I get it. You held up the sky over his head. You can’t blame yourself for his death.”

“Rationally, I know.” Sissy moved her head to my chest. “We could turn out the light now. I’m so sorry I bent your ear. It’s not why I came over. Bill went on his last hike about this time of year. Authorities found his body in April.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Two years this spring.”

She stopped talking then, and eventually gave herself to rhythmic breathing. When she was asleep, I worked my arm out from under her and flipped off the light. Over-tired, sleep eluded me. Some version of Bill’s lethal hike—at least whether or not to take it—was on my agenda before the year was over. But Catherine didn’t deserve the trick bag Bill had put Sissy in. One person shouldn’t have that much importance in another’s life. If I survived the first year without Catherine, no one would ever be that important to me again.

## Chapter 14

### Blizzard Conditions

Two days later, the sound of the basement door opening woke me. Someone puffed taking off snow boots; then, Sissy padded downstairs in thick wool socks. She spread her coat on the three bottom steps and pulled off a hat that covered her head and most of her face. She saw me watching from the bed.

“Blizzard conditions,” she said. “Nine inches with drifts over two feet.

“Not a surprise. It was snowing and blowing last night when I came home. What are you doing out?”

“It’s not snowing now. I knew you would be oblivious until you left for work, so I walked over to tell you.”

"All the way from Church Street?"

She shrugged. "The main roads will be clear by this afternoon, but everything will freeze over tonight. You shouldn't go to work. It'll be too dangerous when you come home." Sissy hugged the furnace for a minute or two before climbing into bed with me, her clothes still on. "We can walk over to Hamburg Inn later if you want to call Sheller-Globe. Otherwise, I'm not letting you out."

"What makes you think Hamburg Inn will be open?"

"Seriously? Police, fire department, postal service, hospital, Hamburg Inn. They'll be open."

She snuggled against me. Even through her granny skirt and charcoal sweater, she felt good. "Don't you think visiting me in a blizzard is a bit much?"

"Yes. That's why you have to put me at ease and make me feel welcome."

Despite how good Sissy felt, I wanted to sulk alone about needing two rides to get home after work. My spirit was frozen.

"When I came over the first time," she said, "what we did. It was like falling off a log."

After Sissy was silent longer than I could stand, I said, "If you want to do it again, you have to bring biscuits."

She threw off the blankets and went to her coat. "I'm sure they were cold by the time I got here. Now they'll be bricks." Out came the kitchen towel with two biscuits. "Do you have any honey or jelly to bring them to life?"

From bed to bathroom to putting my parka on over my pajamas, I sat next to her at the bench and squeezed a packet of Hamburg Inn honey onto a biscuit. Even cold, it was delicious. I started on the second one.

"You didn't show me everything the first time," Sissy said.

I stopped chewing and must have looked ridiculous with my cheeks stuffed with food. "Everything?"

"If I'm going to be gay, I need to learn how to please a woman. I don't know if I'll be any good at . . ." she rolled her eyes at the hole she was digging. ". . . You know, the part on top, but I could be good at other things."

No more biscuit was going down.

"Bill was a bit slapdash when he kissed me there. I'd like to know what it feels like when it's done right." Sissy's face was bright red. "And I'd like you to show me how to do it to please someone else."

Without actually blushing like Sissy, my face and neck were on fire. "You want to practice on me."

"I think that's everything." She put her head on the bench and covered it with her hands and arms. "Oh, my god."

Thoughts flashed and clashed: Incredulity, injury, hilarity, indignation, but Sissy was an angel. I couldn't be mad at her, so I rationalized. She was developing her technique to serve others in the future. Her boldness and humility should have encouraged me to tell the truth about not wanting to be her girlfriend.

Did I have any business doing what she asked of me since I wasn't moved by desire? What did kindness require? Catherine would understand the nuances. She'd know what was right or wrong. It wouldn't be a hardship to make love; I wasn't averse.

I reached for Sissy's hand. "Come back to bed."

"Your eyes look so sad. Did I offend you? I wouldn't hurt your feelings for the world."

One advantage of returning to bed was that I didn't need to explain anything.

## Chapter 15

### Rebecca Blooming

I told Rebecca about Bill Swenson and his inability to live without Sissy. I didn't tell her how hard it was to live without Catherine. Bill Swenson was dead; I was alive. Lucky, lucky me.

Rebecca's sympathy for Sissy and for Bill comforted me. When we changed the subject, she surprised me by asking about the celebration for Mercedes I'd mentioned the previous week. "Children were at the dance with their mothers?"

"The older kids dance or run around. They don't care who's together. It's just dancing to them. We have use of a playroom for the little ones."

"I'm surprised adults and children are together."

"It's a necessity for single mothers. There's a Valentine Dance next weekend if

you and the kids want to go. I'll volunteer for security detail, so I can watch out for you."

"But I'm not—"

"—lots of straight women attend just to dance in a safe place. Not everyone is gay."

I'd seen *Oh* on her lips before. "How much does it cost?"

"It's free. You'll meet women who'll be involved in the day care project once it gets off the ground."

"I'll think about it. Can I let you know Friday?"

We stood simultaneously and crushed our cigarettes. I didn't want to date Rebecca, but I did want to rescue her from her limited life even though I knew it was none of my business.

\* \* \*

The following day Rebecca wasn't at first break. She turned up at lunch and joined me at a table I occupied alone. "I came in late." She lit a cigarette as soon as she sat. "Doctor's appointment."

"You should have stayed home. No offense, but you look lousy."

"I can't afford to take time off. They can fire you just for being late while you're on probation."

Maybe her ex had been beating on her although she looked more flu-sick than battered. "Did you get antibiotics?"

Her tears erupted with a sharp sob. I feared the worst without knowing what the worst might be. "What is it?"

"I'm pregnant."

My heart jumped. How in hell did she get pregnant?

"I don't know what to do."

Finally, my voice came. "Do you want to have another baby?"

"I'm Catholic," she wailed. "What difference does it make if I want another?"

Women at a neighboring table stared at us, startled by Rebecca's cry. Our postures were too intimate. Girl-talk in other cases, but not if I was one of the girls. I backed away a few inches. Rebecca didn't notice that she was damned by association.

"I get terrible morning sickness," she said. "All day long. I can't afford time off. I can't afford another baby. I'm not even married anymore." She was crying hard.

Presumably, her ex was the father. Whether or not he'd forced her, intimidated her, or conned her, didn't matter. Pregnant was pregnant. I almost told her I knew people who could help, but that wasn't true. She couldn't afford to go to New York even if she was willing to take that step.

Rebecca missed work for more than a week, so I figured she'd quit or gotten fired for absences. Knowing only her first name meant I couldn't even check the time card rack to see if she still had a card. I never saw her again.

\* \* \*

Plenty of practice sitting alone among straight women—I could handle that—but I stewed about Rebecca's situation and the years of mandatory child rearing she faced. One night of deadening repetition on the floor, I stabbed an armrest and snapped off the blade of my trimming tool. The tension was electric; everyone on the line waited a beat to see if I would stab anything else. They gave me a bit more room to work but showed no other reaction. Stabbing or slashing the product couldn't have been a rare occurrence. I wasn't even embarrassed. Simply took another tool and continued as before. A wonder that women on the line didn't run amok more often.

During the last break one night, I spotted Rebecca's ex staring at me. Since no



supervisor curbed his idleness, I guessed he was still on graveyard shift, but had come on the floor early. As previously, his expression was menacing. Near closing time, he stood near my work area, closer than he'd been at break time, staring again. Rebecca might have told him I was gay. It had happened before, without the woman realizing the danger to her or to me.

I slammed down a resin armrest and walked off the line toward him. The trim knife remained in my hand. "When is Rebecca coming back to work?" Impulsive barking. Stupid, but with the entire swing shift around us, I wasn't afraid. He turned and walked away. Relieved actually that he'd moved off for reasons of his own—I was nothing to be afraid of—I returned to the line.

My stupid impulse meant I had to be extra cautious every night leaving work.

## Chapter 16

### Until Death

Late in February, I trudged over packed snow to Hamburg Inn. Waiting for counter space, I sat in the window seat and picked up a discarded local newspaper. A photograph I'd seen before iced my checks. Below the photo, I read:

*Iowa City Police are investigating a murder suicide at The Stand-By convenience store on Highway 6 between Iowa City and West Branch. Police say Robert Breton, age 36, shot his wife Rebecca, age 34, once in the forehead before turning the gun on himself.*

*The estranged couple argued when Rebecca Breton*

*arrived at The Stand-By to take the couple's two children home. The children, aged 4 and 2, were in the care of their grandparents who own the convenience store. The Bretons worked nights at Sheller-Globe. The couple's two children witnessed the shootings. They are now in the custody of Child Protective Services. Police say they could be released into the care of their grandparents this week.*

There was more to the article, much more—Iowa City had relatively few major crimes to report—but I stopped reading. After a few moments, the numbness in my face faded, and I re-read the first two paragraphs. Again, I could read no further.

I left Hamburg Inn and wasn't aware of walking home until I arrived. In the basement, I burrowed deep under the bed covers. An hour later, I forced my feet to the floor, heated soup and tried to read before leaving for my bus. I went to work in a stupor each afternoon for the next two weeks. Spoke to no one except whoever picked me up on the highway. The house key Lisa had left worked on the entry door, so I used it.

Sissy left a couple of notes in my mailbox, but they went unanswered. The locked door business might have lasted longer than ten days, but I forgot the key one night and had to use a plastic card to let myself in. Abandoning the key coincided with getting up one morning ready to eat a big breakfast at Hamburg Inn.

\* \* \*

Sissy was in the front room, her boots on the carpet, her legs tucked under her. The hurt in her eyes when she saw me squeezed my heart. I sat on the couch next to her, after a cursory wave at Max who came to the threshold. Sissy cried softly, but only slightly resisted when my arms wrapped around her. Max backed out of the room.

"I didn't panic and run from you," I whispered at Sissy's damp cheek. "Some-

thing happened. Let me show you."

I stood and flipped through women's newspapers on a low table. Plenty of national papers, but no local ones. Then I saw the article pinned to the bulletin board. I unpinned it and returned to the couch.

"This is the woman I mentioned who needed childcare. I worked with her."

Sissy gasped.

"She was the only friend I had at work. Friend is too strong. Her old man was always watching her and me. Who knows what he thought. He was weird."

"Obviously." Sissy looked at the article. "When this first happened, I thought of you at Sheller-Globe. I didn't realize you knew her."

"I wanted to be a hero and direct her to free childcare. Too late now."

Sissy took my hand. "You should have let me comfort you."

"I didn't need comfort. The news knocked me for a loop. I neglected you while you were dealing with your husband's death anniversary. Very sorry about that."

"You don't owe me anything."

"I owe you consideration. Our connection is stronger than the one I had with Rebecca. But like I said, the news knocked me out. I've been sitting in my basement for two weeks feeling sorry for myself."

"I *was* bummed out," Sissy said. "I'm glad my last visit didn't annoy you."

That was a different matter, no need to bring it up just then.

"Have you unlocked your door?"

"Yes. Come over soon." Why I said what I didn't intend to say and didn't want to say baffled me.

\* \* \*

Days later at the Kitchen, Sissy left her spot in the front room to greet me before I

hung my parka. "We have a building for childcare." Her smile was larger than her face.

"How did you manage a building?"

"It belongs to the university. It's been sitting idle. UCC claimed it for a community project."

"You girls don't fool around."

"If you still have qualms about Mercedes and UCC, this should put your mind at ease."

"No qualms, and she won me over with the colored pencils."

"You owe me a picture for my office to justify that."

"Does anyone really care about that expense?"

"Probably not, but the departments Mercedes beat out for the idle building are unhappy. People will be watching her. We've got to get childcare underway fast to make it impossible for her rivals to throw needy children out. Are you interested?"

"In what? No way I'm babysitting."

"Maybe you can volunteer while we recruit others." Sissy's enthusiasm touched me.

"Listen to me." I took her hand. "Being gay has to have some perks. Not for one second did I ever want to have or to take care of children. I wanted to teach college, but I couldn't afford a PhD. The deck is stacked against us doing anything but care taking. Women should stay away from jobs related to kids or nursing."

Sissy squeezed my hand. "That's as long as I've heard you talk in one breath. Many single women like children. I do."

"Many don't, but we're considered unnatural if we say so. There's more to being a woman than bearing and rearing kids." I leaned back on the couch. "No babysitting for me. I'm sorry I'm grumpy."

"What's bothering you?"

"I'm in the dumps."

"Your friend's murder?"

"Something besides that. I can't put my finger on it. I hate Nixon. I'm against the war. I read all the women's newspapers that come into this place. I've always known women got a bad deal. What these papers are talking about is not new to me, but they know nothing about being gay. It's not a political choice."

"It was for me," Sissy said, "and people like me are writing the newspapers."

The twinkle in Sissy's eyes disarmed me. "My point is they don't know jack shit about gay women who pre-date the movement."

"I know what your point is."

"Then why are you making me say it?"

Sissy's face turned serious. "Because you're less a danger to yourself and to others if you let your anger out."

"That touchy feely crap operates like an arm of the military-industrial complex."

Sissy blinked. I'd never said *military-industrial complex* before though I'd heard it and read it many times. I was losing my way.

"I went to see *Cabaret* last Sunday." I changed the subject. "Hustling the system, like Joel Grey did in the movie, that makes sense for a low-life like me."

"Low-life is too strong, don't you think? You have a college education." Her penetrating eyes did their work. "Maybe we *should* keep you away from the children." She was teasing but also cooling me off.

My hands started upward, but flopped back on my lap. "No more Mr. Nice Guy from me."

"I have more good news for you then. Looks like a porn shop will open this

spring.”

“Really?”

“UCC gets reports of City Council decisions. Another reason the job was important.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” The electricity in me needed to be turned off. I stood to get my parka. “Let me know more about the porno place when you find out. Like where the construction site will be. Anything useful.”

“And you’ll be sure to tell me if there’s anything you’d love to do for the child-care center?” Sissy said

“If it were happening in time for Rebecca and her kids, I might let you talk me into something. But it feels like bad ground now.”

She let it go. “Who did you see *Cabaret* with? I know I shouldn’t ask, but I just did.”

“I went by myself and sat through the movie twice. Then stopped for a hamburger and a brew at The Haven, where I met no one and spoke to no one and took no one home with me.”

“You weren’t kidding about ‘no more Mr. Nice Guy.’” Sissy left the couch and headed for her office.

I waited too long before I called after her. “I’m sorry.”

## Chapter 17

### Bird Twitter

Singing birds announced the coming spring. The regulars in Hamburg Inn talked about bracing for a final snow in March. If my personal deep freeze felt like something was thawing, it was only bird twitter. A darker mood clouded me.

With my Sheller-Globe earnings, I'd bought a radio for the basement. I could have afforded a television since there was nothing for me to spend my money on, but I didn't want to watch daytime television. The radio worked fine, playing soft music to help me sleep when I came home from work. Late in March, however, Roberta Flack's "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" broke my heart all over again.

I walked around Iowa City for days looking for ways to end my misery. Near



Hamburg Inn was a church, at least three-stories tall, taller than any other buildings in town, but not tall enough. The icy current in the Iowa River ran swiftly, thanks to an early run off, but in town the banks were in clear view. Up river might satisfy my gloom cloud, but I didn't know where up river was, so jumping in without being noticed and floating to hell was out. Highway traffic might work. But the roadway was dark when I hitchhiked and too risky. A swerving accident could injure an innocent person.

In the basement after one of these excursions through Iowa City, I heard someone at the door. I walked to the bottom of the stairs, where Sissy was putting papers in my boots.

"I didn't want to bother you," she said. "I have news."

"Feel free to bother me. Please. I'll put on tea."

She took longer than necessary removing her boots before she came down. I took longer than necessary facing the hot plate to turn on the burner. When I turned, her face was awash in tears. Crying does not look good on redheads. I wrapped my arms around her and held on when she tried to move away.

"I'm sniffing all over your shoulder," she said. She took a handkerchief out of her coat pocket and blew her nose into it.

"Come on. Take this off."

"I'm so sorry. I sounded like I was keeping tabs on you. I was of course."

"Forget that. I was a jerk."

"I didn't recognize you," she said. "You're always so kind to me. But your reaction made me realize . . . I don't know you at all. I'm also sorry about the last time I was here."

"It wasn't exactly a hardship for either of us, if I remember correctly. Sit down. Both of us don't need to watch the water boil."

My art supplies covered the corner bench where she sat and latched on to a new subject. "Can I look at your sketches?"

"I haven't been drawing much. My ill-gotten new pencils were the kiss of death."

She turned pages in the sketchpad while I arranged mugs and tea bags. I fixed the blankets on the bed, my indoor post for staring at the wood beams. The not-quite boiling water covered our tea bags, sinking both strings. The sketchpad gave her an excuse not to look at me.

"You said you had news."

She took the local paper from her pocket and handed it to me.

"Take that off." She slipped out of her coat. "I have two hooks now. Courtesy of the five-finger discount."

She looked at the wood panel that partially obscured the furnace. I'd twisted two hooks into it and taped paper signs over each of them: ME was above my parka; OTHER was above the second hook, where I hung Sissy's coat.

"You have a sense of humor."

"These signs are improvements over 'me' and 'them.'"

"Did you actually write 'me' and 'them'?"

I lifted the OTHER sign, so she could see the original writing on the back of it.

She opened the newspaper. The first article was an editorial about whether or not Iowa should ratify the equal rights amendment congress had sent to the states.

"Not that one," she said, pointing to the facing page. "This one about local smut. Looks like city council didn't release its decision in its usual cycle of news. UCC was blindsided by it."

The article offered mild protest about a building permit being issued for construction of an adult entertainment establishment.

"Isn't Benton Street in town?"

"The location surprised me too. I assumed it would be outside city limits." She moved so our shoulders touched as we looked at the newspaper. I stared at the article. Sissy stared at me.

"I'd love to burn it down." After a moment, I added, "Unfortunately, my petty crimes don't include playing with matches."

Sissy sized me up and pursed her lips, but remained silent.

"Catherine made me stop being a bad boy. She said shoplifting and mindless vandalism were beneath me. I stopped for her, but petty crime wasn't beneath me. It was at eye level, perfect for aimless retaliation against who knows what. Now, none of that matters."

"So you think you're a rotten egg?"

"I don't know why I talk like that."

"Maybe you're looking for another conscience."

I moved away. "This Saturday I'll walk over to Benton Street. If I can't handle it alone, do you have any suggestions for helpers? Not Max."

"Max is laid up," Sissy said. "She broke her foot. Fell outside her house. Would you like to volunteer at the Kitchen in her place? Brenda comes in the afternoon when she doesn't have classes. But I'm uneasy in the back room without someone in front."

"When will Max be up and about?"

"She gets around now, but she's leery about going outside while she's on crutches. At home she hobbles around with the kids on her shoulders or dragging on her cast."

"What about helpers for my not-arson project?"

"Depends on what you have in mind."

"I have nothing in mind. What I need is someone to discuss possibilities with. I assume the less you know about particulars the better."

"It can't jeopardize pregnancy counseling and my New York connections," she said. "Jenny and Mercedes are possible. Don't get excited. Jenny is a tomb of discretion."

"Born to be devious I'm guessing." Sissy saw my smirk.

"You've been warned."

"I'm not looking to get involved with Jenny."

"You're so transparent." Sissy exaggerated a sigh.

"You're not the innocent you make yourself out to be."

"I never pretended to be innocent. You thought that because I look like Howdy Doody."

"You don't look like Howdy Doody." I studied Sissy until she smacked my arm. "All you have in common are freckles. And the red hair." She smacked me again. "But I see you as the puppet master, not the puppet. Forget Jenny," I said. "But Mercedes? Are you out of your mind?"

"Don't let this go to your head, but Mercedes respects you. She's the only member of the Kitchen core with a genuine leftist background. The others are newcomers, mostly radicalized by the anti-war movement. Mercedes has been putting theory and action together for years. I know what you're thinking," Sissy said. "The night Mercedes went off on you. She suspected what you did was the work of a provocateur. You can't blame her."

"I can blame anyone I please."

## Chapter 18

### Fifty-Gallon Drums

Near the Sheller-Globe time clock, a job posting was taped to the wall. Steam cleaning and sandblasting pieces of equipment on the swing shift was entry level, but it earned 40 cents an hour more than I was making on the line. With the posting in hand, I found the area where the assignment was.

In-door train tracks to and from an outside dock ran adjacent to the area where a man worked alone. Older than I was, he had a bushy light-brown mustache; his dough colored face and neck were grimy with streaked sweat. He was bent over, cleaning a fifty-gallon drum—one of three rows of nearby drums.

I picked up a handy rag and pretended to work with him, so we wouldn't attract

attention. The factory was too noisy for him to hear me approach, but he looked up when he sensed me. A name was embroidered over the pocket of his long-sleeved coveralls. "You Norman?"

"That's me. What're you doing here, girl?" His tone was cautious, but not unfriendly.

"I'm on break. I want to work back here." He kept on swabbing the bottom of the drum. "Would you run me off if they gave me the job?"

"Look in here, girl," he said.

I looked into the drum he was working on; I didn't have my head over it as deeply as he wanted, so he put his hand on the back of my neck.

"More," he said, pushing, but not aggressively. When I pulled my head out, whatever I'd inhaled was eroding my throat. I could gag trying not to react or cough. I coughed.

"By the time we get these suckers," Norman said, "most of the cooking grease has been removed. You have to clean out the drums with the solvent you smelled. First by scooping out the left-over gunk then with solvent. Then I fill them with liquid resin and get the resin back on the floor to the stations that make the molds."

"Did the last guy die of the solvent?"

Norman cracked a smile. "He was taller than you, but he passed out over the barrels twice. He could have died if I hadn't noticed him and pulled his ass out. Think you can do it?"

"Yes."

"There are other parts of the job, steam cleaning or air blasting the dirty molds, but cleaning the drums is what you'd do that relates to me. If the drums aren't perfectly cleaned, I can't do my job. If that happens, the foreman bites me. Then I get you fired."

"Like the last guy?"

"He got fired for smoking weed behind the dock."

"Any women ever have this job?"

"Not that I know of. But it's cleaning stuff, so maybe they'll give you a chance. I can't do this and my own work. Go ahead and apply." He gestured toward the backlog of dirty drums. "If you can clean the drums, I don't give a shit who you are, or what your nationality is, or if you have horns and a tail."

That covered all my social disadvantages. I thanked him and went into the break area for a quick smoke. As I crushed out the cigarette butt, I spotted my supervisor.

"Hey boss," I said, approaching him and pulling the job notice from my pocket. "I want this job cleaning out barrels and molds for Norman in the back. There are twenty fifty-gallon drums full of crap. You hire me and put me back there right now, and I'll put a dent in the backlog. Norman can do his own work."

The supervisor looked me over; he didn't know I reported to him. "I can't hire you just like that. The office has to do that."

"Maybe you could put me there for the rest of tonight. You'd get two hours of clean drums at my dinky line wage, and you'd get a chance to see I can hack it."

"Only thing I can do is tell you to come in a little early tomorrow and talk to someone in the office." He moved away then turned to add, "Which line do you work on?"

"One." I was glad I'd given the hustle a try. Less than fifteen minutes later, he came to my line and waved me over.

"Go ahead and help Norman tonight," he said. "And go talk to the office tomorrow. No guarantees."

I pulled my parka from the shelf and walked to Norman's area, where he waited

for me with coveralls.

“Put these on. The pothead left them. They stink, but you’ll stink worse if you don’t cover your clothes.”

The stench of my predecessor’s uniform curbed the grin on my face, but Norman and I both laughed aloud when I stood in the coveralls, sleeves beyond my fingertips and excess pant legs on the floor.

When the shift was over, I unrolled the legs of the outfit, and Norman showed me where to submerge it in six-inches of solvent. He stirred both our coveralls with a thick broom handle and lifted each out carefully and angled it toward a wall hook. Not a spot of grime on the material.

“If you get the job,” he said, “We’ll cut the legs and sleeves down to size.”

My back and shoulders ached that night, and I had a headache from sniffing the solvent, but I’d done okay.



## Chapter 19

### Children Change Everything

Late March and early April were cold. Solid piles of dirty snow under gray skies blighted the streets. One Sunday, loneliness drove me to a good deed. I pulled off five clean sheets from my old sketchpad, rolled them loosely, fastened each end with paper clips, and dropped the tube into a paper shopping bag. I bundled myself and walked the drawing paper to Max's house.

She answered my knock with some of the children I knew from Mercedes's celebration at her heels. Other children I'd never seen before; I counted seven in all.

"I thought you might be stir crazy," I said. "Didn't realize you'd be with the kids today."

"The kids are a permanent attachment. The cast is not."

"Here. Some good drawing paper." I handed over the tube. "We could draw a bit this afternoon."

"Can we draw too?" One of the twin boys remembered me and pulled on my pants. "Santa Claus, can we draw, too?"

It took twenty minutes to get seven children organized around a large dining room table, each child with crayons and a single sheet of newsprint Max provided.

"I want a little paper like hers," said one of the kids I didn't know. She meant the small sketchpad open in front of me.

I folded the child's newsprint in quarters and set it in front of her.

"I want little paper too," one of the twins said. Max folded his sheet into quarters.

"Anyone else," Max asked. "Okay. Santa's going to teach us to draw." Two kids echoed Max's announcement.

I started them on geometric shapes. They asked questions, all of them at once. Even Max asked questions. My head throbbed. As we drew, Max supplied more newsprint. One of the children who had not come to the table with the others, preferring to whimper alone on a stuffed chair in the living room, turned up next to me. She was small and thin; three years old I guessed. She said nothing.

"What is it, Peanut?" I asked.

Like a cat that picks the person least likely to welcome it, she said, "Lap."

Her hair was silky lemon, her eyes blueberry, her lips pink. I lifted her onto my lap, gooey inside because she had chosen me. I stopped drawing and sat without moving, afraid she'd leave. I'd never fallen in love with a child, much less at first sight.

"Some of us arrived today," Max said, with more finesse than I would have given

her credit for.

“To live here?”

“I think so. Too many bunny ears to talk now.”

“The childcare center is in your living room,” I said.

“This will be the start-up group. If I hadn’t busted my foot, we’d be in the new building now.”

“When will you go there?”

“As soon as we figure out who can drive me and all the kids there every morning by seven o’clock. It could happen tomorrow. The gang will figure that out at today’s meeting.”

“If it’s just you and these kids, why not do it here?”

“Mercedes wants us to use the building. It’s not just for us. People in town can bring their kids. Are you volunteering?”

“I don’t have the patience for anyone under twelve.”

“Maybe you’ll change your mind after we get up and running. It’ll be cool. You can be the art teacher.”

We talked around my instructions. The children drew objects based on circles, rectangles and triangles until Max declared a potty break. I asked the beauty on my lap if she needed to potty. She shook her head, so we sat at the table without moving or talking.

At 3:30 the children finished their peanut butter and apple slices. As my headache increased so did my respect for Max’s skills. The little one stayed on my lap for more than an hour, sitting nearly as still as I. When she finally slipped off, she returned to the stuffed chair and curled up on the cushion.

Max cleared the snack leftovers and motioned me to the kitchen. “You wash up.”

The kids found other toys and games and played in the living room, where an upright piano and bench were draped with a sheet.

“Who plays?”

“It came with the house,” Max said. “One of the mothers plays.”

“What’s the story with the peanut?”

“That *is* what we call her. Her mother dropped her off yesterday because she was on a crying jag.”

“The mother or the kid?”

“The mother. She called this morning to say she couldn’t take Peanut back.”

“What do you mean ‘couldn’t take her back?’”

Max scrunched her shoulders. “She said she was having a nervous break down.”

“How long will Peanut stay here?”

A knock on the door interrupted us. “Get my crutches, will you? I’m tired of hobbling around. I’m supposed to use them even in the house.”

I moved Max’s crutches to her and crossed to the front door. Mercedes was already opening it cautiously, a lit cigarette between her lips. She was surprised to see me.

“You have to be careful with the door,” she said. “Some of the kids are like puppies. They charge through any daylight to get out of the house. If one of them gets a cold running around outside, they all get it.” She closed the door behind her. “Where’s Max?”

“In the kitchen. We just finished up snack time.” Sounded like I knew what I was doing with the children. “She’s bushed, dragging around her cast.”

Another knock and the door opened carefully again to avoid a breakout. It was Wendy. Before I could leave, other women arrived for the meeting. The children sought out new adults to play with, and their mothers appeared from the second floor of the

house. Peanut stirred and held her arms toward me. I picked her up, and she clung to my neck.

I'd never seen Mercedes smile. "You're done for," she said. "Are you staying for the childcare meeting?"

I shook my head and whispered endearments to Peanut.

Jenny arrived but ignored me. Sissy came and greeted me shyly. Jan and Katie arrived with Trudy. Fifteen women crowded on the available seating and on the wood floor. As the meeting came to order, the children climbed on the laps of their mothers or favorites. On crutches, Max came in from the kitchen and took the place on the sofa Trudy vacated for her.

"I've got to get going," I said.

Sissy waved me toward her. "I'll take her."

Peanut whimpered at being transferred, but only for a moment before she settled on Sissy's lap, her platinum hair resting on Sissy's chest.

\* \* \*

After breakfast the next morning, I walked to the Kitchen where I now served as a temporary replacement for Max.

"Good news," Sissy said from the front room. "We opened daycare this morning."

"Congratulations. Another score for the angels."

"That may be premature. Even with reduced hours, Max will be alone for several days before we can get enough volunteers into a rotation. We're strained just getting her and the kids there each morning and picked up each night. Brenda will stay on here in the afternoons. At least until next semester. I don't suppose—"

"No," I said. "I'll hang out for a week or two while you get things going with

childcare, but think about it. It's not a good idea for me to be associated with the Kitchen. No telling what I'll get myself into."

Sissy's chest rose and fell, but her frown showed she knew I was right.

"What's with Peanut?"

"Her mother dropped her off and isn't expected back."

"Ever?"

"We don't know. Apparently, she showed up at Max's with two pillowcases of Peanut's things and said she had to go out-of-town."

"Is there no father? No grandparents?"

"Believe me, we went over that yesterday at the meeting. We're being watched, and the phone here is tapped. It's risky to take over the care of an abandoned kid. It's done all the time everywhere in the world, but we're not everywhere."

"This phone is tapped?"

"There's been funny clicking on the line for a while."

"I've heard about provocateurs since I hit town. You don't think that and phone surveillance are a bit cloak and dagger?"

"Some of us are more paranoid than others. Some more dramatic," Sissy agreed."

"Frankly, is what's going on here important enough to attract federal attention.?"

Sissy looked at me like she was trying to place me. "Your attitude is a form of internalized sexism."

My neck burned. Sissy's comment shorted out one of my brain wires. I resisted the strong temptation to deny her claim. "I always thought I was on top of the ways men screw over women. Internalized sexism is a new one."

"The police came last week. Two of them, checking out a complaint about noise."

"There's not even a radio here to play too loud."

“They said ‘noise.’ They just walked around. Fortunately, they didn’t go upstairs. The clothing room is a fire hazard. We’ll need to move it out of here, so women who need the clothes get them. Despite the flyers we post around town, women are afraid to come. Rumor has it gun toting queers hang out here.”

“Don’t give me ideas.”

## Chapter 20

### Step-by-step

A morning rain fell on my walk to Benton Street, where a cement slab marked the porn site foundation. The building would abut the property line of a Victorian rental. Nothing more to see. I walked aimlessly and landed at the door of the UCC office.

A work-study coed at the reception desk took my name, pointed to a clothes tree for my wet parka, and announced me at an open door. Mercedes walked out immediately. A Nehru jacket and tailored slacks. Very smart. "Come inside," she said and gestured to a chair. She closed the door and sat in the chair next to mine. "What's up?"

On her resume and application she'd admitted that the UCC job was the first of



its type for her, but the role suited her. She instinctively knew which side of the desk to be on to make a visitor feel at ease.

"I walked over to Benton Street this morning," I said. "The foundation is laid."

She hesitated. "Ah, Benton Street. If anything so much as a donut shop goes up, everyone in town talks about it. But no one is talking about Benton Street."

"Is someone on city counsel helping things along?"

Mercedes's straight black hair shifted with a tilt of her head. "What are you getting at?"

Scrambling to make sense, I said, "Is the *source* of this dead fish located further upstream?"

The way Mercedes held her cigarette emphasized her unusually long fingers. She could easily handle a piano octave. I lit a Camel and took a deep drag to re-focus.

"Ideologically, the source is upstream, of course," she said. "I'm missing your practical application."

Talk about dead fish! How idiotic, not planning what to say to her.

"I'm interested in a once-and-for-all solution." Why I was making up the conversation, I had no idea.

"Rash and idealistic." No judgment in her tone.

"I seem to be babbling."

"Maybe just thinking out-loud."

"That's putting it kindly."

"What do you need?"

We puffed our cigarettes. "What I'm getting," I said. "A sounding board. Eventually, I'll need a helper or two." More smoke accumulated in the office.

"Let me think about it. I'll get word to you. This is not a good place for thinking

out loud.”

We stood simultaneously. “Thank you for the pencils. A very thoughtful gift.”

“Don’t mention it.” She put her index finger to her lips. “Really.”

\* \* \*

Every morning a crew framed out the porn building. I watched without knowing how it might contribute to my non-existent plans. Front and back door, but no windows. That made sense. No peeking on the perverts.

When the siding went up, my ride from Sheller-Globe dropped me not far from the site. No one was on the street that late. Except for the hassle of hitchhiking, being out alone when the city was asleep suited me. Workmen had hammered a tarp over the door frame that faced the back alley, but a torn piece at the bottom allowed me to wiggle through. I’d come prepared with a flashlight in one pocket of my parka and a can of spray paint in the other. One of the crewmen had left a locked tool chest on the floor, but I didn’t want the karma of taking anything that represented someone’s livelihood.

A sink and toilet had been installed; otherwise, no interior walls were up. The flashlight caught a six-inch piece of plasterboard, torn along the bottom of a wall where baseboards would be added. My hand fit through the opening to the insulation. Then standing in the middle of the room, I shook the paint can; when the rattling ball settled, I left. On the outside back wall, I sprayed the words *Pig Shit*. The same on the front wall. Graffiti wasn’t enough, but it was a start.

Next morning at the site, primer already covered the front *Pig Shit*. I didn’t check the back. Impulsively, I approached a crew member washing his hands at an outside spigot. “I live next door,” I said. “What’s going up?”

“A store, I think.” Iowa reticence.

“Groceries? We could use one close by.”

"Don't know, miss."

"Do you know when it'll be ready for occupancy?"

"Can't say. We'll finish painting in a day or two. The interior's already primed. We'll paint it tomorrow and put a second coat on the exterior after that."

"Let's hope the weather holds," I said, moving away.

He agreed, lifted the brim of his cap and then re-positioned it over thick brown hair.

I hurried home and sketched the area from memory. The ornamental parts of the next door Victorian intrigued me, but business called. I approximated where the back alley was in relation to the building. The rough outlines were down, so a few details on the Victorian allowed my mind to wander. On his own page, I sketched in the painter crouched down, washing his hands but let more of his hair show beneath his cap than had actually been visible. When I'd captured everything in my mind, I wrote *Pig Shit* on the pad.

The building would go up; nothing would prevent that. Drawing, however, gave me some control over other things around me. Tomorrow, I'd pace off the distances between buildings, streets, cross-streets and the alley, and then re-draw the site. At least the physical reality was taking mental shape; ideas like butterflies fluttered around as well, but they hid from me.

\* \* \*

I hadn't seen Peanut since the first time she sat on my lap. If her mother was still away, the kid could be miserable, even if the best of folks cared for her. I'd been lucky in that regard. No one had fucked with me—literally or figuratively—in foster families. No surprise that one morning after checking the porn site, my steps took me to the childcare building to see how the operation was going.

Typical of the university holdings in the area, the two-story house had a large minimally furnished double living room. Inside, a scowling woman came toward me.

"Hi Max," I said, over her shoulder. When Max grunted at me, the woman stopped and returned to the children. She didn't greet me; apparently, I was invisible after being menacing.

Max had eight children playing a modified form of kickball in the open rooms. A soft ball hung in the air when kicked and didn't endanger anyone or anything. A sofa stacked with two low round tables and several twelve-by-twelve seating cubes had been pushed away from the playing area.

Peanut sat in a corner of the sofa, uninvolved in the game. Max sat in the middle of the room, rolling the ball to the kickers. Two plywood cubes supported her butt; her foot was in a soft boot. I sat on the sofa as far from Peanut as the out-of-bounds stacked furniture allowed. In her cat-like way she ignored me even though one of the twins said, "Can we crayon with the drawing lady?"

"You'll have to ask her," Max said.

No one asked me. I'd nearly given up hope when Peanut scooted across the frayed seat cushion and climbed on me, positioning herself with the back of her head against my chest, her little butt on my lap. We watched the game without speaking until the scowling woman announced that Mercedes's car was in the driveway. The children squealed their version of deferential welcome and clamored around her. She carried in three shopping bags.

With considerable effort, Max rose and took a table off the sofa. "Give me a hand," she said. Then noticing Peanut, she added, "Never mind." She pulled off the second table and set it in the room near the first. "Okay small ones. Get your cubes, push them to your tables and sit down. Mercedes will show you what she's brought."

The children did as instructed, fighting a bit over which primary-colored cube belonged to which child or where each sat in relation to the adult bearing gifts.

"This is for Max," Mercedes said, putting the bags on one of the tables. She handed over two string bags of apples and two jumbo jars of peanut butter. "Enough for a week or two I should think."

"I forgot to tell you we needed milk," Max said.

"I have three gallons in the car." Mercedes turned to the woman who still darted suspicious looks at me, and the would-be bouncer headed outside.

While Max carried the snack supplies into the kitchen, Mercedes dug into a second over-sized shopping sack and placed a handful of children's books on the table. Finally, she emptied the contents of the third sack on the table.

"Toys and games."

The children cheered and those at the second table left their cubes to crowd around the board games, puzzles, clay, and boxes of crayons.

I took Peanut's tiny hands and helped her applaud. Max supervised which items could be opened immediately and which should be put aside for later use.

"Hey, you two," Mercedes said, joining Peanut and me on the couch. "You might be interested in a meeting we're having about things." She signaled with her eyes that the meeting concerned Peanut. "The mothers who live at Max's are concerned about adding another permanent resident. Especially as Max is here now nearly full time."

"Doesn't Max have any help?"

"She does, but the schedule allows no margin for sickness or error. If someone gets the flu, we're in trouble."

Dressed for her job at UCC, Mercedes's outfit included over-the-knee leather boots with fringe, unsuitable for walking in bad weather, but perfect for looking stylish

in-doors. She crossed her legs, and the boots caught Peanut's eye. The child slipped off my lap to touch the fringe; then she mounted the instep. Mercedes rocked her.

"We need a schedule of people to do overnight care at their own houses," she said. "They'd be responsible for getting the cowgirl to day care during the week, preparing her supper and bathing her at night. Maybe in two-day rotations. Sissy will take her on Fridays and Saturdays."

"How can Sissy handle it with everything else she does?"

"Sissy. Sissy. Sissy," Peanut said.

"Attachment is already there. They went to the Kitchen together last Friday to try it. She seems to like the quiet and attention."

"I work nights," I said, not intending to speak aloud.

"We know. Your name came up."

I didn't bother to ask why or how. Despite my feeling disconnected from women's activities in Iowa City, people knew I liked Peanut. They knew my work hours. They no doubt knew of Sissy's occasional visits to my basement. Sissy's housemates surely noticed when she left for the night and didn't return.

"I'm no good for the rotation, but if there's something else I could do—"

"Come to the meeting at Max's. We need a little kitty for her miscellaneous expenses. I'll tap the middle class women first, but those of us who are employed might be able to kick in."

"Count me in." As usual I acted impulsively, but I had no time or opportunity to spend the wages I made, so what was the harm? "Are you in the rotation?"

Mercedes lifted both hands. If she meant she and Peanut were already fated to be together or she wasn't sure what the future would bring, I couldn't tell and didn't ask. She lifted Peanut from her boot and sat her on the sofa. "That's all for now, sweetie. I

have to go to work.”

Peanut whimpered—her regressed form of speech—but she stopped when I lifted her to my lap.

“Any news on other fronts?” Mercedes asked.

“I may need to borrow some tools.” We were talking about Benton Street, but I had no ideas that required tools. No ideas, period. Fortunately, Mercedes didn’t press me.

“Talk to Sissy. Good things can turn up at your door. You know that.” She smiled, a kind smile, not a smirk. “See you.” She left without fanfare; her visits must have been regular.

After a few minutes, Peanut said, “Potty,” and she slid to her feet. Max heard her and pointed me toward the kitchen, where Peanut led me. Inside a bathroom off the kitchen, Peanut dragged a set of wood steps from a corner to the toilet. She climbed the steps and pulled off her corduroys and underpants. She had the personal skills down, but she needed help with hand washing. Even using the steps that she insisted on repositioning herself, she couldn’t quite reach the faucets.

“Good girl,” I said. But *good girl* was meant for my managing like I knew what I was doing.

## Chapter 21

### Impulse and Instinct

Mercedes finished playing a Cole Porter medley just as I arrived at Max's for the meeting. Women chatted together waiting for it to begin. Sissy introduced me to two of the mothers who lived in the house. Tess, a nurse, didn't have custody of her children, and Madge was mother of the ubiquitous twin boys I'd shown how to draw. A third mother Angela supervised all the children on the second floor. Tess made my eyes pop. Curvy above and below, she wore an ankle-length wrap-around skirt.

Max whispered at my ear. "She's straight." Max didn't stink anymore, and she occasionally combed her hair.

Women from the magazine collective sat in a group near Mercedes who wore her



fringed leather boots and corduroy slacks. She stood, covered the piano with its drape, and sat on the bench, facing the group. Jenny arrived with the competition, who'd taken to giving me a nod. I gave up my seat for Jenny while the bear slouched on the newel post leading to the second floor. I joined her on the steps and shook her hand without speaking. Max left her sofa seat and came to the landing to sit with us. We made room for her, but frowned in unison when she started to talk. Bless her non-stinky self: she fell silent, content to be sitting with us. Tess's eyes fixed on mine for a moment before she turned away.

Sissy brought the group to order. "For those of you who don't know what happened," she said, "a few nights ago Max had all the children upstairs ready for bed. Peanut's mother and her flaky boyfriend, both drunk, barged in and made a scene."

"Is he Peanut's father?" It was the scowling woman from my childcare visit.

"Whoever he is," Madge said, "he's bad news. I was here. Sissy got them to leave, but Peanut heard them and came downstairs hysterical. She wanted to go with her mother, naturally, but they didn't want to take her. Just wanted 'to see if she was well cared for.'"

"Bull shit," Tess said. Others agreed.

"I told Peanut's mother we were moving her to another house," Sissy continued. "I said if she turned up drunk or stoned again, we'd call the police and social services and have Peanut removed from her care."

"We wouldn't do that," Mercedes said, lighting a cigarette. "But we have no legal rights. Peanut's mother is unstable, but we're at risk with the boyfriend who, at present, seems too out-of-it to be a threat. And we're at risk with the police and social services."

"This could jeopardize everything else we do," Trudy said. She could always be counted on to see consequences: a workhorse like Sissy but permanently depressed I'd

learned, by rape and its aftershocks.

"Maybe it's too risky for us to be involved period," Tess said.

"Even if we'd weighed all this when Peanut first came to the house," Sissy thought aloud. "Would we have turned her away? I don't think so. And now, we are involved. The alternative is social services. The child is already traumatized."

"Keep social services out of it," I grumbled.

"I don't see why she can't stay here?" Max said.

"I was here the night her mother came," Tess explained. "It was scary with all the shouting and her demanding to see Peanut. All the kids were frightened."

"I was scared," Madge added.

"I'm grateful to live here," Tess continued. "You do a fabulous job with the kids, Max, but I'm afraid for all of us."

"And Angela upstairs agrees. It was Madge again. "Plus Peanut is very needy and makes demands on Max that effect the others. It costs money to raise a child. Or two, as I well know. I don't want to be selfish or small-minded, but who will pay for an extra mouth to feed? We don't want the house to be drop-off central for unwanted kids."

Practical self-interest made sense, even though everyone present found it difficult to square with political ideals.

"We understand, Peanut can't stay here." Sissy kicked off her Birkenstocks.

Mercedes took over. "One solution is to create a rotation for her care. Sissy has already agreed to take Fridays and Saturdays. Jenny and I are the first line of back up for anyone in the rotation who gets sick or has an emergency, but neither of us can take the front line. We need two or three more volunteers to get Peanut to and from daycare, provide her with a home. And more or less adopt her for two days a week."

Jan and Katie each raised a hand. "Jan and I have been talking about this since we heard about the rotation plan." As usual Katie spoke for both. "We can each take a two-day rotation. Monday through Thursday. That will give Peanut a stable core because we also live only three blocks from Sissy."

Everyone focused on Jan and Katie. After a few moments of stunned silence, Jan added, "The only thing is we might need help financially. We're on a tight budget."

Sissy's emotion colored her voice. "Your offer is amazing." She composed herself and added, "We're dealing with the money issues next. We'll figure out something for Sundays. I could take three days if necessary."

Everyone now spoke at once. I planned to offer \$15 from each pay period for Peanut's kitty, but that's not what happened. When we were ready for the funding item, my voice sounded hoarse. "I'll pitch in on Sundays. I work nights, but I can do the day."

"Good." Sissy looked at me then quickly away. "She'll need another kind of role model."

Laughing eased everyone's surprise: the most difficult arrangements were done.

\* \* \*

Peanut liked being propped on a stool where she drank the half-pint of milk I bought for her every Sunday. Peanut butter and apples became a staple for me, but sometimes she asked for a banana or carrots. If we stayed in for lunch, I heated a can of beans and franks or canned ravioli for her.

Sundays with her were a honeymoon. Sissy loaned me the Bug when she dropped off Peanut, making everything easier. After we drove Sissy home, I took Peanut to the Laundromat, my usual Sunday chore; she got a kick out of matching socks and folding underwear. Laundry was therapeutic for me, and she picked up my vibe while we waited through machine cycles and read Sunday comics. Sometimes while we

waited, she crayoned on sheets I drew for her. Sometimes I read to her from one of the books Mercedes supplied to daycare.

On a couple of Sundays, we drove to see the Coralville Dam Spillway; the thunder and chaos of the water hypnotized her. We also played in City Park or at one of the closer parks that had swings, a slide, and a sandbox. Timid with other children at the park, Peanut was also not very talkative with me.

In the bi-monthly meetings about her care—usually held at Sissy’s or at Jan and Katie’s—Peanut’s limited vocabulary and her reluctance to speak came up. Others had noticed it as well. She cried often for no reason I could determine; on the other hand, she seemed easy-going about spending time with me.

I studied her constantly; no one could accuse me of not paying sufficient attention to her. Just the few Sunday hours with her exhausted me, especially if she was restless in the basement or with whatever outdoor activity I’d planned. Often, we went to Hamburg Inn for our main meal and then back to the basement for her nap. On the Sundays we had meetings, she came with me, shortening the time I was solely responsible for her. Guilty and grateful: my part was painless. More or less just watch her grow. Not for a second did I confuse Sundays with what Sissy and the others were doing, or with what Peanut’s mother had to do regardless of the fact that she couldn’t do it, or what full time mothers did every day without help.

## Chapter 22

### Inspiration

One night after work and shower, I didn't immediately crash into bed; the new job increased my stamina. In pajamas, settled on a stool with my colored pencils, I drew Peanut's head and shoulders in the large sketchpad. Doodling her curls tenderized me. After a second cup of tea, I studied previous drawing of the workman washing his hands. Under his painter whites, I added red and black checks to his shirt. Little by little the squares got darker and darker, until I was too sleepy to continue.

Early next morning, strong coffee called to me. Dressing in a flash, I emerged from my hole, and kicked up the stand of the old bicycle I'd inherited. Since the first signs of spring, it sat outside near the basement door. I pedaled to Hamburg Inn. The

counter waitress immediately put coffee at my place. After gulping the first cup, I sipped the refill and took out my sketchpad to the previous night's drawing. Bingo! Without ordering breakfast, I put money on the counter and left.

I sped to Benton Street under overcast skies. No workmen there. No signage. No windows. Unobtrusive. The place could be open for business, although no cars were there. Maybe too early. I stared at it, wagging my head, until my growling stomach led me back to Hamburg Inn. Along with eggs and potatoes, I ordered a side of bacon to celebrate. Then I biked to the Kitchen.

Max's replacement sat at the desk and told me Sissy was with someone in the back room; in the front room, Birkenstocks marked her spot. After twenty minutes, she walked a crying woman to the door; then she joined me on the couch.

"You must hate when they leave crying," I said.

"Some days are worse than others." Sissy positioned her legs under her skirt.

"Nice to see you. Everyone is stretched so thin lately, no one has time to visit."

"Usually I stop at daycare to play with Peanut for an hour before I catch the bus to work. That way I'm not a stranger when she comes on Sundays. Get that Howdy Doody smile off your face."

"How's the new job?" She moderated her smile.

"I'm adjusting. It's physically demanding, but the guy I work with is decent. I see you replaced Max."

"Sometimes I'm here alone in the afternoon, but we hope to get new blood now that the weather will allow people to travel. I worry about the regulars burning-out."

I lowered my voice. "I need some things for a project."

Sissy went into the reception room and returned with paper and pencil. "Will you need people?"

"One besides me."

"What else?"

\* \* \*

One week later the project was ready. "Do you have everything?" I asked.

"Everything that was on the list," Mercedes said. She wore jeans, a black baseball cap and a dark jacket. She'd driven to Sheller-Globe to pick me up, and we sat in the car smoking and sipping from a pint of scotch she'd brought with her. She pulled on her L&M in short quick motions.

"You okay?"

"I always look nervous. I'm fine. You'll see."

In the passenger seat, I rubbed my sore calf muscles. "You don't need to prove yourself to me. I *am* curious why you're doing this yourself. I thought you needed to stay low."

"Sissy and I talked about who to get for you, but when you want something done right...." She offered the bottle.

"No more for me. Later maybe. Benton Street is dead by 12:30. They must close at midnight. Usually, there's no foot traffic. No street lights. No moon tonight."

"Did you plan around the moon?"

"Why not? We could pick our day. The building's not going anywhere. The calendar at the Kitchen marks the moon cycles. Brenda would be so proud of me, if she ever spoke to me again. Can I see what you brought?"

"Behind me in the gym bag."

I lifted the gym bag over the seat; it had a satisfying weight. My hand touched the knob on the turning handle of a drill. A bit was in place. Feeling around gingerly, I touched a small handsaw, a hacksaw, and a roll of electrical tape. In a zippered com-

partment, I found an awl, a hammer, a screwdriver, and a rasp.

“Should I turn on the light?”

“No. I’m okay. Where’s the other stuff?”

“On the floor.”

I unscrewed the wing nuts on the hacksaw and wound heavy tape around one end of the thin blade. “I’m not sure we’ll need everything, but I wanted to be prepared.”

Mercedes lit another cigarette from the stub she held. I walked around the car and sat in the backseat. The rest of the equipment I’d asked for was underfoot. With the handsaw, I halved an old broomstick and lashed the naked end of a garden hose to it.

“Sorry about the sawdust in your car.”

“Anything I can do?”

“You’ve already done a pack gathering the tools.” Finished lashing the hose, I returned to the front seat. “Okay. Here’s the plan. I’ll carry the equipment. You’ll leave me a block from the site. I’ll approach from the front. You’ll go around to the alley. When you see me, signal twice that you’re in the alley. You’ve got your flashlight?”

“In my pocket.”

“Don’t park in the alley. In case, something goes wrong and we have to walk away, we don’t want your car exposed. While I’m working, come closer to the building. You’ll be my eyes. If I need you, I’ll keep my light on. Flash me once if someone happens by. I’ll stop moving and be quiet. Keep the light on the intruder if you want me to cut and run. I don’t expect any problems though.”

“You’ll tell me what you’re doing when we finish?”

“Over your bottle of scotch. Nice of you to bring it. I don’t have any hard liquor in my basement.” I waved that we were ready to drive away. “When we finish at Benton Street, we’ll leave opposite of how we got there. You go by way of Benton. I’ll go



through the alley. Once you get back to your car, drive along Clinton and pick me up."

Mercedes pulled out of the Sheller-Globe parking lot and said, "Let me repeat everything you've told me." She did and ended her recital with, "Scotch in your basement."

\* \* \*

Things never go quite as planned. Drilling small holes close to the outside water spigot took much longer than I expected. Mercedes might be restless or panic. When I managed five holes, my luck turned. I used the hacksaw to connect them and force the plug in with the hammer.

I held the flashlight on and pointed it toward the alley. "Change of plans," I whispered when Mercedes approached. "Take the bag of tools. I don't want it on me when I split. I'll find you somewhere on Clinton. Another few minutes."

The diameter of the hole was just large enough to fit the hose and broomstick. The steady rush of adrenalin sapped my strength. Summoning more will than physical power, I thrust the length of the broom until the plasterboard popped. Then I attached the nozzle at the end of the hose to the spigot.

Relief was momentary. The faucet wouldn't budge. Mercedes had the tools. No chance of Iowa workmen littering a scrap of anything around the building that would be useful for torque. Besides, darkness buried everything. The walk to Clinton Street to find the car, get the damn screwdriver, and return would take ten minutes minimum. I'd over-stayed my time. Mercedes would know I'd screwed-up.

I'd already worked with adrenalin and will power. "Let's hear it for vanity," I panted. Settling my bruised palms over the hexagonal knob, I wedged my back against the building as far behind the spigot as was possible, straightened my arms and used my body to add torque. The thread gave. Crying with relief, I opened the faucet as far as

it would go and felt water flowing through the hose.

\* \* \*

Mercedes stood next to me at the bench in my basement, both of us ignoring the stools. "The idea of telling you I'd forgotten the screwdriver and we had to drive back motivated me. Pour me another, will you?"

"It's two o'clock," she said, pouring into our glasses. "I've got work tomorrow."

"You're welcome to stay and get drunk with me. The bed can hold two. I'll shower off this stinking stress-sweat."

She swallowed her drink in one pull. "Maybe another time." She took her jacket off the guest hook and said goodnight.

"I didn't mean to spook you," I said, before she started up the stairs. "Just wanted to enjoy the glow a little longer."

"At a local joint sometime."

I didn't show surprise or pleasure at her suggestion. "A little flood won't stop them for more than a day or so, but it puts them on notice."

At the top of the stairs, she said, "Does this lock?"

"No. Just pull it closed firmly. Thanks for everything. It was good working with you."

"Good working with *you*."

## Chapter 23

### Mercedes at Ease

Seated at a table in the Haven restaurant when Mercedes arrived wearing an emerald green sweater that showed off her figure, I stood briefly as she settled in, and we both lit cigarettes. A waitress came to the table and took our orders for scotch with water back.

“I arranged for one of my leftist buddies to visit Benton Street,” Mercedes said, starting a comfortable topic between us. “An area in the back of the building was blocked off with folding chairs. ‘A little accident,’ the clerk told him.”

“You didn’t tell your buddy anything, I assume.”

“Of course not.” The drinks arrived, and Mercedes sipped her scotch. “He knew

enough to make small talk with the clerk.”

“Good man.” I raised my glass to toast him.

“Water had run into the building during the night. The clerk hadn’t noticed it until his first customer went behind bookshelves that partitioned the space.”

“Yeah. There are no interior walls.” I showed off.

“The upshot was the outside wall needed to be patched. A section of interior wallboard had to be ripped out. Some books and tapes were ruined. And other products. My friend didn’t specify. I pictured life-sized sex dolls floating around.”

Mercedes picked up her menu. “I’ll have fried chicken.”

“Sounds good to me.” I moved both menus to the edge of the table. A moment later, the waitress came to take our orders.

“Did they call the cops? There was nothing in the papers.”

“Maybe they wanted to keep it quiet.”

When our food arrived, we stopped talking. She salted mashed potatoes on her plate, as I bit into the crispy coating on a chicken leg. Then we ate in silence for a minute or two.

“We should put Benton Street on some type of action schedule,” she said, taking a break from her food to light a cigarette. “Make another visit in two or three months. When they’re not expecting anything, we find something else to do.”

“We’ll need more imagination next time. The place is a box. Maybe something from inside out.” I picked up a crispy thigh. After a few moments of silence, I said, “Your job going okay?”

“My day jobs have always been in offices,” she said. “UCC is a step up for me. My heart was in my night work. Lounge lizard gigs or studio work where listeners couldn’t see I was a woman.”

"Do you sing?"

"Backup occasionally. Never for credit. Not in lounges. That was usually just keyboard behind restaurant noise. My tips were from jokers who came to the piano to proposition me."

She'd said it all before, but it was fresh to me. "You control your anger pretty well."

"That's not how most people see me." She sucked on ice cubes.

I glanced at my chicken. "I meant your anger as a thwarted jazz musician."

She sat back and reached for her cigarettes again. "I wasn't good enough to be an elite musician, but a level playing field would have been nice."

"Is there any work for musicians in Iowa City?"

"No." She puffed hard on her L&M. "It's the same story as it was in Kansas City except there aren't even opportunities for club managers to screw me around here." After a pause, she added, "You're an artist?"

"No. No. That's over-stated. I'm a dabbler. Really. It's nice of you to doubt me—if that's what your look means. But no ambition along those lines. I taught art in New York, and I draw for my own pleasure. And sanity, I suppose. Definitely, not an artist." She shrugged again in polite doubt. "Do you still play?"

"It's harder to carry around a piano than a sketchpad. I treated myself to a secondhand upright last year. I play every day, just for relaxation."

We finished dinner and ordered scotch for dessert; eating had killed the original buzz. When it was time to go, I didn't ask her to come back to the basement for a nightcap. My own scotch now sat on the work bench, but I didn't want to spook her again or detract from the companionable way we had talked to each other. I missed someone to talk to.

We walked to her car, both of us acting as though we hadn't been on a date. "The Peanut meeting is this Sunday," she said. "But next week we could hang out together with her. I haven't relieved anyone or seen her except at meetings. She needs to see me regularly, in case I need to fill in."

"I'll take her to City Park about 2:00. We can meet by the swings. We have our little routine before then."

I didn't let on that Mercedes was suggesting a second date. I'd called for dinner, but wouldn't have without her telling me it would be okay. Everything in town was tangled with political responsibility; evidently, this was the way people got together.

\* \* \*

At the Sunday meeting for Peanut, Jan and Katie, food purists, criticized the nutritional value of the canned food I served Peanut. My shoulders squared, but Sissy defended me gently chiding their middle class drivel. I paid more attention to what Peanut ate after that, but I didn't tell them.

Peanut and I returned from the Laundromat on the day we were to meet Mercedes; she ate most of the split pea soup I heated for her. Crazy kid liked pea soup as much as I did. At Hamburg Inn one Sunday she'd asked for a spoonful from my bowl and wound up ordering a cup for her. Subsequently, I bought several cans for basement meals.

Lunch completed, Peanut worked on her drawing lesson for the week. I was no art therapist, but she frequently broke the points of the cheap pencils I had for her, pressing too hard in zigzag frustration. After she digested her food, I drove her in Sissy's car to City Park.

She did her aloof cat routine for a few minutes when she saw Mercedes on a swing, so I took her to the sandbox, where we filled and emptied her tin pail for a few

minutes. Eventually, she walked to the swings and pushed Mercedes's back. Mercedes helped the momentum by taking steps in the rut under the swing. That lasted only a few moments before Peanut wanted to be pushed on her own swing.

Caring for her was easy; I timed all her activities for fear she'd freak out when I least expected it, and nothing else would be on offer. The longer she was absorbed in something, the less anxious I was. When she came back to her pail, Mercedes joined us. We sat on the ledge of the sandbox and took turns packing or demolishing the mounds Peanut turned out of the pail.

"Before you moved here," Mercedes asked, breaking a long adult silence, "did you do much politics in New York?"

"Not really. I marched against the war, but I didn't belong to any groups. Until I moved here I was a pacifist. I love Gandhi's teachings and Martin Luther King's. Plus I was a chicken shit."

"That surprises me."

"It surprises me too, now. Sissy lent me her *Little Red Book*. It's hard to argue with the realities of power and powerlessness. King appealed to me because in the face of violence falling down and playing dead came naturally to me."

"You exaggerate."

"I'm afraid not. King was a beautiful man, but I didn't follow his vision because of principles."

"So what changed you? We're not wild radicals here."

"I was seriously shaken by all the deaths in 1968. Everything we thought was possible fell apart after that. However, to be honest, I think the change happened because I broke up with my ex." I said no more because Mercedes's months' old angry dismissal of my break-up flashed. She remembered too, I think, because she didn't fol-

low up. We both concentrated on Peanut, who took that moment to climb on Mercedes's lap.

"What is it, Little One?"

"Potty."

"I'll take her," I said. "Come on Peanut."

"We can both go." Mercedes picked up the pail and shovel and one of Peanut's shoes that had come off and dropped them into the pail.

We walked toward the restrooms, swinging Peanut in big jumps between us.

"I'm not a pacifist," Mercedes said. "Far from it, but I'm cautious." She seemed unsure about continuing but took a breath. "That's why I went off on you about the principal and the Black girl. I couldn't be sure the episode would end with vandalism. In my heart, I wanted to slap the pig silly. I was afraid you might actually do it."

Her explanation satisfied me, especially as I'd caught her vibe of agreement with me at the time. That's what made her subsequent blow-up hard to figure. We took Peanut into the restroom. Mercedes secured her shoe, selected a stall, and helped her get seated. No feet showed in the other stalls.

"I don't like to get that close," I said. "I'd have shot him, if I could've."

"That's a far cry from pacifism."

"Even as a pacifist, I had violent impulses. I imagined pacifism would keep them in check. I was also into petty crimes."

"Crimes?"

"Shoplifting."

"Those of us who do it, call it simply *shopping*."

My lips turned down to show I was impressed. "My ex made me stop. She didn't want me to screw-up my teaching job. Since I moved here, I've been at it again. No rea-



son not to."

"We should be careful what we say." Mercedes fluttered her five fingers lightly.

"La la la," Peanut sang while she peed.

"Can you reach the paper, Little One?"

Her cheeks screeched as she slid off the toilet; her corduroys crumpled at her feet, visible beneath the stall door. Mercedes and I listened to the toilet paper unfurl.

"Not too much, Peanut," I said. "Save some for the next person."

"She has her bathroom skills down," Mercedes whispered. "I wish her speech would come around."

"Sissy took her to the doctor. They thought she was adjusting to separation from her mother and being shuffled around."

"I know."

"Are you and Sissy friends?" I don't know what made me ask.

Mercedes pursed her lips. "Sure. We're friends. I never thought about it. We don't socialize together, but we're very close in other ways."

Before I held Peanut up to wash her hands, I fixed her underpants, which she'd neglected before she pulled up her cords. "In political ways?"

"Yes." She hesitated. "We have dead husbands in common. Mine was killed in a car accident before I left Kansas."

"I'm sorry."

"I didn't know he drank too much when I married him. He totaled our car and the car he hit, but fortunately he didn't kill anyone else. He never felt a thing. Died at the scene."

Peanut held out her arms. It took Mercedes and me a few moments to figure out she wanted to swing between us again.

"How long ago?" Peanut whimpered for our full attention.

"Six years. I assume you know about Sissy's husband. My situation doesn't eat at me the way hers does."

Peanut notched up to crying. We stopped swinging her. I knelt on the grass in front of her. "What is it? Why are you crying?"

She walked into my arms, but when I stood with her, she twisted around and wanted Mercedes to hold her.

"Why bother talking if you have everyone wrapped around your little finger?" Mercedes took Peanut.

"Let's go to the carousel. She's my excuse to ride the horses."

"I've never been. Do they have a brass ring here?"

"No." We arrived at the carousel, and I paid the attendant for all of us to ride. Then Mercedes paid for a round. Then I paid for another. Then Peanut threw-up. Then we went our separate ways.

## Chapter 24

### Meetings

Cross-country carloads of women, children and acoustic guitars took the exit off Interstate 80 into rain-soaked Iowa City. The travelers shared news from other college towns in the Midwest, around the Great Lakes and from cities on both coasts. Some visitors stayed only long enough to eat at Hamburg Inn and continue their journey; some stayed a few weeks in town; some settled, volunteered for projects, and attended meetings, the social and political life-blood of the movement.

One meeting at Max's was crowded with more newcomers than regulars, maybe thirty people in the room and four of us on the stairs. Spring rain and clouds did not stop me from wearing dark glasses in order to cruise without giving offense or to doze

when I was bored. Unfortunately, Tess of the curves above and below was on duty upstairs with the children.

As the meeting wore on, I hoped Mercedes would take down three self-described *radical feminists*—newcomers who had driven together from D.C. and who spoke as though everyone else present had been born the previous day. Despite their zeal for revolution, my eyes closed behind my glasses a few times until a knock startled me. Sitting on the bottom step near the entry, Max stood to open the door to two young girls.

“Can we talk to our mother?” the taller one said.

“Come in.” Max turned to the group.

The girls looked around timidly. When no one claimed them, the shorter girl sobbed. “She told us she lived here.”

Sissy crossed the room to them. “Is Tess Forester your mother?”

“Yes,” they answered in unison.

“She’s here. What’s your name, sweetie?”

“Cindy,” the older girl said. “This is my sister Joy. Stop crying.” She shook her sister’s arm. “She’s only ten.”

“I’ll take them,” I said. “You’re needed here, Sissy.”

The girls trailed behind me on the stairs. “Does everyone say you look like your mother?” Cindy shook her head.

The door to the playroom was open. As soon as the girls saw Tess, they ran into her arms, three of them crying. The other children, arrayed like throw pillows on the rug, were only momentarily distracted from a Lucille Ball comedy on the TV. I sat on the floor with my back against a wall.

“Did Daddy drive you?” Tess asked.

“We ran away,” Cindy said.

"And we hitchhiked."

"My god."

"I told you not to tell that part," Cindy said.

"I didn't tell."

Exasperated, the older sister ignored the younger. Tess intervened. "We've got to call Dad and let him know you're safe."

"He's mad at me," Cindy said. "I'm not calling."

"You're the oldest," Joy said.

"Mom's the oldest."

"I didn't run away," Tess said.

"Yes, you did." Cindy stared down her mother.

My hand covered my smile. "If it would help," I said, "I could call to say the girls are safe."

Tess weighed the idea. "Tell him I'll run them home in the morning."

"I don't want to go back."

"Me neither."

Tess and I stepped into the landing that divided the upstairs rooms, and she dialed the wall phone. While it rang, she handed me the receiver and whispered her husband's name. After five rings a male voice answered.

"Greg? I'm calling about Cindy and Joy. They're safe at their mother's house. She'll drive them home tomorrow morning on her way to work."

"Don't be in any hurry." Greg said. "Cynthia is on track to be a little slut like her mother."

"Excuse me. Are you using that word about your daughter?"

Tess waved her hand to discourage me from engaging him.

"If Cindy thinks she'll have better luck dating boys in a house full of queers, she can stay where she is."

"Your concern for your daughters is touching." I hung up before he could say anything else. "What a prince."

Tess wrapped her arms over chest. "You don't need to tell me."

I reported what Greg said before we returned to the playroom. Joy watched TV with the other children. Cindy slouched against a wall with her arms folded exactly like her mother's. In fact, Cindy had a budding version of her mother's figure, a mixed blessing for a girl her age.

Tess signaled Cindy to join her on the landing. "My father's a jerk," she said, as we exchanged places.

"Let's hear it," Tess said, her arms still crossed.

"Joy got her period," Cindy temporized.

Joy heard her name and turned away from the TV. "I wanted to tell Mom."

"Stop disturbing the other children," Tess said. "You'll get a chance to tell me everything in a minute. And you, missy, your father said you had a boyfriend."

"That's not true." This time Cindy lost the staring contest with her mother. "Charlie Griffin asked me to go to a dance. Dad had a fit."

Tess's sigh was audible enough to include the teen years yet to come. "You're twelve-years old."

"Almost thirteen. All my friends are going."

"I doubt that. How old is Charlie Griffin?"

"He's in ninth grade. He plays junior varsity basketball."

Tess moved the conversation away from the threshold of the playroom, no doubt so Joy couldn't hear it, but neither could I. After a few minutes, a sniffing Cindy re-

turned to the room and stood next to me with her back against the wall. *She* would not sit with the younger children.

The TV program ended. With her head hanging, Joy went into the hallway with her mother. The children became restless, so I pulled a boxed erector set from a shelf of toys. "Want to help with adult supervision?" I asked.

Cindy looked torn between listening at the door and acting as an adult. "In this house, everyone shares childcare."

Showing her metal, she intercepted Peanut who made a dash for the hall landing just then.

"Bring her here," I said. "No whimpering."

No whimpering was too much to ask of Peanut, but she did sit next to me, tears in her blueberry eyes.

Tess and Joy were not long in the hallway. "I'm a woman now," Joy said, preceding Tess into the room.

"Are not," said Cindy. "You're only ten-years old."

"Mom says."

"Mom says," Tess announced from behind, "you both have serious responsibilities as young women even though you are both, I repeat, *both*, children. Someone will drive you to the house tomorrow, so you can pick up school clothes." Tess glanced at me. "You'll stay here tonight."

*Staying* pleased Cindy and Joy; they agreed to mind the children while Tess and I went downstairs. The meeting was over. Everyone except Max had vacated the stairwell; women circulated making dates, calling upstairs for the children who didn't live at the house and saying goodbyes.

A newcomer approached Tess and said, "I'm Barbara Whitcomb. Also a mother

with issues." A blue and white man's handkerchief on her head tied at the back of her neck. Acne-scaring gave her face a tough look. She, Tess and Max, now wearing sunglasses, blocked my path on the bottom landing.

"Odd, I've never met you before," Tess said, introducing herself.

"I'm from Davenport. My girlfriend is minding my daughter while I'm here job hunting. Maybe you and I can help each other in some way."

They exchanged political credentials—an Iowa City ritual—and maternal details. Barbara's daughter was eighteen-months, a tight squeeze between getting pregnant and having a girlfriend, but maybe the friend was simply a friend. Eventually, Barbara said, "Can't your girls stay here with you? I was even wondering if I might join this collective."

"That won't work. The house already has a cap on the number of children."

"A cap?" Barbara said. "Like a quota?" She grumbled and found in her purse a sheet of paper designed to be posted in public places. "Here's my phone number." She tore off one of the contact tabs. "No one will do anything for us. We have to do it ourselves. Let's be in touch." Then she left nodding slightly to me and Max.

"Thanks for standing by me," Tess said. When I moved, she took my hand. "I needed an ally."

No need for me to explain I was blocked on the landing. "Sissy is the best ally. Let's talk to her."

Sissy and Mercedes shared the piano bench and looked back and forth at papers each shuffled and wrote on. As we approached, Mercedes said, "I don't want to send my assistant to cover the Kitchen unless it's absolutely necessary."

Sissy agreed. "We should be okay with the newcomers. This is the first month we'll have some wiggle room in the schedule."



"Excuse me." Sissy looked up at me. "Tess needs some advice."

"Something going on with your girls?" Sissy asked.

"It's complicated. They ran away."

"Let me make a suggestion," Mercedes offered. "The Peanut agenda won't take long. Why don't we talk about your situation after it when the rest of the house is here?"

"The kids need to eat soon," Tess said. "I'll start something. I'm glad I made extra brown rice yesterday."

"During the house meeting," Sissy turned to me, "can you watch the kids for supper—"

"—Cindy and Joy are upstairs with them now. They can supervise while Santa and I participate. The least my girls can do is pitch in."

"Are Madge and Angela here?" Sissy asked.

With the room emptied, Max sprawled on the couch. "Madge is upstairs with her door closed," she said. "The kids think she's out. Angela usually comes home in time for supper on Sundays."

Peanut's other caretakers, Jan and Katie had also abandoned their meeting spots for more comfortable chairs. "Why do you feel guilty?" Katie asked.

"This collective has been a refuge for me, but I don't socialize with anyone. I'm not gay, and I'm afraid the other adults think I'm aloof."

"The other adults think I'm weird," Max said. "I don't socialize with anyone either. Anyone my age. You do your house chores. You make nice meals when it's your turn to cook. You're okay. So what if you keep to yourself." Max sat up. "Only thing is: Does this mean another meeting?"

"I'm afraid so." Sissy said.

"I've been *alone* here for the first time in my life," Tess explained. "Just getting the hang of it and enjoying it. I love my daughters . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Nobody's going to put you and your girls out on the street," Mercedes said. "That's the first thing. Go ahead and make supper for the kids. We'll start the Peanut meeting." Tess went into the kitchen.

"Let's do this quickly," Sissy said. "Does anyone have any issues?"

Jenny spoke. "Since no one has called me to cover a rotation, do I need to attend these meetings? When we have two back-to-back, it's an awful way to end Sundays for those of us who work."

"I agree," Mercedes said.

"Why don't we say whoever needs a sub is responsible to contact Jenny or Mercedes?" Sissy looked around; we caretakers nodded. "The only other item is to be sure Peanut goes to the clinic this Wednesday. We'll have a pediatrics intern there. Other than that she has a birthday coming up."

"We'll handle that," Katie said, standing.

"You going to stay and eat with us?" Max asked, looking at Jan and Katie.

"No, thanks. We have a special routine for Sundays, so Peanut can get used to us each week."

As Katie gathered their jackets, Jan went upstairs to get Peanut. Tess poked her head into the living room to ask if it was okay to call the kids for supper. Angela came in the front door and met Madge coming downstairs; they laughed at their synchronized return to food and responsibilities. Sissy pulled them aside and filled them in on Tess' situation. First to leave were Jenny and her partner. I'd given up on her; she had no interest in me. Jan came downstairs carrying Peanut, and she and Katie said their good-byes and were off.

The afternoon had given me a headache, but I couldn't leave before Tess's situation was resolved. The children marched downstairs after being called, the littlest ones pouncing on Max for a few moments. "Cindy and Joy, you mind the children and have supper with them," Tess said.

After following the group into the kitchen, Cindy poked her head back into the living room. "Mom, I hate tofu."

Tess glared at her. Huffing, Cindy turned back.

"Does anyone actually like tofu?" I said. We were all embarrassed for Tess, but also amused.

No one admitted to liking it although Max said, "I'll eat anything. They better save me some."

"I put plates aside for the adults."

"See what I mean," Max said to others. "Tess is okay."

We settled into the meeting. "I don't know much about your situation," Madge said. "I know your divorce was messy, but I don't know if your ex is dangerous. Not only to you but also to the collective. We raised this issue over Peanut."

"Can we talk about what's supposed to happen tomorrow?" Max said. "Will the girls come to daycare with me?"

"Why don't you tell everyone what he said?" Tess looked at me, then at the group. "Santa spoke to their father."

"I called to tell him the girls were safe. Someone would drive them home in the morning. He told me not to be in any hurry. They could stay with the queers."

"Does that mean the girls will be in your care from now on?" Mercedes asked.

Tess shrugged. "It's too soon to tell. The oldest wants to start dating boys. Her father disapproves."

"I disapprove too," Max said.

"According to him her interest in boys makes Cindy a slut. Thanks to me of course." Tess continued, "The ten-year old just started her period. I started mine very early too. Greg's out of his league. But that doesn't mean he won't want them back."

"Any grandmother to guide the girls?" Sissy asked.

"No. Both my parents are gone and so is his mother."

"So we don't know what we're up against." Sissy was in professional mode. "If the girls want to stay with you, will it be possible to have the custody reviewed?"

"Custody isn't the problem," Tess said. "Child support is. If the girls stay with me, I'll need to move into larger quarters with them. It'll be a financial crunch."

"We're way ahead of ourselves," I said. "The kids are here now. Max needs to prepare for tomorrow."

"Of course, the girls can stay for the next few days," Angela said. "But we have three adults and five children not counting your daughters. We don't have the bedrooms to sleep any more. And we have to worry about your ex."

"I understand," Tess said. "I was the one who raised the same concern when Peanut's mother and boyfriend showed up. In fact, my ex-husband *is* something to worry about. He's vindictive and he swings wild."

"He's violent?"

"No. Not physically." We all watched Tess deciding how much more to say. "While he and I were separated, I had an affair with someone at the university."

I groaned. So did others.

"I should've waited until the divorce was final before I got involved with anyone." Tess's face blushed coral. She took a breath and continued. "That's not all. I've never hid my politics, but my lover was in jeopardy as an anti-war protester."

“—in jeopardy?” Angela asked.

“He’s an assistant professor. His department put pressure on him. That was my ex’s doing. He was enraged.”

“So during the custody battle, he painted you as a slut and a commie pinko,” I said, finishing the story for her. She grimaced in agreement.

Angela, who had two girls and a boy, said, “Did he really want custody? Or did he dig in his heels?”

“He dug in his heels. I hope some part of him wanted the girls. He’s gung-ho catholic. His father’s a big shot in town. Greg senior probably advised my husband to go after the girls. Senior is surely the one who got to my lover’s department chair. My ex’s influence doesn’t stretch that far.”

“Are the complications of the affair still hanging over you?” Mercedes asked.

“No. At least my *radical* lover told the truth about being pressured to back off our relationship, but the damage was done.”

Everyone fidgeted in silence. Tess’s explanation didn’t diminish her poor judgment.

“Much as I’ve loved being in the house, you probably need to look for a replacement for me.” Her puppy-dog eyes glanced at me. “Even if the girls go back to their father soon, I suspect running away could become routine. I could call a woman I met this afternoon. She has an 18-month old baby, and she’s looking for a place to live.”

“She’s also looking for a job,” I said. “Be sure she has a job before making any arrangements with her.”

“I need someone like you to make sensible decisions.”

The coyness rang so false, my face burned. I saw Mercedes bristle, but maybe I flattered myself. Or maybe Mercedes saw something in Tess I missed.

“Why not take it one day at a time?” Sissy showed no reaction to Tess’s coyness. “You’re probably right about running away becoming a habit, considering your daughters’ ages.”

“It’s realistic for the house to look for replacement income,” Madge said. “And for you to talk to your new contact.”

“For the time being, the girls will stay in my room, of course.” Tess spoke quickly. “I’ll talk to them tonight about our choices. And I’ll contact Barbara Whitcomb to get the ball rolling with her.”

“If we’re finished,” Max said, getting up, “I’m hungry.”

Mercedes and Sissy simultaneously offered to drive me home, but I claimed I wanted to walk and air out my brain, rather than choose one offer over the other. Tess sought my hand and squeezed it as she went into the dining room. Mercedes’s smirk was obvious.

## Chapter 25

### Newcomers

For two weeks, Tess and her daughters stayed at Max's, straining the goodwill of the house. Cindy and Joy were spoiled, and Tess indulged them rather than trigger the dramas that hid just below the surface of the family dynamic. As soon as Barbara Whitcomb took a job at the Haven, Tess arranged a Clinton Street rental with her. Everyone called the place Clinton House within a few days of its being referred to by its address. It was a short distance from the porn shop.

On moving day, women arrived to help make the new house livable. In a borrowed pick-up, I drove Tess to a secondhand store to find a couch, decent mattresses and a dresser. When we returned with the haul, Barbara's partner Clay had arrived with

Barbara's 18-month old daughter, Maya., their battered VW van crammed with household things.

Clay and I hit it off immediately. A Pueblo Indian with dark sand skin color, she joined me in the pick-up for the next round at the secondhand store. There we found a dining room table with six chairs and two more dressers. Clay peeled bills from a roll of twenties to pay for everything. We dropped the haul in front of the house, where Barbara and Tess supervised the helpers carrying things inside. Cindy and Joy took care of Maya who was still in diapers. Some helpers brought extra supplies from their homes to help the start up. Tess and Barbara took the VW to the grocery store to buy food. They returned with three six-packs of beer for the women who remained. That's when everyone realized there was no refrigerator, and Tess burst into tears.

"Barbara's laughing," I said. Laughing softened Barbara's face but exposed her chipped and missing teeth. "Clay and I can make another run to the secondhand store."

Max had been helping in the house all day, so I asked her to join us in the truck. We took one of the six packs with us and opened three cans on our way to the store. There were four refrigerators for Clay to choose from. Since we were now well acquainted with the store staff, two backroom men agreed to let us take their dolly with the refrigerator strapped on, and they helped us use their portable ramp to get it in the truck bed. After consulting together, they slid the ramp into the pick-up. We were in the loading area, away from other customers, so I opened the remaining beers. Max, Clay and I shared one can, and the men who helped us each had his own can.

As soon as we finished drinking, I said, "Hate to break up the party, guys, but if you want your equipment back before closing time, we better get going."

"You girls come back any time," one of the men said.

We crowded into the pick-up and set off for Clinton Street. "Those guys call us



'girls,'" Max said.

"Pick your battles, *girl*." I slapped Max's thigh.

With the refrigerator back at Clinton House, the three of us struggled to get the unwieldy weight off the truck and into the house. We sweated profusely as we worried it into position against a kitchen wall.

At last the move was done and the helpers dispersed. Clay and Barbara stayed at the house. Max drove home in Sissy's car, and Tess and I drove the pick-up with the borrowed equipment back to the secondhand store.

When Tess dropped me off, she hung out of the truck window. "Come back to the house around seven o'clock," she said. "After you shower and rest. Help us finish the beer and have a bite to eat."

"Thanks for asking, but I'm bushed." I could have told her I was meeting Mercedes for dinner, but I didn't.

\* \* \*

Mercedes sat at a corner table, working on her first scotch when I arrived at the Haven. As soon as I ordered my drink, she said, "If you'd had a phone, I would've called to cancel. I'm exhausted, and I put in only a couple of hours. You must be dead."

"I thought about canceling, but I figured if I could get myself to a pay phone, I could get myself here." My scotch came. A mouthful slid down my throat and burned my chest. "Was that the third move-in this month?"

"No self-pity allowed," Mercedes said. "Barbara's here."

"Barbara Whitcomb? You saw her?"

"She came over to say hello and to thank me for helping. She started working here Thursday."

"She's a tough one. You're right about us having nothing to complain about if

she's doing a shift on her feet."

"She'll mention that she saw us having dinner together," Mercedes said. I waved off concern, but she added, "She'll mention it to Tess."

My involuntary curse was audible, but it was better if Tess knew I wasn't exactly available. "If you're worried, you can tell people you keep political tabs on me."

Mercedes didn't bite at my evasion. "I do keep political tabs on you. I keep them on everybody. But Tess is obviously after you."

"Obviously?"

"Don't get a puffed head," she said. "Some people might find it a disadvantage to be straight among all the gay women."

I didn't pursue her comment because our waitress came to the table. We ordered as we had the first time; then we sat back to light cigarettes. The warming weather allowed Mercedes to shed her sweaters. The blouse she wore showed her collarbone, but no cleavage. I wore my date uniform: a white shirt open at the throat and slacks. It was also my "sir" magnet.

"The baby looks more like Clay's kid than Barbara's," Mercedes said.

"Maya has more burnt umber under her surface color, and the nappy hair is from a Black daddy."

"You sound like an authority on the matter."

"I have your colored pencils to thank for that. Sketching requires that I look at skin color closely."

"Everyone notices skin color," Mercedes said. "Maybe not the way you do, but most white people are obsessed about it even though they describe all shades in between as only black or white."

"I find that very annoying, being neither."

"So you've been sketching? Will Sissy get her office picture?"

"That will take more time than I've had lately."

"You're getting used to your new job?"

"Yes. But instead of a goodnight cup of tea, I've switched to scotch. I need to get a refrigerator for the basement now that the weather is warmer. I have no idea how I'll get even a small one downstairs without killing myself."

"Is there an outlet at the top? You could leave it on the landing."

"Brilliant."

Our food arrived. Both of us had more appetite than we'd had at our first dinner; I added nothing to Mercedes's doggie bag. Our scotch desserts gave us a second wind, so I suggested we do the ice cream stroll. We left the Haven and meandered the main streets with others for whom the promenade was entertainment. "Is it my imagination," Mercedes said, "or do people stare at you?"

"It's not your imagination. It's especially bad in Iowa City, but I've had it all my life. Either they stare at me or don't see me at all. Cool that you noticed."

Deciding against ice cream, we went into the only bar in town that comfortably mixed local and university patrons. A cocker spaniel curled close to the front door and waited for its master. We sat at a knife-scarred table and drank in silence, enjoying the dingy, nearly urban interior. The women we knew would never have chosen the place. Most did not hang out in public unless they were in packs.

When we finished our drinks, we walked to Mercedes's car, and she drove me home. I didn't ask her in; if anything was going to happen between us, she'd need to give a clear signal. Either way it was okay with me.

## Chapter 25

### More Newcomers

Straight white teeth highlighted the flawless complexion generations of good nutrition allowed. Julia Banister cruised into town from Ann Arbor. Articulate to a fault and something of an air hog, she described herself at the first meeting she attended as a red diaper baby. Disdaining her inherited class status—father a lawyer, mother a pediatrician, she claimed to be *one with the people*.

She might have been written-off as a blowhard transient; Iowa City saw its share of the type, except that shortly after her arrival, she joined Clinton House. The move surprised me because Max's, Katie and Jan's, and Clinton House were models of collective living. Julia's place, therefore, among the activists in town was assured.

One Sunday two hours into the usual agenda, Sissy addressed the group. "I know all the regulars are stretched very thin, both with their time and money," she said. "In one sense, our movement is growing very fast, but in another sense, we can't keep up with our growth. So I'm making this request only to those who could give something to Peanut's personal care."

"This is worse than church," Katie said in good humor, allowing others time to groan and dig for money.

"We have just under two-hundred dollars in reserve," Sissy continued. "We want an emergency fund of five-hundred. Peanut's situation is unstable, so we'd like to be prepared for the unexpected."

Julia Banister raised her hand and flashed her expensive dental work. "Lots of working class families don't have any extra money for their entire family," she said. "Peanut is one person."

Adrenalin surged through my stomach, but before I could speak, Mercedes said, "Thank you for sharing your views on working class families."

Julia tried to explain, but Mercedes talked over her. "If Peanut's caretakers want to give her more than your middle class standard for working class families, that's their business." Mercedes's tone was withering. The room hushed. "Upper class, middle class and working class women in this room regularly contribute toward her kitty. Would you like to kick in on a regular basis?"

"I don't have a job," Julia said, only slightly flustered.

"Why not?" I spit out. She looked dumbfounded. "Why don't you have a job?"

"I do political action," Julia said. "I volunteer for day care and the medical clinic, and I advocate at the Kitchen, like Sissy does."

"How dare you compare yourself to Sissy," Mercedes shouted. "Sissy *works* at the

Kitchen. How can you afford not to have a job?"

Julia's facial expression finally showed her predicament.

"If you want to read Julia the riot act," Trudy said, turning toward Mercedes, "no one would stop you. However, if you'd like those of us who are middle class to educate her, we could spare you from having to do this for the umpteenth time."

The wheels turn behind Mercedes's furious green eyes. Trudy never spoke unnecessarily. People listened to her because her emotional scars gave her credibility through she never traded on her history. I admired that about her.

"Go ahead," Mercedes finally said. "I'm sick of this bullshit. Don't forget to ask her why she imagined she had any right to UCC funds."

"What funds?" Someone asked from a corner of the room.

"She pranced into my office and asked for a voucher for the book store." Mercedes jerked her head toward Julia.

"Who told you could do that?" Max asked. She was on the stairs next to me.

"I thought it was common knowledge," Julia said. "But since you're pissed about it, I don't want to get anyone in trouble."

"Did you give her a voucher?" Max said. "I want one too."

"Hell, no."

People talked over each other and the meeting hit a pocket of chaos, as occasionally happened. Julia's self-importance made people like or dislike her immediately. For all her being *one with the people*, she aggravated class differences.

"A provocateur?" Mercedes said to Sissy who sat near her.

Near enough to hear them, I said, "People said that about me when I first came to town. Would the government have infiltrated someone so annoying?"

"You give the government too much credit," Mercedes said.

The cross talk stopped as suddenly as it started. Trudy said in her customary monotone, "Being downwardly mobile doesn't make you working class."

Having the middle class women explain class privilege, as I'd learned to call it, helped take away the sting of Julia's presumption. Maybe not for Mercedes who smoked a cigarette as though she was stabbing Julia with it.

Trudy and others who made criticisms were patient while Julia continued explaining herself. Mercedes wanted to go after her again, but Sissy took Mercedes's arm and led her out of the room. Clay followed them into the kitchen, so did Max, Barbara, me, and two others. Sissy returned to the living room with the other middle class women.

"We needed the income," Clay explained. "But she's been driving us crazy. You haven't heard her go on about our radical *third world* house."

I rolled my eyes, and Mercedes frowned.

"She talks about Third World people," Clay continued, "like she has something to do with us."

Voices in the living room sounded louder, then quieted.

"I don't see much of her," Barbara said. "She's usually asleep when I come home from work and out of the house when I get up. Only time I've really seen her is at meetings."

"When she's at her best," I said.

"I should have booted her ass out after the first time she lectured me about the oppression of Native Americans." Clay's lip curled in disgust.

After we'd trashed Julia's politics and personality, Clay took a joint from her shirt pocket and lit up while the re-education in the living room continued. Not everyone in the kitchen took a hit on Clay's joint. After it went around once, Clay said, "Do you

folks think a group of non-white women would fly in this town?"

"I'm interested," I said. "Are you, Max?"

"Me!" She took off her sunglasses. "Naw." After a moment, she added, "My relatives speak Spanish, but we're all white."

"I wasn't sure," I admitted. "Better to include you and be wrong rather than exclude you."

Clay hissed on the roach and passed it. "After they finish with Julia," I asked, "what else is happening? I want to split."

"We have to wait for Tess," Barbara said. "And Julia."

"Money for Peanut was the last item on the agenda," Mercedes said.

"I'm going then." I slipped into the living room, where the discussion seemed to be dwindling. Julia sat in a lotus position staring at the rug. Her light-brown ponytail accentuated her high cheekbones and preppy nose slightly rounded at the tip. Pleasant looking, but too thin for my taste and too white.

Leaving early relieved me of the weekly offers to catch a ride with Sissy or Mercedes, and walking alone allowed me to think about Clay's proposed group meeting. For as long as I could remember, I'd skated around who I was. I had no group to identify with. The few times I saw my mother, her skin was the color of heroin, booze and misery; I couldn't even tell if under her ratty hair she had once had curls like mine. I could tell she wasn't white like the foster families I lived with. So what did that make me?



## Chapter 27

### Sissy Surprises

One night at the exit door of Sheller-Globe, I spotted Sissy. Before she saw me, I modified my sour face. "You're a pleasant surprise in an otherwise grimy environment," I said.

"I didn't want to miss you, so I waited where I could see everyone leaving."

We walked to Sissy's car. "Are you the good-deed taxi?" I asked. "Or do you have something on your mind?"

"A little of both."

She got in behind the wheel and pulled up the lock button on the passenger side. Then she lifted a can of beer from the floor and handed it and a church key to me.

"Always bearing gifts." I punched a triangle in the top of the can and an air hole opposite it and slugged back the brew. "Ah. Very thoughtful. Thank you. I still haven't bought a refrigerator for the basement."

"What are you waiting for?"

"I don't know." I offered Sissy the can.

She declined and moved with other cars out of the parking lot and onto the highway. "So much has been happening in town. I don't see you except at meetings."

"That's the size of my social life too," I lied.

"If you don't have other plans tonight, I'm inviting myself."

I drained the can of beer. "No plans."

"Did you notice my careful wording?" she said. "I practiced so as not to accuse you of having other midnight visitors."

I patted her thigh, and we chatted about local gossip. Barbara Whitcomb's baby Maya had been to the clinic for a check up. Jenny would be leaving Iowa City to take a job promotion on a campus in Indiana. The magazine collective ran afoul of their printer because he refused to print drawings of nudes.

"Printers print nudes all the time. Hasn't he noticed?"

"These nudes were holding rifles and battle-axes. Bats and swords. It was a full-page drawing paired with a poem Trudy wrote about men and sex crimes."

I straightened my legs for a few moments, before relaxing them. "Men do seem to get that retaliation is obscene. Why don't they get that sex crimes are obscene?"

We fell silent. I massaged Sissy's thigh. "Do you wear long skirts in every season?"

"Pretty much. The long underwear comes and goes."

The light fabric moved easily, as my hand slid under her skirt, not like some of

her winter skirts, heavy as blankets. "Your panties come and go, too?" Her thigh felt incredibly soft under my calloused fingers. I'd guessed right about what was on her mind.

She shifted in her seat. "Don't make me lose consciousness while I'm driving."

"You flatter me."

She parked in front of my house and turned off the motor. "Don't get out yet," she said, climbing over the gearshift—gracefully, considering the tight squeeze in the Bug and her long skirt. She straddled me, her exposed thighs on my jeans. I unhooked her bra and lifted her breasts free. An object came loose from the bra and fell between us.

In the moonlight, I identified a plastic hotdog in a bun and roared, a belly laugh that purified my spirit. Sissy with her head on my shoulder laughed too.

"Wouldn't you rather go inside?"

"No. I'm having a tawdry night, in case you didn't notice."

She held my face against her breasts. I put the hotdog between her legs and held it steady while she worked on it, breathing heavy and building momentum. Finally, she came in a rush that wet my hand and my pants.

When she was calm, I backed the slippery plastic out of her and left it on my lap, the only place for it given our position.

"Take off your jeans," she whispered. "I want to lick you."

"You're an angel, but I can't imagine how to manage in the car. I'm dirty from work. And I'm a chicken-shit."

"Really? Come on then. We'll go downstairs. We need to talk anyway, so you're stuck with me." Rather than climb back over the gearshift, Sissy got out through the passenger door, arranging her clothes as she went. I put the hotdog in the waistband of

my jeans in case she wanted more of it. We managed the basement stairs.

I showered and toweled off then put on a pair of shorts and a tee shirt. Sissy kissed me, but I was through for the night. "Are you sure? Or are you being shy?"

Balking at the shy business, I said, "I'm sure." She let me be.

"Do you still have tea before bed time?" she said.

"There's a bottle of scotch on the shelf with the tea bags. In so many ways my life has moved from tea to booze."

"Care to explain?" Her professional mode.

I sat on a stool, the freshly washed hotdog on the wood bench. Without my asking her or her asking me, she put an old-fashion glass with two fingers of scotch in front of me.

"None for you?"

"I have to drive. Liquor goes right to my head."

"You can stay the night."

"Probably not." She frowned. "I wish I was enough for you. Don't say anything. I know you like me and all that. I wish we were a couple other people respected."

"Respected?"

"Left you alone."

"I thought people in town prided themselves on being non-monogamous."

She stepped behind me and put her arms around my waist. "While they jockey for position."

I considered the hotdog again as a way to change the subject; instead, I said, "If we were a couple, the sex wouldn't be so good. Plus, I'm moody a lot."

"You don't need to warn me off. I know it's not going to happen. Even though I could be good for you."

"Too good. I'd break your heart without even realizing it." Odd the way lines rolled off the tongue without rehearsing them.

Sissy's half-laugh told me she saw through me—the truth and my way of telling it. She moved away from me. "I want to talk to you about Peanut. I didn't plan to bother you about our being a couple." She composed herself. "Tess didn't want to bring this up at the meeting yesterday. Too many newcomers lingering around. We can't have the Peanut meeting after the general meeting anymore. We need to meet at my place or at Katie and Jan's again."

I finished my scotch, relieved we'd changed the subject.

"Cindy and Joy argued with their father about Cindy hanging around with boys. He grounded her. Joy's pre-menstrual symptoms make her a lunatic. Poor child. She was already grounded. The girls told their father they didn't want to live with him. If they couldn't live with their mother, they wanted a group to take care of them like Peanut has."

"Oh shit."

"When Tess questioned the girls closely, they claimed they didn't mention Peanut by name. But the damage is done."

Slipping off the stool, I retrieved the bottle and poured another drink.

"The upshot," Sissy continued, "is we need to be cautious. Tess's ex and his father are well connected in town."

"So what's the drill?"

"We don't have the personnel for everyday one-on-one if we take Peanut out of daycare," Sissy said. "Max will get her out of sight if social services comes snooping around the building. The rest of us need to be alert when we're with her. No more riding her on the handlebars of your bike."

"Who told you that?"

"She told me. She loves it. Child welfare might think you were being reckless with her."

"It's the excitement she loves. Little girls shouldn't be afraid of danger."

"I understand," Sissy said. "But you see the problem."

## Chapter 28

### Always Something

At the end of May, I bought a small refrigerator and installed it on the landing, where I wedged my way around it coming and going. I'd entered the twentieth century with beer in the fridge and cold milk for cereal. Unfortunately, I climbed the stairs more often, and frequency made me careless. I fell again and bruised my hip. The image of an immobilizing fall and waiting until someone heard me hollering nagged me. I mentioned my worry one Friday night after work when I visited Clay to play cards. Going to Clinton House was a new habit.

"Why not fix the damn step before you break a leg?" Clay said. "I'll help you."

I shuffled the deck. "We can have our next Third World meeting there."

"What do you do at your meetings?" Tess asked.

Besides Clay, my other reason for going to Clinton House was Tess. I saw her on Friday nights and Mercedes on Saturday nights. The arrangement wasn't even non-monogamous because the only person I had sex with was Sissy.

"We talk about Angela Davis and Bobby Seale and plan the overthrow of the government." Clay's tone had an edge. Although she'd baited Tess by mentioning it, the no-white-women idea had fizzled. She didn't like Tess's asking about it.

Barbara came home just then wearing her work uniform and tossed her purse on a table near the front door. She joined us in the dining room and plopped onto a chair. Clay folded her cards and took a beaded pouch from the vacant seat beside her.

"You're early tonight. Was it slow?" Clay took a plastic bag from the pouch, shook some weed from it onto the tabletop and combed through it.

"The cook is a pig," Barbara said, bending to unlace her white oxfords and slip her feet free of them. "Whenever I went into the kitchen, he found a way to rub his belly against me. I want to stick a scissors in him."

"When did this start?" Tess asked, covering Barbara's hand.

"Tonight was the first time for me, but other waitresses warned me it would happen." She moved her hand away from Tess.

"Did you say anything?"

Clay lit a fat joint and handed it to Barbara. "I told him to keep his filthy body off me." She hissed on the weed and held the smoke a few moments before she added, "He laughed."

"You should report him to the police," Tess said.

"The police won't do anything." Barbara's tone dismissed the idea. "He owns the place. Other girls have reported him. Nothing happens, except the girls get fired."



"What do you think we can do?" Clay asked. "Short of cutting open his gut with a dull knife?"

When Barbara didn't answer, I spoke cautiously. "After age thirteen or so, I avoided getting that physically close to fight. Except for being beat up a couple of times."

"Those are fights," Clay said.

"Not if I don't get to throw a punch."

Tess was silent; I'd forgotten she was at the table.

"I prefer being wily, too," Clay agreed. "I've seen this fucker. His weight is a weapon."

"Are you going back?" Tess asked, her voice a bit throaty.

"I don't have a choice." Barbara took another hit and held it. "Waiting table at a restaurant that serves liquor is a job I can make decent money at."

Clay rolled another joint, and we passed it around, leaving the first one to Barbara. The card game resumed without much talking, as each of us weighed the news about the cook.

At 2:30 Julia entered the house and came into the dining room. Without a word, Barbara left the table and walked barefoot into the first floor bedroom she shared with Clay.

"I thought you were upstairs asleep," Tess said, cheered by Julia's presence.

"Where do you find anything to do so late," I asked.

"I was in a bar."

"Why don't your clothes reek of tobacco?" Clay asked.

"Why are you two giving her the third degree?" Tess butted in.

"Don't laugh it off." The edge was back in Clay's voice. "I'd like to know where

you were, too. What does a white girl do in this town after dark?"

"A secret *rendezvous*?" Tess suggested.

"I'll never tell." Julia tossed her ponytail in forced nonchalance and left the room. I wanted to strangle Tess.

The front legs of Clay's chair hit the floor, and she looked hard at Tess. "Why did you give her a ready-made excuse?"

Older than Julia, Tess was not intimidated by Clay as Julia had been. "You were giving her a hard time for no reason," Tess said. "It made her and me uncomfortable."

Clay gathered her smoking paraphernalia and stood. "I *wanted* to make her uncomfortable. She was lying. You should have kept your mouth shut and let it go down. You were uncomfortable because you're a middle class . . ."

I sprung to my feet.

"You're going to defend her?" Clay smirked.

"I'm going to ask you to watch what you say."

Clay snorted. Tess got up in a huff.

"I'll leave you two to work out your little ritual."

Tess's comment annoyed me, but it was Clay who challenged it by repeating, "your little ritual," so its put-down echoed.

With Tess out of the room, Clay and I faced each other. No doubt the weed helped, but shared feelings passed between us—distrust of Julia, Tess's mindless interference, her disdainful comment—we needed to save face and control the ocean of anger from causes beyond our control.

"I'm going to bed," Clay said. "I'll come by to fix your stairs tomorrow morning."

"I'll let myself out now," I said, letting her know I wasn't going up to Tess. That

was how we left it.

\* \* \*

The following morning, Clay opened the door to the basement and called my name. "I nearly tripped over your damn bike," she said, coming down.

"It must have fallen over. The kickstand's broken. Don't trip over the step we're supposed to fix. I thought you'd wheel Maya over in the buggy."

"Julia's scoring third world points this morning." Clay pretended to spit. "Maya goes upstairs with her when she wakes in the morning."

Why did Clay let Julia use Maya that way? I didn't ask. Need could lead to compromised decisions; I knew that.

"Where can I roll?" Clay looked around.

"Here." The cover of my large sketchpad was firm and flat.

She pulled out her pouch. "Stays fairly cool down here," she said, picking twigs out of the grass.

I took a clean ashtray from a shelf and put it on the bench next to her. After she rolled and twisted the ends of the paper, she fired up. One toke was enough for me. After two or three hits, Clay licked her thumb and forefinger, squeezed off the lit end of the joint and dropped the cinder into the ashtray.

"Show me where the problem is."

"It tripped me twice," I said, pointing out a short step, cut too narrow to make the turn into the basement.

"An amateur built this," Clay said. "No Iowa carpenter could have done it."

After she studied the problem, she said realigning the step was too complicated, so we agreed on a simpler solution with a railing of two-by-three posts.

"This will maintain the original construction style of careless-make-do," she said.

When she finished measuring, we went upstairs and drove her VW Van to the only lumberyard in town. A worker cut the wood to measure, I paid, and we drove back, where we unloaded the lumber and supplies along with Clay's tools. She measured and marked, and I hammered as she instructed.

At one o'clock, we slapped hands and declared the job finished. I gave the new railing its maiden trial going up for two beers. We gulped the icy brews. Admiring our work, I said, "If I fall again, I'll probably crash through."

"Hey. What do you want from an Indian?" Clay picked up the ashtray and carried it to the soft chair by the bed. "Let's polish this off."

I sat on the bed while she lit the second half of the joint. We passed it back and forth until she burned her lip on the roach. "We work well together," I said. "Would you consider another project with me? A political project, sort of." I told her about the porn shop. "It's on Benton Street, around the corner from you."

"I've seen men go in there. I never put it together." She frowned at missing the connection. "We can't do your hose trick again. Do you have anything else in mind?"

"No. The original plan was to pester the store every three or four months. It's time."

"This appeals to me more than sitting through boring meetings about radical politics," she said.

"I check out the site whenever I go to your house. Looks like the patrons use the empty lot next to it for parking."

"Any possibility of breaking in and torching the place?"

"I ruled out fire. A rental property is too close."

Clay stood and stretched. "I've got to get the van back to Barbara. I'll take the stroller to Benton Street this afternoon when Julia brings Maya home."

"Be nice to know what the traffic patterns to the building are," I suggested.

"I can check it out every couple of hours until they close."

"I'll go to your place after my shift on Friday." I swept up the sawdust in the work area while we talked. Neither of us mentioned my visiting Tess.

"After we do this porn business," Clay said, "would you help me with the slime ball where Barbara works?"

"Okay."

"You're not sure?"

"I'm sure," I said. "I could spend a lifetime doing the nickel and dime stuff. Three new fuckers pop up every time we ding one. It's never ending."

## Chapter 29

### Nickels and Dimes

At the start of each shift at Sheller-Globe, I prepped ten or more drums to get Norman started; after every break, I cleaned another ten for him. An ear-cracking PA system regularly sent me by name to other areas of the plant with a flat utility cart to remove dirty or broken molds of various sizes. Some I took to the repair area. The dirty ones, I cleaned.

Small and medium sized molds fit into a huge aquarium-like tank that had gloved holes for my hands to access the cleaning hose. I could sandblast for as long as needed to get perfect results. Steam cleaning was not so easy or satisfying. Only the molds too large for the sandblasting tank were steam cleaned. I burned myself regularly

at that task and always covered myself with gunk. Overall, having different tasks was better than standing on the line in one spot for eight hours.

My ride from work dropped me about a mile from Clinton House the Friday after Clay and I fixed my stairs. Generally, I needed fifteen minutes of night air to be free of physical and emotional toxicity. At the door of Clinton House, Clay greeted me with an impish grin. "I may have screwed up your bedroom life," she said. "I told Tess you were coming over after work, and she got all huffy. I guess you haven't talked to her since last week. She left about ten o'clock with Julia. Sorry about that."

Clay was not the least bit sorry. "I didn't tell her I was coming over because we've got nothing going on," I said. "I came to see you. Tess is a tease. Doesn't know if she wants to come out with just a fling."

"What better way?"

"Mercedes was right about her," I said. "She thought Tess wanted a gay shield to help her manage her way around the women who do all the work."

"Her younger kid is good with Maya," Clay admitted. "But Barbara can't deal with any of them. She's fried after her shift and has no patience for any BS. Tess is as strapped for money as any of us, but she has these airs sometimes. Like insisting on ballet lessons for the girls."

"It's Julia who gives me the creeps." I sat at the dining room table where Clay began rolling a joint.

"She gets the best grass," Clay said. "Without it, I wouldn't have any use for her. Do you think people where you work might want to buy?"

"I have no idea what goes on there." I almost mentioned my predecessor at Sheller-Globe who was fired for smoking pot but caught myself. I wouldn't help Clay in that area and certainly not Julia. "Did you see anything around the corner this week?"

We took a few tokes. Clay squeezed off the lit part as she'd done many times before and took folded graph paper from her pocket. She opened two sheets, smoothed the creases with the palm of her hand, and moved them toward me. Neat columns marked days, times and number of vehicles in the lot next to the porn shop.

"I'm impressed by your details," I said.

"Do you have a plan? Or will we both figure that out?" Clay pointed at one of the columns. "Tonight and last Saturday night are the big winners. We could have guessed that. The problem I see is that nobody hangs out there for any length of time. Traffic moves in. They make their purchases. They leave."

"Nails," I said. Clay squinted. "We bought a box at the lumber store last week for my stairs." She raised an eyebrow encouraging me to continue. "Do the cars park in any particular pattern? Any one spot?"

"Most park close to the entrance. Those pricks actually look right and left to see if they're being watched."

"We could make this action easy on ourselves and lace the area with nails. Nothing would happen on the spot. Cars would drive off, hopefully with slow leaks, and eventually a tire or two fizzes out."

"The drivers and cars would have no connection to each other," Clay added. "They wouldn't put flat tires and the location together."

"No immediate satisfaction for us, but dropping nails could be ongoing until we think of something better."

"One Chevy parks there all afternoon and evening," Clay said. "Probably the guy who runs the place."

"We could think up something special for his car, at least dirt in the gas tank."

Clay pushed a second graph sheet toward me. "License plate numbers," she said,



grinning ear to ear. "I probably missed more than I saw."

"This is fabulous work. We could use public records to track people by their plate numbers. We have enough dope here for months of projects. You're a genius."

"Thanks. You can do the nails on your own. No need for two of us."

I folded the sheet of license plate numbers and slipped it into my jeans pocket. We had no more to say, so Clay dealt the cards, and we played Concentration for a couple of hours. Close to two o'clock, I got up to leave.

"If you wait until Barbara gets home, I'll drive you. Unless you want to wait around for Tess to come home and play hard to get?"

"Thanks, smart ass. I'll walk home."

\* \* \*

Showered, dressed in clean clothes, I set the Big Ben alarm to go off at 4:00 and lay on top of the bed covers. I'd forgotten to flip on the fan I'd bought and argued with myself about getting out of bed to turn it on. It felt like a minute passed and a shrill alarm sounded. I bolted upright and slapped down the clock stem. At the utility sink, I passed a wet cloth around my face. Under the stairwell where Clay and I'd left it was the box of nails. Upstairs, I took my sneakers off the top of the refrigerator and slipped into them.

I peddled hard toward Benton Street; the box slid from side to side in the bicycle carrier. Deliciously cool air. I parked the bike on the front lawn of Clinton House just beyond the porn site, walked back to the building, and sprinkled nails over the empty lot. Carpet tacks might work better. A visit to a hardware store would take care of that.

By quarter to five—that was how long the action took—I leaned the bicycle back where I'd started from and went downstairs to the basement. Clothes folded neatly on the chair by my bed, I flipped on the fan and poured two fingers of scotch to help me

sleep. But instead of getting into bed, I roughed in a sketch of Clay's face in three-quarters profile; I wanted to show her long braid and the slant of her eyes. The likeness was exceptionally good, so I added color, pencil by pencil. When I took note of the time, it was 6:30 in the morning. I dressed again and went upstairs, mounted the bicycle, and peddled toward a reward of pancakes and bacon.

While I slouched against a wall at Hamburg Inn and waited for an opening at the counter, I followed an impulse and called Mercedes on the pay phone in front. She picked up on the fourth ring and knew where I was because of the background noise. In some ways, life in Iowa City was an open book.

"You told me you were an early bird," I said, nearly losing my nerve when she silently waited for me to continue. "I'm going to The Haven tonight about seven-thirty. Are you free to join me?"

"I'm not fit for human company. I've had a miserable week."

"Not personally, I hope."

"UCC."

"Let me twist your arm. I have news about Benton Street."

She sighed in a way I couldn't read without seeing her face. "I'll meet you there. Whoever arrives first orders drinks."

## Chapter 30

### Upping the Ante

A hostess led me to the table Mercedes and I usually shared. I ordered two scotches, and the first taste stirred an erotic rush. The cat-and-mouse game with Tess titillated me; I'd make love to her eventually, but I didn't think her heart was in it. *It* being genuine interest in me. Mercedes on the other hand was problematic in my life. She had a temper to be avoided, but she was more of a match for me than anyone else on the horizon. Except I wasn't looking for a match; at least, I'd stopped pining about Catherine every day.

Mercedes looked especially good when she joined me. Lightweight slacks showed-off her figure, as did her scoop neck sleeveless blouse. I stood when she arrived and kissed her lightly on the cheek as though that was our usual routine. If she minded, she didn't let on. I signaled for a scotch refill. When it came, we clinked glasses.

"Enjoy your drinks," the waitress said. She was already too tired to smile, but her voice was cordial. "I'll be back for your order in a few minutes."

"I feel better already." Mercedes sipped her scotch. "It's not just the drink. I feel

like a human being enjoying a Saturday night out. I'm not at a meeting or thinking about all the crap that happens to women in this town."

"Is there another issue brewing?"

"Endless large and small problems need attention."

"Funny you should say that. I was talking to Clay yesterday about the same thing. The oppression of women is never ending."

"You're talking like a feminist," Mercedes said. "Don't look defensive. I'm pulling your leg. You know what the result is of all the consciousness raising we've done at the Kitchen? Women use their tears and neediness to get their way with us. For some, manipulation is the only strategy they know."

"Us?"

"They suck Sissy dry with their stories. I know they need to talk about whatever leads them to our door, but some women think their sob stories are social coin at UCC."

The waitress came to the table and took our order for dinner. "I have one small victory to report," I continued when we were alone. "I dumped nails all over the porn shop parking lot. I won't know how many flat tires I'll get, but pestering the place is on schedule."

"Did you work alone?"

"Doesn't take an army to sprinkle a box of nails. I could let others do it. It's very low risk."

"It is a good entry-level action," Mercedes agreed. "For someone who likes to play in the dark."

"Do you have anyone in mind?"

"No. Sissy keeps track of newcomers who turn up. Most are still into consciousness raising."

"I have license plate numbers of cars that frequent the porn place." I lay the sheet of graph paper on the table. "These could help with a more elaborate project." I stopped talking when our food arrived.

When the waitress moved off, Mercedes cut into her chicken and said, "The license plates are an impressive piece of work."

"I thought so, too, but not my doing." We ate in silence for a few minutes, sampling each item on our plates.

Mercedes took a break after four or five bites and lit a cigarette. "Sissy runs a group called 'Action Strategies.'"

"Could they develop something around the porn shop? Put the licenses to names and addresses."

"I wouldn't give them anything so valuable until they show some metal," Mercedes said. "Unfortunately, they talk more than they act."

"I shouldn't laugh. It's not easy to come up with actions."

"The newcomers don't integrate quickly enough." Mercedes separated canned green beans from potatoes. "Our core operations eat up our best people."

"I wish I had the know-how to blow up something. The small stuff is frustrating."

Mercedes and I looked up to smile at Barbara who stood in her waitress uniform at our table. "Enjoy." She put a plate of pie and two forks on the table. "Sorry it's not a la mode. I didn't want to go to the kitchen for ice cream."

"Is the creep still bothering you?" I asked.

"He's a permanent bother. To me or to some other woman." In a practiced manner, Barbara's eyes swept her section of tables. "You have no idea how much I'd like to stick an ice pick in his belly."

"Has anyone made a scene when he gets aggressive?" Mercedes asked.

"He thinks it's a big joke." She checked her section of tables again and moved off.

"Got to go."

"I want to get rid of fuckers like that pig," I said. "That's my idea of action."

Mercedes frowned. "This is a too small a town for such risky business. You need to think longer term."

"Longer term will be just as bad or worse." I stood and put my napkin on the table. "Excuse me. I'll be right back."

Louvered café doors near the bar led to the Haven kitchen. As I approached, two waitresses with plates of food along their forearms and a plate in hand backed out against one of the doors. I pushed open the other door a moment before a third waitress, similarly laden, tried to back out. We nearly collided. Behind her a man with a white apron tied around his big belly had a hand on her hip.

"Excuse me," I said, surprised to see him in action.

"What are you doing in here? This area is employees-only."

"Looking for the rest room." He knew I'd seen what he was doing. The waitress hurried out while I held the door open. Still glaring at him.

"The other side of the bar," he grumbled.

I backed away, but kept looking at his face.

"Fucking queer," he said.

"So's your mother." He might not have heard because he picked up and slammed down a pot.

Grinning on my way back to the table, I locked eyes with the last waitress through the door. She was not grinning. The staff would have to deal with the cook's anger. I re-joined Mercedes. "Caught the SOB with his hands on one of the women. I

wanted to see what he looked like.”

Mercedes frowned. “Now he knows what you look like. We can’t come here anymore. He’ll mess with our food.”

“There are other restaurants.”

Mercedes sat back and studied me. Patiently, she said, “Your recklessness has no political foundation.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Not in the least. You may not give a shit about politics, but I’m talking about having principles. You’re simply impulsive and lawless.”

“Who makes the laws?” Her continued frown showed she would not argue with me about abstractions.

“You can’t go after someone like him,” she tossed her head in the direction of the kitchen, “on instinct.”

“More of the waitresses should act on instinct. He was groping them when their hands were full. Instinct could have been to throw the plates at him or just drop them on the floor.”

“She did act on instinct.” Mercedes leaned forward. “The instinct to keep her job and work around the obstacles.”

“That’s one way of looking at it. Maybe her instinct is to be subservient, to tolerate being touched even though she didn’t want to be.”

We didn’t talk again until we each ate a mouthful of pie and settled the bill. Outside the Haven, Mercedes said, “Want to stroll a few blocks?”

“Gladly. I thought you were ticked off at me.”

“Not ticked off. Trying to understand you. You’re a serious person underneath your glib attitude. Didn’t you say you’d read Marx?”

"I read Marx, but I prefer Bakunin. I told you that the first time you asked. Reading Marx doesn't make me a true believer. He has little to offer women or people who are not white. And Sissy gives me books by women regularly."

"Marx and race are matters I'd like to discuss with you some time."

She really did take me seriously. I was flattered. Not flattered. Relieved.

"Right now," she continued, "I'm trying to square your attitude with the politics I know. Your behavior is very individualistic, very bourgeois."

"Please, with the bourgeois."

We walked the main streets of downtown Iowa City exchanging ideas about book politics and spontaneous actions. I listened to her cautions and her strategies for long-term change and asked sensible questions about her ideas. She returned the attention and asked probing questions about my judgment and recklessness.

"I'm willing to learn from you," I said. "I'm hungry for conversations that connect ideas with personal behavior."

She stopped in the street and turned me around to face her. "I'm willing to learn from you, too."

At ten o'clock we separated. I walked to Clinton House to talk to Clay. Since Barbara was at the Haven, I assumed Clay was at home with Maya. Tess, however, answered the door.

"I thought you'd given up on me," she said.

Tongue-tied for the moment, I entered the living room with my head down. "Is Clay with Maya?"

"Maya's asleep in Julia's room. Clay usually comes in before Barbara." Tess sat on the couch and patted the cushion next to her.

"Your girls with their father?" I asked.



“For more than a week. That’s some kind of record since I moved here. They certainly know how to manipulate both their parents.” Tess’s long breath was filled with parental exhaustion.

A non-committal grunt was all I managed. I no longer cared about her or her problems; she wasn’t crazy about me. That bit of self-knowledge landed in the junkyard at the back of my mind. Fortunately, Clay opened the door then.

“This is not your night here,” she said to me. “Did you get stood up?”

I stared at her. “Tess was keeping me company until you came home. I’ve got to talk to you. Something happened at the Haven tonight.”

“Did you have dinner there with Mercedes?”

Tess stood, puffed out of the room and went upstairs.

“Why did you do that?” I asked.

“Just a mood. I didn’t want her to play cards with us.” Clay went into her room and returned with cards and her beaded pouch. “Forget it. She needs help with her daughters. I did you a favor.”

I put ten dollars on the table. “I must have smoked a nickel bag with you over the past two weeks.”

Following her usual cleaning of the weed, she wrapped a thin joint and lit up. “Are you planting nails tonight?”

“I did them early this morning. Parked my bike right on your lawn. When you take Maya out tomorrow, see if they’re still on the ground. Carpet tacks will work better.”

We passed the joint back and forth. Until Barbara came home, I’d forgotten what I’d come to discuss with Clay.

“Slow night,” Barbara said, sitting at the dining room table and untying her

shoes. "Pig face was a pain in the ass. Someone walked in on him while he was annoying one of the girls." Barbara took a puff and held the joint while she swallowed the smoke. Then she hit it again.

"I'm the one walked in on him. I'm sorry I screwed things up for you."

"Was it an accident?"

"I wanted to see what he looked like. For future reference. I didn't expect to catch him with anyone." I turned toward Clay. "He's big. Over three hundred pounds, I'd say. Sticking him with anything would be getting way too close."

"I've seen him," Clay reminded me.

"How serious are you about getting to him?" Barbara pointed toward the ceiling where the bedrooms were above us.

"I don't trust either of them," I said. "Tess has done marches and rallies, but she's in a difficult position because of her kids. Julia's the fishy one."

Clay rolled another joint. "I asked her to cover our part of the rent this month because we were a little short. She jumped at the chance, maybe trying to get in my good graces."

"She doesn't work. Where does her money come from?"

Clay lifted and dropped her shoulders. "I'm sure she sells, but I don't know who her source is. She never charges me full price for what I buy and resell." Only one shoulder went up and down. "She had no problem doubling her overhead."

"Doesn't that make you suspicious about her?"

"Grass is grass."

"And cash is cash," Barbara added. "I can't stand her or Tess." Barbara reached under the table for her oxfords and pushed out of her chair. "I'm going to crash."

Clay and I said goodnight as she headed toward the first floor bedroom. "If he

touches Barbara, I'll kill him," Clay said, tilting her chair forward.

"Why wait? He *will* go after her sooner or later."

Clay brooded. "I wonder how hard it is to buy guns in this state?"

"I'll find out on one of my library jaunts." Standing, I pushed my chair seat under the table.

"Not going upstairs to kiss and make-up?"

"Why are you such a shit-stirrer?"

Clay shrugged and didn't answer.

## Chapter 31

### Sissy's Advice

The next Sunday, I recognized Sissy's knock on the basement door simultaneous with her opening it and calling out, "Peanut delivery. Do you want the car?"

"No. But can I have a minute of your time."

In a quiet voice, Sissy said, "Go down carefully and Santa will meet you half way."

I slid off the stool where I was sketching another head of Clay and went to the stairs. "Hey girls."

Walking up a few steps, I gave Peanut a big smile, but I didn't hug her when she was in arm's reach. She was fussy about caretaker transitions; hugging and kissing too

soon freaked her. Sissy came down the stairs behind the child. No hugs or kisses with her either.

“Going biking today?” she asked.

“Yeah, but Peanut rides in the wire basket not on the handlebars. Don’t you sweetheart?”

Peanut did not answer. She walked past me to the stool I’d vacated and climbed on it. “My paper,” she said.

From the shelf above her, I took a sheet of newsprint. “Why don’t you draw a picture of Sissy?” I closed my sketchpad and stored my pencils. “Here are your supplies.” I opened a cookie tin containing her crayons and colored pencils.

Sissy sat on the stool next to us. “Let’s do it together.” Standing next to Peanut, I drew an oval face. “Sissy has pretty hair. Why don’t you give her some?” Peanut went right for the red pencil and zigzagged hair.

“Can I talk to you?” I said while Peanut drew. “In the next few days?”

“Are you in romantic trouble?”

“Why would you say that?”

“Grapevine. I hear you have several irons in the fire.”

“What next?” Peanut asked.

“Look at her. What do you think should be next?”

“I can’t make eyes.”

“Sure you can.” I took a pencil and drew an abstract eye. “You try.”

“If not romantic trouble,” Sissy said. “Ordinary trouble?”

“I’m not in any trouble. Want to meet me after work Wednesday? We could come back here, or if you prefer we could stop someplace for a drink?”

“Now I’m curious.”

"Good. I'll see you Wednesday after work."

Sissy rose. "Got a kiss for me before I go?"

Peanut put her arms around Sissy's neck and kissed her. Sissy looked at me, but my mouth would not say *got a kiss for me*. "See you Wednesday," she said and went up the stairs.

Peanut and I drew a second eye. I hated asking Sissy for help, but I needed it.

\* \* \*

She picked me up at Sheller-Globe and handed me a can of beer and an opener as soon as I got in the Bug. After I opened the can, I thanked her and took a long noisy swallow.

"Rough night?"

"The usual," I said. "I might soon have enough money to quit. Give myself a couple of weeks off before I look for another job. How was your week?"

"I'm worried about Peanut." Sissy pulled into the line of cars snaking out of the parking lot. "A woman turned up at daycare and claimed she was interested in enrolling her son. She had heard rumors we didn't treat boy children as well as girls. Meanwhile the twins were attached to Max's shins."

I laughed at the picture of Max lumbering around with a little boy sitting on each of her shoes.

"The woman wanted to see the entire place. Fortunately, she picked one of the few days Peanut wasn't there. Katie and Jan took her to buy shoes that morning. The woman asked about the ages of the children who attended regularly. Max invited her to bring her son for a trial visit, but she never returned."

While we discussed the possible causes and consequences of the visit, Sissy made good time getting to my street. "Thanks for coming over," I said, getting out of the car.

"I didn't want to talk about this in a public place."

"So mysterious."

On our way downstairs, I pulled two cans of beer from the refrigerator. Sissy switched on the light and the fan. "Mind if I shower? I'm all sticky."

She didn't mind, but I was stalling. I needed a shower, but I didn't need to linger in it. Finally, I toweled off, put on shorts and a tee shirt and joined her at the bench where she sat, nursing the beer.

"I'm moving in a dangerous direction," I said, standing next to her. She studied my eyes in that way of hers. "I want to buy a gun. It's not hard to do in Iowa. I checked it out."

Her shoulders sunk. "Why?"

"Women are defenseless. We need to protect ourselves."

Sissy straightened her spine. "Are we defenseless against anyone in particular?"

"Does that mean you'd approve if someone in particular was a worthy target?"

"No. I wouldn't approve even if the target was perfect." Her shoulders sagged again.

"That means we'd never be justified in defending ourselves, no matter what a pig did."

"If we were defending ourselves from attack," Sissy said, "our defense could be lethal. Justified. Unavoidable. But not desirable."

I didn't expect Sissy to be thrilled about the subject we had not named, but her reluctance surprised me. Exasperated, I said, "More and more, I feel I'm born to this ugly stuff."

"What a thing to say! Why are you telling me? You knew what I'd say."

"You're wise. Your politics might guide me."

"For that sort of politics you need Mercedes."

"Mercedes is too cautious."

"Because she understands things take time."

"But what about the time I live in? How much has to happen before I can defend myself?"

"Has someone offended you? Or injured you?"

"Jesus, Sissy. My whole life has offended me. What about women who don't survive attacks? How do they defend themselves? What you're saying makes no sense. Every situation would be individually one-on-one."

Sissy blinked and lifted her eyebrows. "Is it logical? No. Is it politic? No." Her tone softened. "What do you think your Catherine would have advised?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm asking you. Catherine and I always knew women were secondary in every way imaginable, but we didn't look at things politically. All the books you loaned me, everything I've learned in Iowa points to this decision."

Sissy's posture looked defeated. "Only because I don't know what advice she'll have. She's not a pacifist."

"That's good. Women have been pacifists forever. It doesn't get us anywhere."

"It's a matter of what each of us can live with," Sissy said. "I can't live with violence."

"But if I can live with it, you think it's okay for me?"

Sissy got up and put her arms around me. "This is depressing," she said at my ear. "Even if I thought it was a good idea, how could you do it?"

Leaning back, she looked at me; her eyes filled with tears. I didn't answer. She'd told me what I needed to know. It was a matter of what each person could live with.

Her embrace tightened again, shielding me from myself. "Think of the conse-



quences before you act. You'll never be the same."

She let me go and said good-bye. Depressed when she closed the upstairs door, I took down my scotch bottle and poured a splash into a glass. What had I expected from her? Maybe the business itself was depressing. I sipped scotch then stared into the glass. Clay understood. Our lives were filled with violence even if by a miracle neither of us had suffered a crippling offense the way Trudy had.

## Chapter 32

### Mercedes's Advice

Mercedes drove; Peanut sat on my thigh. Warm air rushed through the open windows as we sped passed cornfields just outside of Iowa City.

"Thanks for driving us," I said. "I haven't used Sissy's car lately because Peanut and I go biking on Sundays. Today was too hot for the park."

"I hear mother hen gave you hell about someone riding on the handlebars."

"I ride in the basket," Peanut said.

"Mother hen might not be crazy about us swimming in the shale pit either."

"Do you know how to swim?" I asked, as Peanut moved to my lap. She shook her head. "Want to learn how?" She didn't answer.

Mercedes turned into Sand Road and pulled the car off the rutted lane. We got out and walked through a worm patch of thick brush leading to the water-filled quarry. I carried everything; Mercedes held Peanut's hand. After stacking our towels on a large rock, I intended to strip down—as was the local custom—but at the last moment, I left on my underwear. After she helped Peanut take off her things, Mercedes left her underwear on too, and entered the water quickly.

Peanut fussed over the squishy and stony bank, so I picked her up and stepped slowly into the water. Mercedes did a breaststroke away from us. "See how Mercedes swims? Want to try it?" Peanut clung to me, but most of her was submerged. Mercedes swam back and treaded water near us.

"Later today, can we talk about a personal matter?"

"We've worn out our welcome at the Haven," she said. "But we could go for pizza tonight."

Talking over Peanut's head had to be limited, or she'd whine. On cue she squirmed out of my arms and plopped into the water. I caught her before her head went under and lifted her over my head.

"Wasn't that fun?" I dipped her and lifted her again. "Watch this." I handed her to Mercedes and put my head under the water. "Want to try it?"

"Maybe not a good idea," Mercedes said. "She gets ear aches easily. Who knows what's in the water."

"Under. Under," Peanut said, wiggling from Mercedes's arms to mine.

"You have to admire her reaction to limitations." I distracted Peanut by bobbing and lifting her a few times.

Mercedes swam about thirty yards from us and floated on her back. I swirled Peanut around the water by her wrists. When Mercedes swam back to us, she played

with Peanut, and I swam off. Floating under the blue cloudless sky felt religious.

By the time I swam in, Mercedes had carried Peanut to the bank and slathered sun lotion on her. My undershirt clung to me, so I sat as Mercedes did with forearms on our raised knees. Peanut shoveled mud into her tin pail. It held its shape better than sand, so she added twigs and pebbles to the mounds, singing her tuneless "La la la." We spent the afternoon alternately sitting on the bank and cooling off in the water, less and less concerned about our see-through underwear.

At four o'clock we were ready to leave. I carried Peanut into the water to wash mud off both of us. She squealed a bit, until I did more dipping and lifting. I made sure Mercedes was finished dressing before I walked out.

"Here you go," I said, climbing the bank and transferring Peanut to a waiting towel. I slipped off my underwear and put on shorts and a dry tee shirt while Mercedes dried and dressed the little one.

In the car, we agreed Mercedes would drive to her place, so she could shower and dress for pizza. I'd take her car and drive Peanut to Jan and Katie's then to the basement for my shower then back to her house.

I ran my route quickly, not wanting to lose the momentum of the perfect day. I'd never been inside Mercedes's house, but when I knocked to pick her up, she invited me in. She lived in the downstairs of a re-fashioned Victorian, a type of multiple dwelling found all over the city.

"I wanted to have a drink here," she said, gesturing toward a seat on a couch upholstered in a floral pattern. "They serve only beer and wine at the pizza place."

"Nice digs," I said, sitting. "The middle class women all favor makeshift and mismatched furniture."

She was in and out of the kitchen with a tray of provisions and put everything on

a coffee table in front of me. "Help yourself." She sat in a rose colored stuffed chair that picked up a color in the couch.

I dropped ice cubes from a glass bowl into both glasses and poured from the bottle of scotch on the tray. Swirling a glass, I set it on a coaster in front of her and took up my glass. "It's better to talk here rather than at a public place."

"Talk away," Mercedes said. "I'm not in a hurry to eat."

"How do you feel about buying guns?" Her expression of surprise made me feel stupid. "For self-defense."

Her hair swayed from side to side. "I see nothing wrong with guns. Is there somebody in particular you want to shoot?"

I couldn't tell if she was being facetious, but even Sissy understood that much without saying it aloud. "The Haven cook. Considering how he preys on women, slashing his tires or some other vandalism isn't enough."

Mercedes swirled her ice cubes. "You've heard my lecture about individual action—"

Before she could finish, I said, "This is not the sort of thing you want a group to reach consensus about."

She moved from her chair to sit next to me and took my hand in hers; her hand felt like a foreign object. The nails on her piano playing fingers were short, but manicured and coated with a clear polish.

"Listen to me," she said. "Really listen. There's no turning back if you take this step. You can't wound men like the cook. The risk of retaliation is too great."

"I've thought of that."

"You'll have to leave town. Have you planned where to go?"

"I haven't *planned* anything." When I could no longer take Mercedes's silence, I

added, "The police do nothing when someone complains about him. He's raped two that I know of. Other waitresses don't bother to file any more. I take it personally."

"It's the personal that clouds your thinking."

"This is not a thinking matter. It's instinct about what's right."

I expected Mercedes to offer a version of political discussions we'd had before. Instead, she brought my hand to her lips and kissed it. Stunned, I stiffened.

"This is not what I thought you wanted to talk about," she said, no trace of coyness in her voice.

Her strong fingers moved into my hair, pulling the curls at their roots, as if to say, *you idiot*. I didn't have to be told twice to kiss her. "Are you sure?" I asked, catching my breath after the first long kiss.

She leaned into me. I was talking about shooting a man, how dangerous could kissing Mercedes be? "You've been with a woman?"

"Once in high school. I was scared to death."

"Not scared now?"

"Nervous. A little. Not scared. Let's go inside." She buried the telephone receiver under a couch cushion and put a finger in each of our glasses. I picked up the bottle of scotch and followed her to the bedroom. After she carried the drinks to bedside tables, she pulled off a light cover and the top sheet from the pillows to the foot of the bed.

Desire kicked in as soon as I saw her without a bra, folding her clothes on a vanity bench. I stepped out of my sandals, unbuttoned my white shirt, dropped my summer-weight slacks and joined her in bed. She seemed to know that underwear was my naked.

## Chapter 33

### The End of a Perfect Day

Emphatic banging on the front door froze us. I bounded out of bed and into my pants and shirt. Mercedes grabbed her blouse and Bermuda shorts. "Do we have to answer?" I asked.

"My car's sitting out front."

More banging. "Mercedes, please be in there." Sissy's voice had a frightening urgency in it. "Please."

Mercedes waved me to stay where I was. "I'm coming."

I closed the bedroom door and buttoned my shirt. The pack of Camels in my pocket had matches tucked in the cellophane, but I couldn't light up.

"I tried to call." Breathless, but relieved, Sissy added, "Your phone was busy."

"I must have knocked off the receiver while I was reading," Mercedes said.

"Here it is. I'm so sorry. What's the matter?"

"It's Peanut. We need to get her out of Iowa City. Katie and Jan have her at their place. You have the money we set aside for her. We'll need that. I drove by Santa's, but she's not there."

"I went swimming with her and Peanut this afternoon. She goes to the art library on Sunday nights. I think. I'll get the money and try to find her. What happened?"

"Tess's daughters heard their dad talking to his father about sending child welfare to find Peanut. The older girl knew how serious that was and called her mother. Tess called me."

"I'll meet you at Katie and Jan's with or without Santa."

I heard the front door close, and I opened the bedroom door, avoiding the windows. I lit a cigarette. "Fast thinking."

"She's already upset. No need to add to it." Mercedes turned her back to me.

"Let me get my clothes on properly. We'll wait ten minutes before we drive over. Pour us another drink."

I retrieved our glasses from the bedroom and did as Mercedes asked. I didn't know where the run plan for Peanut would take her. Mercedes took more time in her room than I expected. Maybe she felt embarrassed to face me any sooner than she had to.

\* \* \*

All of Peanut's caretakers, plus Max and Trudy, who took Jenny's place as back up, were in Katie and Jan's living room when Mercedes and I arrived. "Oh, good," Sissy said, when she saw both of us. Neither Mercedes nor I elaborated on the lie about my



being at the library.

"Can someone fill us in?" Mercedes asked, taking the last seat on the couch.

I sat on the floor next to Peanut. "I'm going on a plane," she said.

"Wow. I've never been on a plane." While I talked to Peanut, Sissy repeated what she'd said at Mercedes's house.

"I assume you've considered other options?" Mercedes said.

Trudy waved her hand. "I seem to be the only one who thinks we should allow Peanut to go into social services."

"No!" My tone startled Peanut and the adults. "No offense, Trudy, but some of us have been in the social service system."

"Running off with her is probably criminal." Trudy's voice was calm.

"Foster care is criminal." I backed off, covering my exposure. "Maybe not as bad in Iowa as in New York."

"I'd be the only one at risk," Sissy said.

"You've been over this already?" Mercedes asked the group.

They had. "I can live with the decision," Trudy said. "I was just adding my two-cents worth."

At the end of the couch, Katie hung up the phone call she was on. "I have flight times for the morning," she said and announced them.

"Can you drive us to Des Moines tomorrow?" Sissy looked at me.

"You'd be ready to go that soon?" Max said.

"I've been prepared for a while. And in my desk at the Kitchen, I have transition notes for whomever takes over the counseling."

"I'm impressed," I said.

Others agreed. "What will we do without you?" Trudy said.

Katie let a cry escape, and Jan put an arm around her. I distracted Peanut.

"I'll watch your plane take off."

"You've made arrangements for pick up at the other end?" Mercedes asked.

"Oakland is very together. They have health care contacts in Seattle for pregnancy issues. It's not so expensive to get women there. They're arranging a place for me to live with Peanut and half-time paid office work in their Center."

"I can keep sending my usual amount of money," Mercedes said. The rest of us said we would do the same.

"Until we're settled."

"Are you kidding?" I said. "You're a full time mom now regardless of who pitches in on the coast."

"Eventually, someone can drive my car out to me," Sissy said. "For now, you and Max can share it."

"Better leave it with Santa," Max said, sitting on the other side of Peanut. "I don't have money for gas."

"I'll do the gas. We'll figure out how to share it."

"Money and communication should move through Mercedes only," Katie said. "No one needs to know exactly where Sissy and Peanut are. Does Max have a cover story?" Katie continued. "If any trouble turns up at daycare?"

"I'll change Peanut's enrollment card first thing in the morning," Max said. "I'll use her mother's name and address like Sissy told me."

"Let the authorities try to find that disappearing act," Katie muttered.

"I don't think she's still in town," Sissy said. "I tried to call her to let her know what was going on. The number's been disconnected."

When the business of the meeting was over, I stood near Sissy while everyone

was saying good-bye to Peanut. "I wish we had more time together," I said. Sissy frowned at me. "I know. You're too kind to tell me I'm full of shit."

"Not that I haven't noticed." Disappointed in me as Sissy was, her tone aimed for humor though it fell short.

Forced into the truth, I said, "I can't tell you how sorry I am. Your goodness terrified me."

"Oh, hush."

"Peanut is lucky to have you."

Everyone now took turns hugging and kissing Sissy—all emotionally subdued for Peanut's sake.

## Chapter 34

### Without Sissy

Sissy's departure sucked the soul out of Iowa City. The original women responsible for putting the city on the women's liberation map were giving way to newcomers, many unseasoned, but looking to live in new territory.

The August humidity clung to everyone and was only momentarily relieved by late afternoon downpours. Without Peanut to care for on Sundays, I stopped going to City Park to ride the carousel. Sissy never gave me hell for taking Peanut to the quarry, and she had never seen Peanut learning to stand in the basket over the bicycle handlebars. If I ever saw Peanut again, she'd be too big for the basket.

\* \* \*

Max took Sissy's car from Sunday nights to Friday mornings; she had someone drive her and the houseful of kids to daycare on Fridays and take them all home. I used the car on Fridays to drive to work and visit Clinton House afterward. After ten days of this schedule, Max started picking me up nightly at Sheller-Globe. Sometimes she'd come into the basement with me for a drink.

One night as we slouched against the workbench, ignoring the stools and drinking beer out of cans, I asked if she wanted to try some low risk mischief. I told her about the porn site. "It might help you feel better about missing Sissy," I said, showing her the carpet tacks I'd bought.

"I'm scared," she said, her head down.

"Tomorrow when you pick me up, we'll go to Benton Street. You'll see how easy it is."

"I could drive the get away car."

"Yes. But you might want to do the tacks yourself. We're all afraid of things. Especially women are afraid. But we can try to change, so fear doesn't paralyze us."

"I'm afraid a lot," she admitted.

"Put the tacks in the car." I handed her the box. "They won't bite you."

The following night when she picked me up at work, the box was on the passenger seat waiting for me. We sat in the Bug watching cars come and go for the shift change so as not to be at Benton Street before midnight. Driving slowly, we arrived when the building was closed and the parking area empty.

I had a system now. One handful of tacks went along the edges of a small ridge cars rode over before entering or exiting the lot. The incline forced them to bounce slightly after clearing the hump: a small detail, but it gave the illusion of cars coming down hard on waiting spikes. I tossed a second handful of tacks in the area where pa-

tron cars generally parked.

Back in the Bug, I said, "You don't need to go near the door if you don't want to. See how easy it was?"

"My heart is beating fast just watching," Max said. "Would you still be my friend if I don't do it?"

I disguised my disappointment. "Don't worry about it." Why had Max acted like she could do the Slap Happy job with me? Sissy would know, but she was gone.

Another consequence of Sissy's being gone and Peanut being gone was that without the child between us, Mercedes and I didn't re-connect. We went for pizza the Saturday after Sissy left, but we couldn't get from public to private space. It was my doing or lack of doing. I no longer had to protect myself against caring for Sissy. I didn't want to bring Mercedes out, if that was her agenda and then drop her.

\* \* \*

After Clay opened the door to me one Friday night, she led us to the dining room table and lifted a dishtowel covering her smoking paraphernalia. I asked about Barbara.

"She never turns her back on the creep. Her whole shift is about where he is. Where she is." Clay fired a joint.

"Grass has been giving me headaches," I said, taking a short hit. "Find out anything?"

"Four stores in Cedar Rapids sell guns," Clay said. "ID is required. Otherwise, just a form to fill out."

"I've been copying Iowa drivers' licenses since Sissy left. I have two for me with different names, but I need to know the vital statistics of the person who'll be working with me. For the IDs."

"How soon?"

"Soon. I'm getting antsy."

"You have the money for this project?"

"I'll get it." I had the money, but money made me cagey, so I lied.

"What about Tess going to Cedar Rapids with you? You told me she's done political work. She'd love to show you her stuff."

I ignored Clay's double meaning. "Doesn't she confide in Julia?"

"I can't say who she confides in."

"You're not proposing Tess." I was slow to catch on. "You're playing god to see what'll happen."

Clay grinned and passed the joint. "What about Mercedes?"

"She's reliable," I said. "But she has too much at risk. We already lost Sissy."

Clay dealt cards for Concentration. We finished a joint while we played and waited for Barbara to get home. *Too bad Jenny left town.* I flashed on being alone in the Bug with her after the trip to Cedar Rapids. Her straddling me. A fruit or vegetable of her choice between us.

Tess came home and joined us in the dining room. "I never see you anymore," she said, pulling out a chair. Instead of sitting, however, she rested her arms and chest along the back of it. "Are you two into a private matter?"

"Sit down," Clay said, up to her usual mischief. "Have a hit."

"We'll have to get together soon," I said.

"I'd like that."

I didn't want to get together with Tess, but I had nothing to say. If I were going to hang out with anyone I wasn't crazy about, it would be Mercedes. The weird grass haze suggested I might date them both to avoid being linked to either of them.

Tess played Concentration with us until Barbara came home. Then she excused

herself before the game was over, put her hand on my shoulder and left without a word.

Clay and I finished the hand. When Barbara dropped her work oxfords to the floor and was settled at the table, she said, "When can I stick a butcher knife in the slob's belly?"

"At least your weapon is growing," I said. "You started with a hat pin I think."

"We're working on it," Clay said. "Santa wants to go to Cedar Rapids to make the purchases. You want to go?"

"I'm making fake IDs," I added. "They'd have a photo of your head, but you can take pictures with whatever look you're willing to wear to Cedar Rapids."

"Who else is involved? I won't do anything with the two who live here."

"I could go," Clay said. "Check out the neighborhoods. Make a sale or two."

"Risky with guns and grass in the same vehicle," I said. Barbara agreed.

I wouldn't have chosen to work with Barbara; she was icy and hard to read, but she had nerves of steel, no denying that. I walked into the living room to the telephone table with its own attached seat and picked up a note pad and pencil. "Write down your height, weight and eye color," I said.

Barbara wrote in a backhand slant. I returned the memo set to the table and tore off the top page. "There's a photo machine at the drug store in town. Take some headshots and get them to me. Three different looks. I'll finish the IDs this week."

"I haven't seen you and Mercedes in the restaurant lately." Barbara's bad teeth showed for a moment in a sly smile.

"Since the cook got a look at me, we've been avoiding it."

"Probably wise. No telling which of his body fluids would turn up on your plate."

We stopped talking when we heard noise on the stairs. Julia in an over-sized tee



shirt set Maya down in the living room. The baby waddled into the dining room, crying with every step. "What's the matter?" Barbara lifted the child into her arms.

Clay waved the dishtowel to dissipate the hanging smoke; then, she covered the stash and the roach clip with it.

"She had a bad dream," Julia said. "I couldn't comfort her. She wanted you."

Barbara gently bounced Maya in her arms until the crying stopped. She took the dishtowel that covered the pot and wiped Maya's nose. Clay dealt another hand of cards, and we played, both of us too stoned to acknowledge Julia standing in the room. After five minutes of maternal petting, Maya nodded off, and Barbara transferred her into Julia's arms.

Julia's cooing as she carried off the sleeping child seemed over done. When she was out of earshot, I said, "Is she for real?"

Clay twisted her smile. "She thinks it's cool to be seen with a Black kid. She takes care of Maya most of the time lately. Frees me up to conduct business."

"That stinks." I stood. "I need to get home and take a shower. I stink, too."

"Why don't you shower upstairs? I'm sure Tess would welcome you." Clay kept a deadpan face.

"Give it a rest."

"I'm afraid I ratted you out with Tess," Barbara said. "The day we moved in here—Tess and I were still friendly—I mentioned seeing you and Mercedes together for dinner that night. I assumed you two were an item. Tess turned green."

"You did it purposely," Clay said.

Barbara rolled a thin joint, fired it, and inhaled deeply on it. I declined. Clay took a hit. After Barbara's second hit, she said, "It was obvious Tess wanted you for the same reason Julia wants Maya. No offense to your natural charm."

Even if Barbara was correct, I didn't like her saying so. Plus, she could have been talking about herself and Clay. I stood and put a five-dollar bill in front of Clay.

"Smokes on me tonight."

"Let me roll you a couple to take home," Clay said.

\* \* \*

The upstairs door opened just as I was nodding off. "Are you awake?" It was Max speaking in a loud whisper.

"Am now."

I sat on the edge of the bed in my underpants and tee shirt and turned on the lamp. Max thumped down the stairs. "What are you doing roaming around town in the middle of the night?"

"Waiting for you to get home. I wanted the car for early tomorrow morning, but I knew you went to Clay's on Fridays."

"Does everyone know who I see every weekend?"

"More or less," Max said.

"What do you need the car for?"

"I'm taking the kids to Dubuque to play on my family's farm. The kids get to look at the animals and ride on the tractor. There's a stream on the property they can splash in."

"The car key is under the mat where it usually is," I said. "Tank's almost full."

"I'll put gas in it this week. Since I'm taking all the kids away for the day, the mothers will give me gas money."

Max wasn't in any hurry to leave, so I said, "You want to smoke a joint with me? If you want a beer instead, you've got to go upstairs and get it yourself."

"I'm not going back up. I see you got yourself a railing."

I fired one of the joints Clay had rolled for me, took a deep drag on it and coughed until my throat hurt. Weed gave headaches and it cured headaches. As Max took a jumbo hit—everything she did was jumbo—the paper glowed and disintegrated by half an inch. I was too stoned to care.

“I’m not as tough as you are,” Max said.

“Tough? What does that mean?”

“I play with children all the time. They don’t do evil things to each other, especially if they don’t see bad stuff every day between their parents.”

I let her talk and concentrated on my euphoria. Far back in my head, I picked up an odd vibe.

“Being with kids all the time makes me soft. I don’t feel angry like you do.”

“Me? Is there a point to what you’re saying? Or are you just commenting on the state of the world?”

“I don’t think you should hurt the cook.”

“What are you talking about?” I pinched off the lighted end of the joint.

“You told me you wanted to retaliate against the guy who messes with women,” Max said. “The one at the Haven.”

I didn’t remember telling Max anything. I had no reason to. “I told you about *the porn shop*.”

“A different night. We sat right here drinking beer and scotch. You said you wanted to blow a hole through him. You were wasted.”

“I was running my mouth.”

“You were, but I could tell you meant it.”

I denied it, but my brain was molasses.

“You shouldn’t retaliate,” she insisted. “It’s wrong for you to hurt him.”

"What about the girls and women he's hurt? You *do* spend too much time with kids."

"I'd rather have a kid's heart than a heart full of hate."

"How many of your precious children will grow up to be raped by the likes of that creep?" The idea wounded her. "Max," I continued, but I couldn't bring myself to say I was sorry. *I* wasn't hurting the children. I was stating a fact of life. "Is that what you came here for?"

"No. I want the car for tomorrow, but I've been thinking about what you said. It's not right."

I was annoyed with Max for challenging me; I was lead dog. "Pacifism is useless for women. It's never worked to make anything better for us." Max's stare was another challenge. "Maybe I meant it the night I told you. If I actually said it, but it's not something I'm serious about."

She shrugged and slid off her stool. "If you don't need the car this weekend, I may keep the kids overnight at the farm. Depends on how they like it and how well they behave."

"I won't expect you, but I do need it for next weekend."

"No dates this weekend?" Max asked, attempting to smooth over our conversation.

"Nothing planned." I walked her to the stairs.

"Do you hear from Doctor Lisa?"

"A card about a month ago. She and Daniel are fine."

"I'll pick you up Monday night." She clomped up the stairs.

When the door closed, I turned off the lamp and went back to bed, kicking myself for blabbing although I couldn't believe I had.

## Chapter 35

### Buying Guns

Barbara showed up on Tuesday morning, knocking and opening the door at the same time. "So this is the famous basement," she said, coming down carefully as I instructed.

"I don't know about famous." I gestured toward the stools.

She looked around. "I've seen worse."

"So have I." Her tone confused me. What was the unspoken comparison? "Is there a particular amenity you're holding against me?"

"You have everything you need."

"Yes I do."

"I can't stay," she said. "Here are the photos." She put three strips of head shots on the bench.

I pulled the licenses I'd worked on from the pages of my drawing pad and looked over her photos while she studied the IDs. Her brown hair was combed DA-style, but it was thick enough to curl and fluff up as it was in the photos.

"Your different looks are remarkable," I said.

"You should see my mug shot."

She wasn't kidding, but I didn't ask any more questions and she didn't offer any more information.

"How long will we be in Cedar Rapids? I'd like to get back for my shift."

"You'll be back in time."

She handed over a slip of paper. "Clay's homework. Here's the price range for thirty-eight specials and twenty-two automatics. New and used. The other side has four store names and addresses. Clay's working on how far the stores are to each other. She'll make us a map."

"I'll have the IDs ready for Saturday. Dog-eared and aged."

"You could make a little money with IDs, you know?"

\* \* \*

By design I didn't go to Clinton House that Friday night. Instead I sped from work and arrived at Mercedes's at 11:20. I parked where Mercedes could see the Bug from her bedroom window. That light was on; so was a lamp in the living room. When she answered my knock, I said, "I know I'm uninvited, but I figured you wouldn't answer if you were in bed or busy."

"Come in." She held a cigarette and didn't look directly at me. "Will you have a drink?"

"I'd like that. Maybe we should stay in the kitchen. I'm grungy from work." I followed her and sat at a small kitchen table. The scotch bottle was on a counter tray with upside-down old-fashion glasses. She turned over a glass, poured into it and placed it in front of me; she didn't pour for herself.

Assuming the single glass meant she wanted me to drink up and go home, I said, "I'm going to Cedar Rapids tomorrow to buy guns. I could buy one for you. If you don't have the cash on hand, I could front you."

"You're not going alone, are you?" I shook my head. "I trust you, but people you're working with could talk about an extra item. I don't want my name tossed around."

"My partner and I won't be making joint appearances, so to speak. If you want a handgun, I could buy it personally without anyone knowing. I couldn't hide a shotgun or a rifle obviously."

"If I pass on getting one this time," she said, "will there be other chances?"

"If there's enough interest," I said. "I could go to the Quad Cities. Certainly Des Moines."

Mercedes poured herself a drink and leaned against the counter. "In case you didn't notice, I'm mad at you for not following up on our last meeting." She sipped her drink. "I'm guessing you're afraid to go to bed with me."

Certainly fooled her. Tilting my head, I said, "You're not a woman to trifle with."

"That's true, but what if I wanted to trifle with you? Surprised?"

"I need a shower."

"I'm not talking about this minute. Stay here." It was easy to be frozen in place while she went into the bedroom. She returned and put two twenty-dollar bills on the kitchen table. "That's all I have in the house. I'll go to the bank on Monday. How much

more will you need?"

"Probably \$150 with shells, minus what you've given me."

"Bring me something small and powerful. Simple to use."

I swept the bills from the table and put them in my shirt pocket. "Something to look forward to tomorrow night." I up-ended the drink. "Do you have more specific instructions about what you want?" Her blush tickled me. "In Cedar Rapids."

"I know nothing about the subject. In Cedar Rapids. Or about trifling with you. You'll show me."

I drew her into my arms for an encouraging hug. She wasn't wearing a bra; she felt stacked. Maybe it would be okay to sleep with her. Maybe she did simply want me to bring her out. Maybe I was fooling myself.

\* \* \*

I picked up Barbara at 9:00 the next morning. After she put a small suitcase in the back seat of the Bug, we drove off to Cedar Rapids. She had a thermos of black coffee with her, so she kept its red drinking lid filled, and we passed it between us. She looked more feminine than usual in a dress and heels, her hair curled. Heavy make-up covered her scars. When we finished the coffee, I handed her an envelope containing three ID packets, each secured with a rubber band. From her purse, she took two wallets and put an ID along with weathered unofficial membership cards with the ID name in each wallet. The third ID packet she put in a leather coin purse. She decided which ID to use first and put the second wallet and the coin purse into the suitcase. She lit two Pall Mall cigarettes and put one between my lips without asking, probably something she did for Clay.

The drive was uneventful; neither of us inclined to chatter. We parked at the first sporting goods store on the map. I pulled the car a few feet passed the front of the door,



so Barbara wouldn't be visible when she exited. She stuffed the twenties I gave her into the wallet and went off.

She took seventeen minutes. When she returned to the car and I drove away, she said, "I bought a twenty-two automatic and a box of shells." She slipped a paper bag between us behind the seats, and I covered it with a blanket I'd scored in the Kitchen's rummage room.

The next stop was two blocks away. While I drove, she took off a necklace of red beads and red clip-on earrings and pulled a wide brim straw hat from the suitcase. She also took a bright yellow summer jacket from the suitcase and struggled into it. From one of the jacket pockets, she found yellow clip-on earrings and a yellow cuff bracelet to complete the outfit.

"You like to play dress up?"

"I like to write checks," she said.

I parked at the second store and gave her another packet of twenties. "Take these," I said, handing over the keys and getting out of the car with her. "I've got to find a bathroom."

When she was inside the sporting goods door, I hurried back toward the first store. On the way, I pulled my shirt out of my slacks and knotted the ends at my waist. In front of a store window, I applied the lipstick, bought for the occasion, and opened the top two buttons of my shirt. An overhead bell dinged at the entrance.

"I'm looking for a handgun small enough to fit in my nightstand," I said to the clerk who approached.

Middle-aged, he walked to a glass case under the counter and took out a .25 automatic and a .38 revolver. He didn't waste a smile on me.

"This one's nice," I said of the .25.

"Yes, miss. But if you want it for protection it doesn't have much firepower. The sound might scare off an intruder, but it won't take down a man unless you were closer than you'd want to be. And maybe not even then."

He moved to a gleaming revolver. "This one has the firepower you need."

"It looks like a cowboy gun."

"Yes, miss, but it's not a toy." Talking about guns warmed the clerk's personality.

"This part is too long for my nightstand." I pointed to the barrel. "Do you have anything like this, but a little smaller?"

He put the revolver and the .25 back into the case and pulled out a short-barreled .38, the gun I wanted. I let him talk me into it. After a decent interval, I showed my license, filled out the required paperwork and paid for the .38, plus a box of shells.

I was thirty yards from the car when Barbara left the second store. Hurrying along the street, I wiped the lipstick on the back of my hand and untied my shirttails, just as she opened the passenger door. I approached from the driver's side and kept the tightly wrapped package against my outside leg. She tossed me the keys over the top of the Bug. When she stored her package behind the front seat, I sat in the driver's seat and slipped my package into the back before I closed the door.

"I bought another twenty-two and the thirty-eight you wanted. Plus a holster that sits on the hip or shoulder. Are we out of cash? We could use more shells?"

"I have enough for whatever we need." The money I'd saved from Sheller-Globe was down to two hundred dollars. Later Mercedes would finish paying me for the gun I'd bought for her, and Clay would pay me for the .22 she wanted.

Barbara tossed the straw hat on the top of the suitcase and slipped out of her yellow jacket and yellow accessories. Then she tugged off the dress she wore, revealing a housedress, the sort a farm wife might wear, wrinkled from being under the first dress.

She combed her hair pulling out the set she'd put in it. From a pocket of the housedress she took a piece of lint. "My husband give me this here list of bullets he want," she said with a grin big enough to show spaces where her back teeth were missing.

She needed no ID or paper work to buy shells, so the last stop was quick and effortless. As soon as we cleared the parking lot and were on the road, we slapped palms at our success.

"I'm starving," she said. "And I need to pee."

As we drove out of Cedar Rapids, a Howard Johnson came into view shortly before the turn off south to Iowa City. I dropped Barbara at the entrance of the restaurant, so she could use the bathroom, and I parked the car well away from other cars. As soon as I saw her returning from the restaurant, I waved at her and locked the car. Coming abreast of her, I said, "A hamburger okay with you?"

"With everything. Did you leave the car open?"

"Yep."

Inside, I ordered food to go and went to the bathroom while it was being prepared. When I returned to the car, Barbara was leaning against the passenger door, smoking.

"I thought I left it open," I said and fished for the keys. Opening the passenger door, I handed over the hamburgers and French fries when she was seated.

In the car, she passed out the food, and we ate without speaking, stuffing two and three fries at a time into our mouths and taking cheek-popping bites of hamburger. After we downed our drinks, we put the trash into the to-go sack, and I added it to the debris behind me. Backing the Bug out of the parking lot, I opened my lips to take the lit cigarette she held for me. She took a few puffs on her own cigarette before she was ready to talk again.

"How soon before we can put our toys to use?" she said.

"I want to work for at least two more weeks to build up the money I'll need to leave town."

"I can't wait that long. Pig Face makes his target known then pursues. He's breathing down my neck."

"Is it time to quit?"

Barbara exhaled in resignation. "Even if I quit, that's not going to stop me from getting even. And he'll just move along to his next victim."

"I like to prepare before I do anything."

"I know his habits," she said. "He closes the kitchen and bar at 1:30 while most of us are finishing up. Sometimes he holds someone back because he wants to talk to her about a customer complaint. It's all baloney. When he makes his move, he usually yanks a girl into the men's room."

"How does he keep the place in waitresses?"

"Coeds. I've lasted so long because he likes the young pretty ones."

"I assume he locks the door to do the receipts and reconcile the cash registers. Do you know when that is?"

"After we're all out of there most likely. I don't really know. The bartender reconciles his own register, so Pig Face has only one till to account for." Barbara shifted in the car to put her back against the door and face me.

"I could knock on the door after the place is locked to find my keys or purse. Something. He might open up if he hears a familiar voice. Might even see it as an opportunity."

I studied her. "You'd use yourself as bait?"

"Why not? You'd be right there to greet him."

"I want to work alone. I could just as easily wait for him to get into his car. What kind of car does he drive?"

"A beat up station wagon with wood paneling on the doors."

The junction with Interstate 80 was ahead. We hadn't paid any attention to the drive, and we'd soon be in Iowa City. The rest of the trip was silent. None of what we'd talked about was decisive, but possibilities swirled in my head.

As though Barbara were reading my mind, she said, "I'd really like to be there. I wasn't kidding about sticking a kitchen knife in his belly. After he was down and out."

"I don't think so." The car moved along Dubuque Street until I turned at Clinton Street and stopped to let Barbara out.

"Clay wanted a twenty-two," she said, pulling the suitcase out of the back seat. "Should I just take it with me?"

"I need to collect for it."

Barbara hung on the open window. "I don't have that much cash with me," she said. "I know Clay doesn't have it either."

My face felt cold. "I can't help you there. I've got to return the funding to my source."

She rolled her lips. She wanted to ask who the funding source was—maybe she'd have a better chance with someone else extending credit, but she didn't ask.

"Maybe, one of your housemates can make you a loan." I felt like Clay making a snide remark, but I wasn't going to loan money or give away a gun no one would pay for. As it was, I hadn't asked for change at each store, and she hadn't offered any.

## Chapter 36

### Hitting the Wrong Notes

Piano notes sounded as I walked the path from the curb to the door. Through the porch window, Mercedes was visible at the upright. I listened without knocking, but she must have heard me on the steps. The playing stopped and she opened the door.

“I like the old standards,” I said.

“Playing relaxes me.” Her floral and spicy perfume heightened all my senses.

Inside, I handed her a pint of J&B scotch and held on to the sack with the .38 and the shells. She took the scotch into the kitchen and returned with two generously filled old-fashioned glasses, each with a single ice cube. We clinked glasses before we sat a few feet apart on the couch. I emptied the second sack between us and showed her how

to open and load the cylinder of the .38.

"I'll go to the bank on Monday and get the rest of the money for you. Come by UCC before you go to work. No one knows I have this?"

"Correct. No one knows it was even part of the purchases."

"You think I'm being paranoid?" she said.

"No one should know you have anything worth stealing."

"Would you like to keep whatever you bought with me? Now I *am* being paranoid."

"Shit, no." I bolted to my feet.

"What's the matter?" She followed me out the front door and into the car.

I strained the Bug squealing around corners. As we reached my street, my heart pounded. I swung open the car door without closing it and started across the street in one motion. Then I saw someone walking half a block ahead of me. My pace slowed. My breath came easier. I gained to within five yards, and the figure in front of me turned toward my basement.

"How come you're not at work tonight?" I said.

At the sound of my voice Barbara turned. She took less than a second to neutralize her surprise. "I called in sick."

"Coming to visit me?" Mercedes came abreast of me, but then she hung back.

"I wanted to appeal to your generosity," Barbara said, looking over Mercedes.

"But I see you're busy."

"I'm not a generous person." I wanted to add, *or a foolish one*, but ironically generosity got the better of me. I let her save face. "Business is business."

"Yes. Capitalism wins out. We'll never learn to give according to need."

I didn't take the bait. Her eyes straight ahead, Barbara passed us and walked to

her van, which I missed seeing; the prospect of her or Clay getting into the basement blinded me.

"It doesn't make me happy to guess right," I said. "That was close. Let's get what we came for and go back to your house."

\* \* \*

At Mercedes's we downed our watered scotches. I pushed the rescued handguns under the couch. "Until you figure out where to store them," I said. "I'll take mine when I go." Brooding about locking the basement the door again, I sipped the fresh drink Mercedes poured for me.

"I assumed you were working with them," she said. "That's why I was hesitant to buy something."

"She didn't want to pay for the gun Clay ordered! She was going to help herself. Everything was out of sight, but she would have found it."

"I liked Barbara's hardness when she first came to town," Mercedes said. "She's working class without any edges rubbed smooth. But something was always off there."

I kept Barbara's check-writing and mug shot to myself. "I took to Clay right away," I offered. "But there's something strange about her, too. Not just that she's a pothead. They seem to use people although personally, I've not experienced anything but generosity from Clay. This was my first dealing with Barbara."

"Tess and Julia pay all the Clinton House bills," Mercedes said. "Tess told me she doesn't want the hassle of moving again, so she lives with it. Her daughters are at the house more and more lately. She feels it's not that unfair."

"Not that unfair." I mocked Tess' justification.

"Julia is the real piece of work there," Mercedes said. "She won't say anything against Clay or Barbara. House security she calls it. She definitely splits the costs with



Tess and Tess only.”

“Julia’s got money from god knows where. And grass. Also magically available. I wouldn’t be surprised if you were right about her being a government plant.”

“I hope not. She may be the only person who can take over the pregnancy counseling.” Mercedes went to the kitchen to pour us another drink. Returning with our glasses, she continued. “She also puts in time at daycare although Maya’s too young to be left there.”

“Let’s change the subject,” I said. “This is depressing.”

She buried the phone under a couch cushion. “Come on.”

In the bedroom, she tossed back the bed covers. I pulled the window shade. Three scotches got us into the bedroom. One more drink and I could rely on habit to guide me. I had no idea why I was doing something so personal with my body that I didn’t want to do.

## Chapter 38

Max

After that night, I never saw Barbara or Clay again. When Max picked me up after work, I was hardly seated in the car before she blurted out the gossip that convinced me Barbara would have taken all the guns had I not intercepted her.

“Not only did they split owing money to almost everyone in town—not me of course—but they left Maya with Julia.”

“Just left her?”

“Isn’t that disgusting? They said Julia could organize a care group like we did for Peanut.”

“Did Tess and Julia know anything?”

"They were blindsided. Tess isn't happy about stepping in more shit than her own kids make."

Max elaborated all the details about who was out money and by how much. She also reported people's speculations about why the pair left and what their plans might be. Some local women called contacts in other cities and warned them to be cautious if Clay and Barbara turned up.

Breathless when she arrived at my street, Max parked and turned off the ignition. She wanted to come downstairs with me.

"Let's visit another time if you don't mind."

"What should I say if Julia asks me to take care of Maya?"

I stood on the curb and looked into Max's forlorn face.

"Julia put up signs at day care already," Max added. "And at the Kitchen. She wants a meeting to find caretakers. Are you willing?"

"Absolutely not."

"You did it for Peanut."

"That was different. I'm not queer so I can spend my life babysitting other people's kids."

"That's not a very revolutionary attitude."

"Max, I'm too tired for this conversation. Childcare is remedial, not revolutionary. Saddle all women with childcare, and there'll be no one to do radical work. How would Dr. Lisa be able to go to . . . other countries to do medical work?"

Max said, "I love taking care of kids."

"Thank god for you and others like you. The kids you mind are extremely lucky. Childcare is a necessity but not obligatory for everyone. If they ask you to take care of Maya before we can talk again, say 'no'. You can always change your mind later."

I walked away, but after a few steps, I looked back to the car. Max was still sitting there. I retraced my steps. "Do you want to take care of Maya? Special. Like we did for Peanut?"

"Maya's a bigger handful than Peanut ever was."

"It's okay not to like every kid that comes your way. You don't like every adult you know. Let's plan on tomorrow night. After you get me, we'll come back here and get soused together."

Her face brightened. Without another word, she turned on the ignition and drove away. There wasn't anything wrong with Max. She wasn't even *slow*, as I originally thought. She just preferred being a protective big kid among the little kids.

## Chapter 38

### Down

I soon welcomed Max's nightly visits to the basement. She helped me stay awake after work. Usually, she talked about issues at the daycare center: who volunteered, how they behaved with the children, and how the enrollment among the town's people was slowly growing. After she left each night, I waited ten minutes for her to clear my street; then I left too. Depending on how close to two o'clock it was, I bicycled or walked to the Haven

The parking lot behind the restaurant was a three-wall rectangle opened to an alley and not accessible from the street. Over the course of nights I studied the area, employee cars drove out of the lot within a few minutes of each other shortly after two

o'clock. The cook's routine after the employees left didn't vary by more than ten-minutes. Any night would be okay. If I waited much longer, students would flood into town, and some frat boy could be peeing in the alley when I least expected. It was time.

Friday night after my shift, I drove into town and cruised through the alley behind the Haven. It was 11:30. The beat-up station wagon was parked facing out, as it usually was, the driver's door only steps from the restaurant exit. The nearness of the doors to each other meant the cook probably took receipts with him when he closed for the night.

I stopped in the alley and left the motor running. From the passenger seat, I took a large river stone, selected days before, and carried it to the parking area. After wedging the stone against the passenger-side tire of the station wagon, I went back to the Bug and drove home.

In the basement, I wrote a note thanking Lisa and Daniel for use of their cellar and telling them I was bound for New Orleans. I packed the duffle bag with clothes and shoes I'd take with me, fitting items carefully around my art supplies and sketchpads. The duffle would come in the car with me. If my plan worked and I didn't need to leave town immediately, I'd return to the basement, unpack and tear up the thank you note.

After I showered away the grime of work and dressed in a navy shirt and black pants, I set the Big Ben alarm for 1:30. Resting on the bed, I didn't expect to sleep, but Big Ben was a precaution. A few minutes before the alarm sounded, I sat up and turned it off. Tossing the clock into the duffle, I put on a navy baseball cap, strapped on the holster with the loaded .38 in it and pulled my shirttail over the slight bulge. Finally, I carried the duffle upstairs.

\* \* \*

At 1:50, I drove through the alley without the lights on and slowed at the Haven

lot. Three familiar cars parked near the station wagon. Turning out of the alley, I pulled the Bug to the street curb. Two cars came out one behind the other before 2:05. My wristwatch clocked seventy seconds before the third car drove out. I left the car door slightly ajar and made my way up the alley. The parking area had no cover, only brick walls, so with my back against the alley wall, I took out the .38, held it at my side, waited. Finally, a metal door scraped open.

The cook was surprisingly light-footed for a big man; the station wagon door opened and closed with hardly a beat for him to get behind the wheel. The engine turned over. It revved without moving forward. It revved again. The car door opened and slammed. I turned to see the cook rounding his car and looking at his tires.

“Fucking jokers,” he said with his back to me.

As he knelt to dislodge the stone, I fired. The shot sounded extraordinarily loud; the smell of powder hung in the air. I didn’t want to fire again. In a heap, he didn’t move or make a sound. He looked dead, but I didn’t make sure. I opened the door of the station wagon, using my shirttail over my hand. I holstered the .38, grabbed the bank pouch on the seat, tucked it under my belt, and split.

\* \* \*

Carrying the duffle bag down the basement stairs reminded me of my nosedive when I arrived in Iowa City. I stepped around the repaired step and plopped the bag on the cement floor. At the bench, I opened the cylinder of the .38 and emptied the unused shells onto my placemat. Then I packed the gun, holster and shells deep into the duffle; I wasn’t ready to unpack.

The green bank pouch at my waist was damp from sweat. I unzipped it to be sure it held money—a satisfying number of twenties and tens—I didn’t count the bills, just re-zipped the pouch and added it to the duffle bag.

I'd been rock steady ten-minutes prior; now, my hand shook as I poured scotch into a glass. Seeing the tremor, my knees went soft in sympathy. I sat on a stool staring into the glass until the shakes eased. My body could do whatever it wished; my mind switched off.

Stripping off my clothes and shoes, I went into the shower again, running it for several minutes with cold water. When I turned off the faucet, the physical tension swirled down the drain. My towel was damp from the first shower of the night. I dried off as well as possible and stayed naked. I sat on the bed when a mild panic seized me: the weekend stretched ahead. I slid my legs under the sheet and monitored my breath moving into and out of my nostrils.



## Chapter 30

### Innocent by Association

I woke with a start at 7:30, surprised to be naked. Dressing in shorts, sandals and a tee shirt pulled from the duffel, I rolled my towel for swimming. It was still damp thanks to Iowa humidity, but swimming did not merit a fresh towel. Upstairs, I looked over the Bug before I got in. There was no sign of where it had been the night before.

Glaring sun burned off the morning dew; three-digit heat loomed. I drove to Max's; at her door, I knocked and went in. The twins were playing on the living room floor with their fleet of trucks. Madge called out a greeting from the kitchen.

"The rest of the kids upstairs?" I asked, joining her.

"Watching cartoons."

"Is Max up?"

"She sleeps in on Saturday mornings. Want coffee?"

"No thanks. I'm in a hurry. I owe Max at least one sleep disturbance." One of the twins stayed with his trucks; the other followed me upstairs. "Which is Max's room?" I asked him.

He pointed to a closed door. "We're not allowed."

"I know." I opened the door and closed it quietly behind me. Timid knocking surprised me; I opened the door.

"Me too," the boy said.

I shook my head. His sad eyes surprised me, but he backed away, and I closed the door again. I bounced on the bed a bit until Max stirred. A pained grunt preceded her voice. "What are you doing here?" Her hair was more tangled than usual.

"I've come to annoy you. Get up. I'll take you to breakfast. Then we can go swimming before it gets too hot."

"Later," she groaned.

I pulled the sheet off her.

"What's the hurry?" She said but moved to the edge of the bed and tugged her oversized tee shirt to her knees. She lumbered away toward the second floor bathroom.

When she returned, she stepped into extra-large cut-offs and a pair of men's sandals. The hair on her legs was curly.

"The twins want to come with us," she said.

Outside the bedroom, we found both boys sitting on the landing under the wall telephone. They were around women so much they knew how to evoke emotion. Their soundless pleading eyes gave me an idea.

"Tell them we'll pick them up after breakfast, if Madge says they can go."

Max consulted with them, and we were off. Madge would no doubt make sandwiches for everyone; we'd be out of the city for much of the day, and the twins would take the pressure off my being alone with Max. The cook's death, if he was dead, might not matter to any of the women in town. He had been all I talked about with Barbara and Clay, but they were gone. Still I had to cover the possibilities, so when I left town, no one would think my leaving was suspicious.

"Want to ask Mercedes to come swimming with us?" Max asked while we drove to Hamburg Inn. Her grin was a caricature of buddy-buddy elbow in the ribs.

"No, smart-ass. I'll see her tonight."

"She smiles a lot lately."

"Cut it out, Max." I slouched over the steering wheel. I liked Mercedes, but I hadn't known how to avoid sleeping with her. If I couldn't have Catherine, I didn't want any serious relationship. Leaving town would lift all expectations in that regard.

\* \* \*

The day with Max and the twins went as planned. We found a semi-truck tire in the bushes, left by other swimmers. We spent hours sitting on the tire; the twins straddled it as well as they could; they took turns jumping off it or diving off my shoulders or Max's shoulders and coming up in the middle of the tire. Max kept all of her clothes on in the water; the twins and I swam naked.

When we were hungry, I moored the tire, and we sat on the muddy bank. Peanut butter and grape jelly sandwiches proved delicious. The tea jug Madge gave us had lost its chill, but no one complained when I poured seconds into plastic cups.

It was easy to rest for twenty-minutes or so before we went back into the water because the boys were exhausted. The after lunch play was quieter. At three o'clock, Max supervised the twins' toweling off and dressing while I rolled the tire to the spot

where we'd found it and then policed the area for our trash. We were sun-drowsy in the car: the children silent in the backseat, Max and I silent in the front.

At Max's the twins got out of the car and went into the house. "Sheller-Globe is on overtime for five days," I said. "Mind if I keep the car all week?"

"Sure. Madge or Angela can drive the gang of us to daycare." Max got out of the car, still very wet. "When will we hang out again?"

"Not until next Saturday, I'm afraid."

"Bummer."

## Chapter 40

### The End of Everything

Mercedes and I left the pizza place close to eight o'clock. The line waiting to get in was even longer than the line we had waited on when we arrived. "I don't remember this place being so popular," I said, as we moved along the crowded sidewalk.

Someone called Mercedes's name. Trudy was with Katie and Jan. We walked over and greeted each other.

"We just put another issue of the magazine to bed," Katie said.

"I liked your poem last month," I told Trudy.

"We usually go to the Haven to celebrate finishing another issue," Trudy said, ignoring the compliment. "But they were closed."

"On a Saturday night!" I said.

"A handwritten sign was posted," Katie said. "An emergency of some sort."

"Is this place any good?" Jan asked me.

Surprised to hear Jan speak, I gave a longer answer than necessary. A baby butch, she probably felt safe talking to me.

"We used to go to the Haven all the time," Mercedes said, as the conversation crisscrossed. They were Mercedes's friends, so I hung back.

A rumor moved from the last people to join the restaurant line to those progressively ahead of them. I heard it because I knew what I was listening for. A screened cage enveloped me. I couldn't hear a word of the nearby conversation.

"A robbery," someone said.

And then another voice, "He was found this morning."

I shook off the screened-in sensation and waited for the news to reach Mercedes and the others. When it did, Trudy passed it along to a middle-aged couple waiting in front of her.

Mercedes ended the social chatter and said goodnight. I waved toward the group, not trusting my voice. We walked toward the car. If Mercedes's silence was purposeful, I couldn't tell. I risked saying, "Want to do an ice cream stroll?" She shook her head. Not good.

"I want a drink," she said. "Let's go to my house." That was much better.

Neither of us spoke in the car, but her vibe needled me. "Should I come in with you?" I asked when we reached her house.

"Yes. I have a few things to say to you." She waited several moments before she added, "I don't want to see you again." She got out of the car and closed the door sharply, her body language decisive.

"So I'm *persona non grata*?"

"Did you expect applause?" Mercedes stopped on the path to her door and turned to face me. Her green eyes penetrated me the way Sissy used to look into me.

"You did, didn't you?"

"I wanted recognition for a viable political path."

"A political path for whom?" She opened her front door.

"For women who've been wronged." The door closed behind us.

"Every woman on earth has been wronged." She raised her voice.

"That's my point. If women fought back in kind...." I couldn't finish. The ferocity of her eyes hurt my breathing.

"Most women can't remember what the first offense was." She was no longer shouting. "Do you want a night cap before you go?"

"Of course, I want a nightcap." Relieved that her tone softened, I followed her into the kitchen, where she took out the scotch bottle and poured into two glasses. We didn't bother with the ice. This was a drink for the nerves, not for pleasure.

Sipping at her glass with her back against the kitchen counter, she said, "Murder is criminal not political. That's what troubles me."

"Criminal?"

"It's revenge."

"Guerilla action is always revenge." Surprised to be speaking aloud, I added, "Don't you think I wonder about this coming so naturally to me?" When she joined me at the table, I spoke faster, hoping to win her over. "You think Che Guevara was pure of heart? Or Angela Davis? Resisting the status quo is always criminal. And in this case, if it is *only* criminal, what about the crimes those in power commit? Big crimes against whole nations."

"I haven't called the police, have I?" she said. "Women are not an armed fighting force. Violence goes against everything that makes women tick." Her eyes looked away from me.

"I had to stop this guy. He didn't think there was anything wrong with preying on us. It was a game to him."

Neither of us spoke for a while. We drank. "Will you leave town immediately?"

"In a week or two."

"West with Sissy's car?"

"Unless you think it's a bad idea. I thought I'd crash with her, at least for a short time, but I haven't talked to her since she left."

"What time is it? Close to nine." In the bedroom, Mercedes took a piece of paper from the nightstand drawer and dialed the numbers on it. I held my breath until she greeted Sissy. "Listen carefully," she said, using the cryptic language that had become our paranoid talk on the phone and in public. "One of your favorites will head west in a week or so. The trip will include an auto delivery. The traveler wants to know if a temporary crash pad would be available?"

Mercedes and Sissy talked for five or six minutes, long enough for Sissy to say, *Sure, come ahead*. But Mercedes was mostly listening and answering in monosyllables. The whole business suddenly depressed me. What a jerk! How could Sissy welcome me if I was on the run? Puff went my imagined homecoming with mother and child.

Mercedes hung up but stayed seated and spoke with her back to me. "Sissy will arrange for someone in San Francisco to take you in short-term or whatever you work out when you get to the Bay Area."

"I thought she was in Oakland?"

"She is, but you won't be. The person you stay with will get her car to her. She



doesn't want to see you. She doesn't want you to see Peanut."

"You didn't talk about all that," I protested.

"She'd thought it through some time ago. Your request didn't surprise her. When you get to San Francisco, call me. I'll have other information for you. No other phone calls from Iowa to California." Mercedes stood. "Do you want the things I've been keeping for you?"

"Not if you're willing to hang on to them."

"Trudy might be interested. I'll mention it to her in a few months. If I can sell anything, I'll send you the money."

I wanted to ask her why she was keeping a gun and why she thought Trudy might want one, but my breath was irregular.

"Do you have your cigarettes and keys?"

I went to the kitchen and picked up the car keys. Mercedes led me through the living room. She opened the front door.

"Is that it?" I asked, stepping onto the porch.

"That's it." She closed the door without slamming it and turned off the porch light from inside.

Night air was my favorite part of Iowa City. I'd spent many nights in the dark. Inhaling deeply. Lost in myself. Empty. The next two weeks would be a tough stretch alone, but I'd survived those stretches before and would do it again once I arrived in San Francisco. The Bay Area would have plenty of cell-like rooms to welcome me.

The End