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EVEN PUNK GIRLS CRY
by
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Chapter 1

The door to the hospital room bursts open, and Rudi stumbles out.

She's right then a paradox within a paradox, with her spiked jet-black hair and punk makeup contrasting with the beautiful white-lace wedding gown she's wearing, which itself contrasts with the tears streaming down her face. Tears for her husband of not even ten minutes, who has just died in her arms.

She thought she'd be ready for this, with more than a year to prepare for it, but she now knows that even if she had a hundred years it wouldn't be enough.

This is when she relives the moment. The moment he stops breathing. She stops breathing, too, and she tells herself that she won't breathe again until he does. Then she shakes him over and over, trying to restore life to both of them. But after many seconds of this, only she's restored. Which causes an anger to rise in her, greater than any she's ever felt, and she pounds her fists onto Tommy's body, unleashing a fury against the one thing she couldn't conquer.

Again and again, her fists fall upon him and the evil lurking inside. She does this until her

arms can punch no more. Which is when she tumbles off the bed and onto the floor, before rising to her feet and rushing into the hallway.

There her whole body convulses, and her heart beats so loud that it sounds as if someone were banging a big bass drum inside her. Along with this comes an irresistible desire, to escape from everything, including herself. Which sends her rambling down the corridor. She does this without any direction and with her arms flailing about. She rambles until she sees a nurse pushing a medicine cart into a supply closet.

Hurriedly, she flies toward the man. She does this while singing “Without You” — a song that just popped into her head, and she gets to him just as he’s closing the door. Which she grabs and pushes open just enough to slide her petite frame inside.

“What are you doing?” the nurse barks.

Ignoring him, Rudi slams the door closed. She also lifts the cart up and turns it onto its short side, and she places its edge between the door and the knob to jam it.

“Open up!” yells the nurse, while banging onto the door and yanking the knob.

Once more, Rudi ignores him, and she turns around and sees a glass cabinet filled with all sorts of drugs. Which reminds her of a dream she once had.

Like in the dream, she tries to open the cabinet. But, like in the dream, it’s locked. So, like in the dream, she flings her fist through the glass, and with her unscathed hand she pulls out a bottle of morphine. Then, with multiple people banging at the door and shouting with increasing desperation, she shuffles through drawers and finds a hypodermic. She further collapses onto the floor against the cabinet, where she hesitates for just a few seconds before rolling up her sleeve and unwrapping the needle. Which she uses to draw morphine into the syringe until it can draw no more.

“Don’t do this!” comes a familiar voice from nearby.

At once, Rudi spins her head in its direction, and she sees Tommy. She sees him standing in his wedding tuxedo just a few steps away. Though he isn’t the sickly Tommy she left minutes earlier. In front of her is the boy she first met — handsome and muscular, with wavy brown hair and eyes so piercing that they’re cutting her apart.

“Tommy?” she mumbles, in something beyond shock, with her head shaking so much that she can’t focus her eyes. She even feels around her arm, to make certain that she hasn’t already given herself the injection.

“Don’t do this,” he repeats, with his eyes almost as tearful as hers.

“I’m coming to you, baby,” she tells him, as an ax blade rips into the door from outside it. “I’m coming.”

“Not like this!” he insists.

But she doesn’t listen. She instead drives the needle into her flesh, and she thrusts down the plunger with her thumb, causing her to loudly gasp before slipping along the floor.

“Rudi!” he cries out. “Rudi!”

But she doesn’t reply. She just gazes at the broken door as it gets more and more blurry. It’s so blurry that she can barely see the hands pushing through the shards as her eyes begin to flutter.

Chapter 2

Rudi wakes with the rising sun. Though she isn't so sure she's alive.

This is because the morning light has given the sparse white room in front of her a strange glow, making it seem unreal. Even when she sees the bandage on her hand she isn't sure of her existence, and she only becomes so when she notices her mother-in-law sleeping in the chair by her bed.

"Mrs. Goodwin?" she mutters, not really wanting to wake the woman, but way too curious about why she's there to keep quiet.

Despite the hushed tone of Rudi's voice, Mrs. Goodwin opens her eyes, and she smiles. She smiles at the young woman she despised only a few days earlier. "Hi," she says, with her smile remaining on her face.

"What are you doing here?" Rudi asks.

"The same thing you did for my son."

This embarrasses Rudi, as she doesn't feel deserving of anyone's care. So she turns from the woman and looks straight ahead at the plain white wall.

“Where am I?” she mumbles.

“The hospital,” her mother-in-law tells her.

Rudi reacts to this by looking around the room, and she sees that there’s almost no furniture apart from the chair and its twin a short distance away, which has a dark blue dress lying across it. There’s no television or telephone or even a mirror, and there are also no handles on the windows, which are made of thick plate glass.

“It doesn’t look like the hospital,” Rudi says.

“It, it’s the psychiatric ward,” Mrs. Goodwin says back.

“So they think I’m crazy.”

“They think you’re sick.”

“What’s the difference?”

Rudi says this and stares out the window, and she sees the frozen and lifeless trees in the distance, and she again wonders if she’s really among the living.

“They can help you, Rudi, if you let them,” Mrs. Goodwin goes on.

“How would you know?” Rudi utters.

“I know.”

“How?”

“What . . . what if I were to tell you that I spent some time here myself?”

With lots of surprise, Rudi turns toward Mrs. Goodwin, who adds, “Remember when I told you how I grew up poor?”

Rudi nods, and her mother-in-law tells her: “Well, it was more than just that. I was into, I was into some terrible things. Maybe worse than you. Definitely worse. Then, then came Tommy’s father, literally out of nowhere. He was like some knight on a white steed. The kind

you perhaps heard about in fairy tales when you were little. Only I never even had fairy tales when I was a girl, which made it all that more incredible. He saved me, Rudi. He saved me mostly from myself, and he made me his queen. So when he . . .”

“Tommy never told me . . .” Rudi interrupts. “About you being here.”

“He didn’t know. He thought I was staying with relatives. I didn’t tell him because I was ashamed. Like you, I thought people would think I was crazy. But I was only sick, just like you are right now. And I got better, just like you will.”

“How?”

“It won’t be easy. For me, it still isn’t.”

While lowering her eyes, Rudi shakes her head, for no particular reason.

“There’s a bereavement group that meets at our temple,” continues her mother-in-law.

“Of course, most of the people are my age and older, but you’d be welcome there. I’d see to it.”

Again, Rudi shakes her head, and she adds, “There’s nothing left for me, at least not in this world. I just want to die. Please let me die.”

“That’s not what Tommy would want,” Mrs. Goodwin insists.

“So he told me.”

“He told you?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, your stepfather was here a short time ago. And all your friends have visited as well. The entire wedding party, in fact, including the Crosses and the rabbi. Even Mr. Agnellino came by . . . with a pizza, of course.”

“He’s a nice man.”

“He told me about all the pizzas you bought for Tommy over the past months.”

“It was nothing.”

“Buying the pizzas perhaps, but putting up with all the rudeness . . . I guess that was largely my fault.”

“No.”

“There won’t be any more rudeness, Rudi. I promise you that.”

Ignoring this, or at least trying to ignore it, Rudi points to the blue dress and says, “What’s that?”

“I didn’t know if you had something to wear,” answers Mrs. Goodwin, “so I brought you a dress of mine. I figured if the gown fit so well . . .”

“To wear for what?”

“The funeral.”

Once again, Rudi turns to the window. This time much faster.

“It’s tomorrow,” adds her mother-in-law.

“It’s not black,” Rudi mutters. “The dress.”

“Jews don’t wear black at funerals.”

“I guess, I guess I have a lot to learn.”

“You have a lot to *teach*. You’ve taught me so much in such a short time. Here I am well into my fifties and I didn’t know what love really was about until you showed me. Until you forced me to see it.”

“I don’t know,” Rudi utters with a shaking head. “I don’t know if I can do it — the funeral.”

“Please,” the woman utters back, after putting her hand gently on Rudi’s. “I need you there with me.”

“How long do I have to stay here?” Rudi asks, wanting to change the subject while her emotions are still in check.

“You’ll be meeting with a psychiatrist later. As long as they feel you’re not a threat to yourself, they’ll release you. But they’re gonna want you to seek outside help. And so do I.”

Rudi shakes her head, over and over.

“So what are you going to do now?” asks Mrs. Goodwin, after removing her hand.

“Do?” Rudi bewilderedly asks back, as if she doesn’t understand the question.

“Where will you go?”

“I don’t know. I can’t even think about it. The future — the word has no meaning.”

“Well, I was planning on picking up Tommy’s things at the apartment later today. I could pick up yours, too.”

Like a few minutes earlier, Rudi turns her head toward the woman with surprise, before saying to her: “And take it where?”

“I know you don’t particularly care for that ‘palace’ of mine, but . . .”

“I couldn’t,” Rudi retorts, with lots of fear, which comes from many sources.

“You’d actually be doing me a big favor,” the woman insists, while choking a little on her words. “I’m all alone there, and I’m hurting just as much as you, believe it or not. The very moment I get my son back he, he’s gone again.”

Hesitantly, Rudi puts her hand on Mrs. Goodwin’s, and even more hesitantly she tells her: “I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you.”

“No promises.”

“All right. Well, I’ve got a lot to do today . . .”

With just a bit of reluctance, Rudi releases her hand from Mrs. Goodwin's, and the woman stands. Which is when Rudi notices the gold wedding band on her finger. "Wait," she says, as she grabs the ring and begins taking it off.

"What is it?" her mother-in-law asks.

"Let me give you back your ring."

But Mrs. Goodwin stops her. She stops her by saying, "It's not mine to take."

"You sure?"

"It's yours and yours alone."

Uncontrollably, Rudi tears up, at the kindness of a woman she once hated so much that she couldn't imagine hating anything more. She also stammers, "Thank you. I promise, I promise that it'll never come off my finger. They won't even get it off my rotting bones."

All Mrs. Goodwin can do in response to this is nod, as she's tearing up herself and can't come up with words, even in her head. She then turns to pick up her purse off the chair and utters, "That reminds me — I've something to give you."

"You've already given me too much," Rudi insists, with tears rolling down her cheeks. "And after all the things I —"

"— Nonsense. I was the one who was wrong, not you. Not ever. And besides, it's really nothing. I'm almost embarrassed to give it to you."

"Give me what?"

Mrs. Goodwin answers by grabbing her purse. She further sits on the edge of the bed and takes out an old jewelry box. Which she opens, exposing a thin and inexpensive gold Chai necklace.

"What is it?" Rudi asks, as she gazes at the pendant.

“The Hebrew word for ‘living,’” the woman tells her. “The most precious word there is.”

It’s then she takes out the necklace and places it around Rudi’s neck, and she says, “My mother gave me this when I was your age, or maybe a little younger. Just like her mother gave it to her.”

The woman afterward clasps the chain, and she whispers, “You know, I always hoped one day I’d give it to my daughter. And now, now I am.”

No longer able to control her emotions, Rudi clutches Mrs. Goodwin, and she cries out, “Oh, Mom!”

“I never thought I’d ever hear that word again,” Mrs. Goodwin cries back, with tears pouring down her face as she hugs Rudi with everything she has.

“I never thought I’d ever say it!”

Chapter 3

Wearing the blue dress, Rudi sits without emotion in one of the room's two chairs, looking so lifeless that she seems made of wax.

Which Mrs. Goodwin notices when she steps inside the room, wearing a dress much like Rudi's and carrying Rudi's white seabag.

"You ready?" the woman asks.

"I guess," Rudi says.

"How about some makeup?" Mrs. Goodwin says back, before offering Rudi the seabag. "You're almost unrecognizable without it."

"It doesn't seem appropriate."

"I would think Tommy would want you to be you, especially today. Don't you think?"

Rudi shrugs, and blurts out, "I don't even have a mirror."

"I have a compact," the woman tells her. "And I'll help you."

Chapter 4

A plain black limousine sputters up a steep hill along South Orange Avenue before veering right onto Irvington Avenue.

In the back sits Rudi, who's looking much as she had in the hospital, apart from her makeup, which she's applied far more modestly than usual. If it weren't for her hair, she'd actually look much like a normal person, which is quite abnormal to Mrs. Goodwin, who's sitting next to her and providing her support, both physical and emotional.

"I still don't know if I can do this," Rudi murmurs, before leaning against her mother-in-law even more than before.

"You'll be fine," Mrs. Goodwin murmurs back, as the vehicle turns right onto the large parking lot of Congregation Beth El. It then continues to the entrance of the synagogue, where waiting outside are a group of people very familiar to Rudi, as they were all at her wedding days earlier. This group includes her stepfather Mr. Reese, along with her former foster parents Stephen and Pam. Her best friend Maria is there, too, along with Maria's girlfriend Sandra, Owen, and the three boys. Even Mr. Agnellino is there.

Seeing them makes Rudi feel happy, but only for the briefest of moments, because she also sees something not far away. She sees a dark oak coffin next to Rabbi Orenstein, who's desperately trying to feign strength when he's feeling anything but, especially as this is one of the few times in his life that he can't help question his faith.

Right then, the limo parks a short distance from the curb, and the chauffeur climbs out and opens the back door. First, Mrs. Goodwin steps out, followed by Rudi, who can't take her eyes off the coffin and all it represents. It means death, not just Tommy's but her own, and much like before her attempted suicide her whole body convulses.

"I can't do this," she utters. "I just can't!"

Quickly, she turns around and starts running — away from the coffin, and away from the death.

"Rudi!" her mother-in-law cries out.

"I'm sorry!" she cries back. "I'm so sorry!"

Soon, she reaches the end of the lot and turns left, and she rambles down the hill. She further rambles up the next one, and she doesn't stop until she reaches South Mountain Reservation, where she sits on the edge of a cliff overlooking the falls Tommy loved so much.

There she watches the endless water, with her arms tightly crossed against the coldness of both the day and her emotions. For hours she stares at it, just as Tommy often did when he was sad and troubled, and just as she had done during an afternoon that was all too similar to this one.

"I thought I might find you here," comes a voice.

Rudi doesn't respond. So Mrs. Goodwin makes her way over to her, and she puts a heavy wool coat over her shoulders, doing so without Rudi seeming to notice.

"How'd you know I was here?" Rudi asks, while continuing to stare at the water.

“I knew Tommy came here,” the woman tells her.

“Do you know this is where I first knew I loved him, where I first knew such a thing was possible?”

Mrs. Goodwin responds to this by sitting next to Rudi, and she wraps her arm around her.

“He used to tell me that looking into the water made him forget his problems,” Rudi goes on. “But no matter how hard I try it doesn’t work. It never works.”

“Perhaps then it’s time to stop,” her mother-in-law says.

“How was it?”

“The funeral?”

Rudi nods, and Mrs. Goodwin tells her: “Fine, I suppose.”

“And the reception?”

“The same. Everyone was asking about you.”

“They, they must think I’m horrible for missing my own husband’s funeral,” Rudi mumbles, while again starting to lose control of herself.

“Nonsense.”

Slowly, Rudi turns to the woman and says, “I just couldn’t do it.”

“I understand. I’ve been there, remember?”

“But you at least went to your husband’s funeral.”

“What makes you say that?”

The woman says this just as a single set of tears fall down her cheeks, which is just before Rudi hugs her.

“Come on, let’s go,” the woman insists.

“Go where?” Rudi asks.

“I’m taking you home.”

Chapter 5

Mrs. Goodwin leads Rudi inside the big white house. The house that once represented everything she hated. But she now sees that it's the last link to everything she loves. She also sees Elizabeth in her pristine white uniform, and she runs up to the tall woman and hugs her, with her eyes full of tears.

"What's the matter, child?" Elizabeth murmurs, while gently caressing Rudi's back.

"It was all because of you," Rudi utters, with her voice past broken.

"What was?"

"There wouldn't have been a wedding if it hadn't been for you."

"I —"

"— And, and if you hadn't called me that Christmas when Tommy was in the hospital . . . I don't even want to think about it."

"I really didn't do anything."

"You did everything! For a nobody like me."

"Hush now. Don't you ever say that again. You think a fine boy like Tommy would've

wasted his time with a nobody? He could've picked any girl he wanted, and he picked you. And don't you ever forget that."

"I won't forget what you did for me. Not in a billion years."

These words make Elizabeth want to cry herself, and to avoid this she looks at Mrs. Goodwin, and she sees her smile.

Days earlier, after she forced the woman to speak to Rudi, she truly believed it would be her last act as maid. She even packed her things, thinking Mrs. Goodwin would surely fire her as soon as she came home from the hospital. Instead, she received a large raise, and an even larger bonus, along with inexpressible gratitude for services beyond any call of duty, and this gratitude is once again on display.

Chapter 6

Rudi steps out of the bathroom and into the adjoining bedroom wearing a pink flannel nightgown, watched by her smiling mother-in-law.

“It fits,” the woman calls out, while feigning astonishment.

“What a surprise,” Rudi remarks, with a small forced smile. Then, with actual surprise, she hurries up to the wall by the bed, where hanging there is her crumpled drawing of Tommy set inside a plain black frame. Which she gazes at.

“The hospital gave it to me,” Mrs. Goodwin says. “Did you draw it?”

Rudi nods, and she adds, “Pretty terrible, eh?”

“Actually, I think you captured him incredibly well. It’s obvious how much you loved him.”

“I didn’t even like him when I drew this.”

“I very much doubt that.”

Rudi doesn’t respond to this. She just crawls into bed, with her mother-in-law looking around Tommy’s former room with a bit of discomfort.

“Are you sure you want to sleep here?” the woman says. “There are lots of empty bedrooms in this house. Ones that come without memories.”

“Memories don’t need rooms,” Rudi tells her. “They can pass through anything.”

“Still . . .”

“I want to stay here.”

“All right.”

Mrs. Goodwin says this and steps up to the bed, and she pulls the covers up to Rudi’s neck.

“Just look at me,” she utters, while shaking her head. “Tucking you in like you were five years old.”

“I don’t mind,” Rudi tells her. “No one’s ever done that to me before. At least I don’t remember anyone doing it.”

Mrs. Goodwin nods at this, and does so a bit sadly before heading to the door, where she turns around and looks at Rudi while saying, “Is there anything I can get you?”

“Do you have a stereo?” Rudi asks.

“A few, actually. Tommy had one, in fact. I put it in that closet over there.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have a copy of ‘Moonlight Serenade’?”

“By Glenn Miller?” Mrs. Goodwin mutters with some surprise, while vaguely recalling her son strangely mentioning the former bandleader once before in regards to the two.

Rudi nods, and the woman says to her: “I suppose I have a copy somewhere. Or I can get one. But why would you want it?”

“You think you could also get me a blank cassette tape?” Rudi goes on.

“Sure. But what about your own tapes? I have them in a box downstairs.”

“I just want that one song, please.”

“All right. Anything else?”

Rudi shakes her head, and Mrs. Goodwin asks, “Should I turn off the light?”

“Yes, please,” Rudi answers.

The woman responds by flicking off the switch, and the two say their goodnights before Mrs. Goodwin leaves and closes the door.

This is when Rudi clutches both the pillows and the sheets, and she inhales the small but ever-present remnants of her husband. Which makes her smile and smile. “Oh, Tommy,” she whispers, while feeling him touching her everywhere. “I’m never gonna leave you again.”

Chapter 7

In the morning Rudi opens the door of Tommy's closet, and she sees his stereo. She also sees something even better: his blue-and-white football jacket, with his name stitched into it.

Quickly, she rips the garment from its hanger, and much like the night before with the pillows and the sheets, she smells it and caresses it with her body. Eventually, she falls to the floor with it, too, where she wraps her arms around it and calls out Tommy's name again and again.

At the same time, Mrs. Goodwin takes a trip to Sam Goody in the Livingston Mall, and she buys a record of Glenn Miller's greatest hits and a blank cassette. Both of which she brings to her daughter-in-law's room.

"Thank you," Rudi says to her with a timid smile, before getting out of bed and heading toward the woman with Tommy's jacket over her nightgown.

"You're not dressed yet," Mrs. Goodwin utters.

"Dressed for what?" Rudi utters back.

"You do realize that it's almost noon?"

“So?” Rudi mutters, before taking the items and carrying them to the stereo she set up next to Tommy’s old trophy case. “It’s not like I have anywhere to go.”

“What about school?” Mrs. Goodwin asks. “When are you planning on going back?”

“I’m not.”

“Why not?”

“What’s the point?”

“I —”

“— I only went before because Tommy made me.”

“Don’t you think he’d want you to continue?”

Rudi doesn’t reply. She just peels the shrink-wrap off the album and takes out the vinyl record, and she places it on the turntable. She also opens the cassette and inserts it into the tape deck, and she places the needle at just the right spot of the record before turning on the player. Which she does just before pressing the record button.

Right away, the sounds of “Moonlight Serenade” and its gentle but steady trombone fill both the room and Rudi, and she closes her eyes and wraps her arms around herself while slowly dancing with a big grin.

Watching this, Mrs. Goodwin shakes her head again and again, as it’s as incongruent as when she first saw Tommy and Rudi together. For here is this wild-looking punk girl, with a helpless angel trapped inside her, and she so wants to cradle this angel and make all the unhappiness go away. Though she well knows she can’t.

So she leaves the room, doing so without Rudi noticing, and soon after that the song comes to an end. Which she restarts by bringing the needle back to the beginning of the song while letting the tape continue to roll.

She keeps repeating this process until the first side of the tape has almost reached the end, which is when she takes it out and turns it over, before filling the other side with the song, too. Then, she returns to her bed with the tape, and she puts it in her Walkman, and she listens to it for hours, only stopping when sleep overtakes her. Which is accompanied by a dream of a dusty dance hall. In this dream, Tommy's arms are desperately clinging to her, just like they were so many times when he was alive, and just like then his cheek is pressed against hers.

"You're back," she whispers, while watching Glenn Miller lead his orchestra not far away.

"I never left," Tommy insists.

"I want to make love to you," she pleads. "I want to make love to you right now, just like we used to. I want it so badly."

It's then they find themselves back in her old bedroom in Irvington — back in the same bed they spent their first night together. Like then, he kisses and touches her everywhere. Only now it really seems to continue forever, through days and weeks and lifetimes.

Chapter 8

For months Rudi rarely leaves Tommy's room, and she refuses to see all the people who come to visit her, including her stepfather and her former foster mom and all her friends. She also takes all her meals in bed, which she barely touches, realizing that the weaker she is the easier it is to fall into her dream and remain there. She never dresses, either, and she spends most of her conscious time listening to "Moonlight Serenade."

Soon, she becomes almost as gaunt as Tommy was when he died, and her hair becomes long while returning to its natural brown color. This, along with her lack of makeup, makes her look like a completely different person, and not a better one.

It gets so bad that Mrs. Goodwin presses her to see a doctor. But she keeps refusing. So one morning the woman arranges for a doctor to come see her. Though she ignores the man and his questions as he examines her, paying attention only to her music.

Eventually, the aging man turns to Mrs. Goodwin, and he nods toward the door before marching into the hallway, followed by the woman.

"What do you think?" Mrs. Goodwin whispers, as soon as she closes the door.

“You may want to consider . . .” he answers, while averting his eyes a bit.

“Consider what?”

“I know a very good hospital.”

“You mean, an institution.”

“They could help her.”

“I’m not gonna commit that poor girl.”

“Well, I can tell you that you’re not helping her by doing nothing.”

“But —”

“— Look, we’re not talking about forever. Just until she’s better.”

“No.”

“Think about it. Please. But don’t think about it too long, because right now that girl’s slowly killing herself.”

The doctor says this and the woman leads him out of the house, before returning to Rudi’s room, where she sits next to her on the bed. She also shuts off her Walkman.

Without emotion, Rudi turns to her mother-in-law and gazes at her.

“Hi,” the woman mutters.

Rudi responds by reaching for the play button, but Mrs. Goodwin grabs her hand, and she says to her: “I was talking with Pam earlier. She’d love to see you. So many people want to see you, especially your stepfather.”

“Not today,” Rudi mumbles.

“Tomorrow?”

“No.”

“Rudi, you can’t just waste away here.”

“Would you prefer I did it somewhere else?”

“I don’t want you doing it anywhere.”

Angrily, Rudi shakes Mrs. Goodwin’s hand away and turns on her player.

“The doctor who was just here,” the woman goes on, with her voice raised, “he wants to put you away. Is that what you want?”

“I want to die,” Rudi says, with her eyes beginning to tear. “Please just let me die.”

Mrs. Goodwin reacts to this by ripping Rudi’s headphones off her ears, and she howls, “I won’t let you die! What’s happened to you, Rudi? What’s happened to that tough you-know-what who came barreling into my house, shaking it at its very foundation?”

“She’s six feet in the ground, along with your son.”

“No, she isn’t! She’s right here in front of me!”

“No.”

“Do you know, do you know you were the first person in twenty years to stand up to me, and now look at you . . . you’ve become a sheep! Is that what you want — to be a sheep?”

Rudi shakes her head, but it’s not too convincing.

“Then live, goddammit!” her mother-in-law shouts. “Live!”

“How?” Rudi shouts back. “How can I live without him?”

“You fight! You fight for every breath!”

“He was my breath!”

“Please. Will you just try? If not for yourself or for Tommy, then do it for me. Because I love you.”

“You don’t love me. You just feel sorry for me.”

“I love you!”

Hearing these words, Rudi starts to cry, because she knows they're true.

"And I can't stand watching you do this to yourself," Mrs. Goodwin continues. "So do it for me. Please, do it for me."

At first Rudi doesn't respond. She just lies there. But then she reluctantly nods, and she says, "All right, I'll try."

Chapter 9

With the sun setting outside, by a table at Reservoir Mrs. Goodwin sits with Rudi, who's still wearing both the Walkman and Tommy's football jacket. But she's also gotten dressed, wearing a plain white T-shirt and jeans.

Mrs. Goodwin right away glances at the menu and does so with a bit of a sneer, having always disliked the place, especially when her late husband used to drag her there on a weekly basis. "You know," she murmurs, "there's a much better Italian restaurant that just opened —"

"— You said I could choose," Rudi interrupts, while also glancing at a menu, despite knowing exactly what she wants.

"All right," the woman relents, while not surprisingly hearing the faint sounds of "Moonlight Serenade" coming from Rudi's headphones. This piques her interest, just like it does whenever she hears it, and though she promised herself that she wouldn't bring up anything that would cause Rudi to relive the past she utters, "That song, it was old when I was your age. Why do you keep listening to it?"

"It's hard to explain without sounding even more crazy than I must already seem,"

answers Rudi. “But the song meant a lot to Tommy and me, just like this restaurant meant a lot. In a way it was our song. In a big way.”

“You know,” says Mrs. Goodwin with a slight shake of her head, “every time I think I have a handle on your relationship with my son you throw me a big curve, like right now. Perhaps one day, if it’s not too personal, you could tell me about it. I’d really like to know.”

“It wasn’t as wild as you probably thought.”

“I’ve figured that much.”

“We didn’t even . . .”

“You didn’t?” Mrs. Goodwin gasps, while feeling ashamed at how she once thought their relationship was only about sex.

“He got sick,” Rudi stammers, “before we, we . . .”

“Oh, Rudi, I’m so sorry.”

“I’m not. The only thing I’m sorry about is that it ended. I would’ve gladly taken care of him my whole life, and I wouldn’t have complained once. Not once.”

“Oh, Rudi.”

“You have no idea how happy your son made me — more happy than I ever was or will ever be again. He was the first person who ever saw me — who ever wanted to see me. I didn’t even see myself until he came around.”

“If only I hadn’t been so stupid, maybe I could —”

“— I always beat myself up like that. ‘If I only did this — if only that happened.’ It never helps. Nothing can ever change anything.”

It’s then Pam steps inside the restaurant, and while pretending not to notice how thin her former foster child looks — not to mention how strange she seems with long brownish hair and

no makeup — she smiles and calls out, “Hey, guys!” She further sits next to the pair, and they soon order. Afterward, Pam reaches across the table, and she takes Rudi’s hand while saying, “It’s so nice to see you.”

Rudi responds with a forced smile, and a mild one at that.

“So how’s your stepdad doing?” Pam adds.

Rudi shrugs, so Mrs. Goodwin replies for her, by saying, “He’s doing just fine. He visits every week, in fact.”

“That’s nice.”

“Lots of her friends visit, too. Especially that big hulking young man who was at the wedding.”

“Owen,” Rudi utters, with her eyes lowered a bit. “His name is Owen. I’m gonna have to call him, and my dad. And lots of other people, too. I haven’t been much of a friend. I haven’t been much of anything.”

“They understand,” Mrs. Goodwin insists. “I’m sure they do.”

This is when Mr. Agnellino comes to the table with a big grin and an even bigger pizza, which he places on the table while telling everyone: “For the three most beautiful women in town.”

“Thank you, Vincenza,” Mrs. Goodwin tells him back.

“You need anything else, just holler.”

“Actually, I would like something.”

“What’s that?”

“The bill.”

“What bill?”

“The one for all those pizzas you delivered to the reception at the hospital.”

“Didn’t you get it?”

“No.”

“It, it must have gotten lost in the mail somehow,” he says bashfully.

“I’m sure that was it,” she says back, quite unashamedly. “So you better send me a copy.”

“All right.”

The man then starts off, but Mrs. Goodwin grabs his hand, and she tells him: “Thank you. For everything.”

While trying hard to control his emotions, the man nods and hurries off, and both Pam and Mrs. Goodwin pull out a slice of pie. Though Rudi just stares, lost in her own private world.

“Aren’t you gonna have any?” Pam asks Rudi, while once again worried about how thin she looks.

Rudi responds by taking a piece of pizza, and she brings it to her mouth, with the wonderful smells bringing back even more wonderful memories, of her first date with Tommy and all the times they shared over pizza just like this. For this one moment she’s actually happy. But it doesn’t last. It doesn’t because before she can even take a bite she sees a young couple a few tables away, who are holding hands and kissing, just like she and Tommy used to do and would do never again, apart from in her dreams.

This realization causes Rudi so much pain that she drops the pizza and lowers her eyes, and just like in the hospital, she has an irrepressible desire to escape.

Chapter 10

Rudi and Mrs. Goodwin return home, and the latter takes the former's hand and asks, "Would you like to watch some TV with me?"

"No, thank you," Rudi says. "I'm pretty beat. I think I'm just gonna go to bed."

"All right. But tomorrow we're going out again."

"All right."

"Only tomorrow I'm picking the restaurant."

"All right."

"And we're going out the day after that. And the day after that."

"All right."

Rudi says this and starts toward the staircase, while her mother-in-law makes her way toward the living room. But all of a sudden Rudi stops, and she turns to the woman and utters, "Mom?"

At first Mrs. Goodwin doesn't react to this. But then realizing Rudi is addressing her, she comes to a halt and spins back to her, with a big smile on her face. "I love it when you call me

that,” she tells her.

“I kinda like saying it, too,” Rudi tells her back. “More than kinda.”

“Thank you.”

“Actually, that’s what I wanted to do. I wanted to thank you. And not just for tonight. I know I haven’t exactly shown it, but I really appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

“I know.”

“You’ve been more of a mother to me in these past months than I’ve ever had or could’ve ever hoped for.”

“You’re a pretty okay daughter yourself.”

“Well, goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Rudi.”

Again, Mrs. Goodwin makes her way toward the living room while Rudi again starts toward the staircase. Though at the foot of it she hesitates, and she glances around and notices that not only is she alone but that the kitchen not far away is dark, and calling out to her.

It keeps calling until she takes a single step inside it, which is when she turns on the lights. Then, after another moment of hesitation, she moves deeper inside. She does this even if she isn’t exactly certain why.

Randomly, she opens cabinets and drawers. In one of the latter she finds some table knives, and she picks up one and tests its sharpness with her index finger, and finds it way too dull. Then she continues through the kitchen, and she eventually finds a butcher’s block, and she takes out the largest and sharpest knife. Which cuts her finger with ease.

Chapter 11

It's late at night when Rudi peeks out her bedroom, wearing nothing but Tommy's jacket.

While glancing down the hallway at the door to Mrs. Goodwin's room, she sees only darkness underneath it. She also notices that the whole house is quiet. It's so quiet that she has the feeling that she's the only person in the world.

This is when she returns to her room, and she marches into the adjoining bathroom, where she starts the tub, using only hot water. She further adds a little bubble bath, and she steps up to the sink and takes the large butcher's knife from her jacket pocket, and she lays it beside the faucet. She also takes off the Chai pendant and carefully places it next to the knife.

Again, she peeks her head out the bedroom, and again she glances down the hallway at Mrs. Goodwin's room, and she again sees that it's dark and silent.

What comes next is another round of hesitation, and once it passes she returns inside the bathroom and removes her jacket. She also picks up the knife and climbs into the tub, where she waits for even a flimsy excuse not to do what she's planning.

But none comes, and with the scalding water now above her chest, she realizes no

excuses would come even if she waited forever. So, with her hand shaking slightly, she brings the knife to her wrist.

“Don’t do this, Rudi,” comes a familiar voice.

Ignoring this, she cuts open her wrist, with just a bit of a wince, before dropping the knife onto the floor and bringing her bleeding arm into the water.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this to me!” an angry Tommy howls, while flailing his arms.

Reluctantly, Rudi turns to him, and like in the hospital supply closet, she sees that he’s wearing his wedding tuxedo. Though she doesn’t say anything to him. She just desperately tries to pretend that he’s not there.

“I thought you loved me,” he utters.

“I do,” she utters back, with the water now approaching the edge of the bathtub. “More than anything.”

“Then how can you do this to me?”

“You don’t know what it’s like being without you.”

“I know what it’s like to die. I would’ve done anything to live — anything!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry! Do something about it!”

“I can’t.”

“Do you know why I fell in love with you?”

Over and over, she shakes her head, and she says, “I never understood. I’m a nobody.”

“Because you made me feel alive!” he yells. “You made me feel so fucking alive! But obviously I didn’t mean the same to you!”

“You did! I swear you did!”

“Then show me!”

“I . . .”

“Show me!”

“I can’t live without you!”

“You never will! I’ll always be there whenever you need me! I’m a part of you, just like you’re a part of me. The very best part. We’ll have forever together, I swear — but not now. Now you have to live. Not only for yourself and for me, but for all the people you’ll touch — all the people who’ll need you and depend on you. For all the people whose lives you’ll change!”

“I . . .” she mumbles, while starting to lose consciousness.

“Live!” Tommy screams. “Live!”

Meekly, Rudi tries to stand up, but she falls right back into the tub, with the water starting to pour onto the floor. Seeing this, she reaches for the faucet knob and tries to turn it off, but she’s too weak, and her hand returns to the water and she closes her eyes.

“Rudi!” Tommy hollers, causing her eyes to open just a bit. “Tell me you love me!”

“I love you,” she insists.

“Louder!”

“I love you!”

“Tell me louder!”

“I fucking love you!” she screams.

This scream wakes Mrs. Goodwin, even if she doesn’t know why it does. Then she hears another sound. The sound of running water, and she rises out of bed and marches into the hallway, where she notices water coming from Rudi’s room. Which sends her to Rudi’s open bedroom door, and to the water flowing out of the bathroom.

“Oh, my God!” she gasps, before sprinting toward the water’s source, and she gasps even louder when she finds it.

Chapter 12

Rudi wakes and sees that she's back in the psychiatric ward. She further sees that there's a bandage around her wrist and that the Chai pendant is once again around her neck.

She also sees Mrs. Goodwin sitting by her side again. Though this time she isn't smiling. This time she's angry.

"This is becoming a habit," Rudi says, while avoiding the woman's gaze.

"One that's coming to an end," her mother-in-law growls, having realized almost too late that coddling Rudi wasn't helping, and that she needs to try something else, regardless of how difficult this might be.

Rudi doesn't respond to the woman's growl, apart from averting her eyes even more.

"You were very lucky," Mrs. Goodwin goes on, "that I heard you shouting."

"Shouting?" Rudi mumbles, while trying to recall why she'd been shouting. Then, once she does, she becomes frightened, because it just might mean that she wasn't hallucinating.

"Tommy," she whispers, "he . . ."

"What about Tommy?" Mrs. Goodwin demands.

“Nothing.”

“*Rudi.*”

“All that water in the bathroom. I must’ve ruined your house.”

“Fuck my house!” the woman barks, with the same harsh Brooklyn accent Rudi last heard the last time Mrs. Goodwin was furious with her.

“I’m sorry,” Rudi mumbles.

“Yes, you are sorry, and I’m sick of it.”

“Does this mean that you’re finally throwing me out?”

“Yes. But not because of what you did to my house. I was speaking to one of your doctors a little while ago, and he thinks it might be a good idea for you to get away from here, and from all the things associated with here. So, once you’re good and ready to leave the hospital — and only then — that’s exactly what you’re gonna do.”

“What bullshit,” Rudi retorts. “I couldn’t get away from here if I traveled a million miles — if I went to the fucking moon!”

“Still,” Mrs. Goodwin retorts back, “we’re gonna try. Mr. Cross tells me that, with your grades, you can get into any college you want. So you’re gonna pick one for the fall. Any one. Just as long as it’s out of town.”

“I don’t want any.”

“Well, too fucking bad, young lady. *Too fucking bad.* Because you’re going if I have to drag you there screaming. And I’ll do it — believe me!”

Rudi reacts to this by turning toward the thick glass window. She also points out the door, and with a breaking voice she says, “Why don’t you just walk out of here and be done with me. I’m not worth it.”

“Was my son worth it?”

“What?”

“Why didn’t you walk out on him when things got tough?”

“That was different. He was sick.”

“And so are you!”

“Just go! I’m not your responsibility!”

“You are!”

“You don’t owe me anything!”

“I owe you everything!”

“Just get out of here!”

Instead, the woman grabs the top of Rudi’s gown with both fists and she howls, “Shall I start dragging now?”

But the woman doesn’t have to drag Rudi anywhere, as Rudi tells her exactly what she wants to hear, and later on she fills out a bunch of college applications with her help. She also attends all her counseling sessions as well as group therapy, and she says all the right things. She even takes all the terrible drugs they give her for her depression, which only make her even more depressed. She does all these things thinking it will lead to her escape, just as it had during her many stints at rehab. But unlike then, the doctors see through her act and they won’t release her, which makes her sullen. Which is how Maria finds her one morning after Rudi returns from breakfast.

“Hi,” Maria mumbles, while trying not to look shocked at how different her friend looks.

“What are you doing here?” Rudi utters without emotion, before getting into bed and turning away from Maria.

“It’s spring break.”

“Shouldn’t you be on a beach somewhere?” Rudi asks, while feeling embarrassed that Maria is seeing her this way, especially as she knows Maria has always looked up to her.

“I had something else to do,” Maria says, before sitting on the bed and taking Rudi’s hand.

Right away, Rudi pulls away her hand, and she mutters, “Please go away.”

“Why wouldn’t you see me before?” Maria asks.

“I haven’t seen anyone. Not even my dad.”

“You know, I saw him downstairs in the lobby just now.”

“You did?”

“He looks so sad.”

“I, I’ve screwed up everything,” Rudi mumbles, while starting to tear up.

“No, you haven’t,” Maria insists.

But Rudi doesn’t want to hear this, and she moves even farther from her friend.

“Mrs. Goodwin was telling me,” Maria goes on, “she was telling me that you’re applying to colleges for the fall.”

Rudi shrugs.

“Have you picked one yet?”

Rudi shakes her head.

“Because I was thinking,” Maria continues, “I was thinking maybe you could come to GW with Sandra and me.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s a little beneath you. You probably should be going to Harvard or Yale,

or something like that.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“You wouldn’t want me around. You’re only asking me because you feel pity. And I don’t want it!”

“That’s not true. It’s not pity at all. I miss you. I miss you so much. Even at a big school like GW I get lonely. Especially there.”

“You have Sandra.”

“It’s not the same. I love her, but it’s not the same. I don’t think you know just how much you’ve meant to me — how much you’ve helped me — how important you are to me. If anyone needs pity, it’s me.”

“I don’t know.”

“Soon, Sandra and I have to pick out a dorm room for next year. We were planning on getting a double in the building we live, but we could just as easily get a triple. They’re much nicer, in fact. They even have alcoves. So I talked to Sandra right after I talked to Mrs. Goodwin, and she was really excited about the idea. I swear she was.”

“I’d be a third wheel.”

“You’d be a third friend. And that’s something we really don’t have that many of.”

“I, I’ll think about it,” Rudi stammers, after turning to Maria, who hugs her friend, and Rudi hugs her back while saying, “Could you send my dad up?”

Maria does this, and before long Mr. Reese timidly steps inside the hospital room.

At once, Rudi throws open her arms with lots of guilt on her face, and he rambles up to her and gives her a big bear hug.

“Why were you waiting downstairs?” she asks, after they break their embrace.

“I thought you didn’t want to see me,” he answers.

“It wasn’t you. It was me.”

“I’m so sorry, Rudi.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about.”

He nods, but it isn’t too convincing.

“I’m the one who should be sorry,” Rudi goes on.

“No,” he tells her, while shaking his head.

“I’ve been so selfish, not thinking about anyone but me.”

“I went through that myself once.”

With lots of emotion, Rudi takes her father’s hand, and she says to him: “From now on, you see me. You see me whenever you want. You hear me?”

Chapter 13

Rudi is still thinking about Maria's offer that night, as she wanders the halls of the ward, unable to sleep or even rest her eyes.

Eventually, she comes to an open and dark room in which lies a young man in his early twenties. This man is tall and lean, with short light brown hair and sad eyes. Eyes that are a few shades darker than his hair. He's also paralyzed from the waist down, with his wheelchair standing a few steps from his bed.

Apart from these facts, Rudi knows nothing about him, other than his odd name: Vilem. That's because he never speaks in the group therapy sessions they both attend. He won't even acknowledge questions directed to him. He just stares into space, looking barely alive. Which is exactly what he's doing when Rudi comes to his door.

Right then, for a reason she can't explain, she finds him fascinating, and she stares at him.

"Not much of a prince is he?" whispers a scratchy voice from nearby. Which belongs to a short blonde patient named Glenda, who's a few years older than Rudi.

"What?" Rudi whispers back.

“I said —”

“— What did you just call him?”

“Don’t you know he’s a prince?”

“What do you mean?”

“You do know what a prince is, don’t you?”

“For real he’s a prince?”

“Prince Vilem of . . . of some place in Europe. Though he doesn’t have a castle or a crown or anything like that. He just has a title, and lots of money. Which is probably the only thing keeping him out of jail.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He was driving drunk. That’s how he got hurt. But he was actually lucky.”

“Lucky?”

“His unlucky girlfriend was in the car with him. She couldn’t even crawl away from the wreck, if you know what I mean.”

Glenda says this and walks off, and Rudi again stares at the young man, though now she does so with a bit of a grimace, as she now sees the person in front of her as someone she’s always despised: an overprivileged brat, who deserves every misery coming to him. But strangely there’s something else about him — something she can’t quantify, and this feeling gets stronger and stronger the longer she stares at him, until it compels her to step inside Vilem’s room.

There she quietly sits in a chair next to his bed, and she finally realizes what’s driven her to him: his pain and self-hatred — something she knows all too well.

Not surprisingly, Vilem doesn’t acknowledge her presence at all. He just keeps staring

nowhere. He doesn't even acknowledge her hand when it gently takes his.

But Rudi doesn't mind, as she knows that she's there as much for herself as for him. For this same reason, she sits there all night holding his hand, without saying a word. She even holds on to it after she falls asleep.

Then, in the morning, she wakes to the sound of crying. Vilem's. Which is when he turns to her and tries to tell her something. But he just can't find the words, and he would've had trouble expressing them even if he could.

"Somehow," she tells him, "somehow it's gonna be all right. I don't know how or when, but it will. For both of us."

He responds to this, by bringing her hand up to his wet face, and he cries even harder.

At the same time, a doctor marches into the room, and she drops her clipboard in shock — shock that Vilem is expressing any kind of cognition, and this sound causes Rudi to spin toward her.

"What?" the doctor mumbles, while pointing at Vilem with her jaw unhinged. "How?"

"I guess he just needed a friend," Rudi tells her. "We all do."

Rudi soon after returns to her room, where Mrs. Goodwin is anxiously waiting.

"Where have you been?" the woman asks, with lots of concern. "Everyone's looking for you."

"I had something to do."

"What?"

"Penance."

"Penance?"

"I've decided on a school."

Chapter 14

A limousine reaches the industrial outskirts of Washington, DC amid the oppressive heat of early September.

Inside it Mrs. Goodwin glumly looks out the window. She also shakes her head and turns to Rudi, who's wearing Tommy's jacket and listening to her tape of "Moonlight Serenade" on her Walkman. "You sure you want to take those things with you?" she asks.

"What things?" Rudi asks back, after turning down the player a bit.

"The jacket and the music. You're supposed to be getting away from the memories."

"The doctor said it was okay. He said it was kinda like a security blanket or a night light. To be real honest, I'm not sure if I can make it without them."

In spite of saying this, Rudi has improved much since her days in the hospital. She's not only back to her normal weight, but she also no longer languishes in bed all day, and she's both social and functional. She almost resembles her former self, which includes her punk makeup and spiked jet-black hair, and she no longer wants to kill herself.

Still, Mrs. Goodwin can't help worry about her, and this manifests itself when she again

glances out the window and says, "I really wish you had picked a different school."

"What's wrong with GW?" Rudi says back. Though she's got her own doubts about the place, and has been having second thoughts about going there during the entire five-hour trip.

"You should be going to an Ivy League school," Mrs. Goodwin insists. "Or at least something like Swarthmore."

"I don't have any friends at Ivy League schools. Or even Swarthmore."

"I don't know, I just, I just figured you'd be going someplace reasonably close, like Princeton or Penn. Someplace within driving distance. I . . . I'm gonna miss you."

With a gentle smile, Rudi puts her hand on top of the woman's, and she tells her: "It's gonna be real nice to be missed."

These words cause the woman to smile herself, and she turns back to Rudi, and while shaking her head a little she murmurs, "Tell me, whatever did my son do to get someone like you?"

"He smiled," Rudi answers. "It was actually a lot like yours."

Earlier, Mrs. Goodwin had promised herself not to get emotional, but she does just that, and she hugs the only thing in her life that means anything to her. She also weeps a bit.

"I'll be home for Thanksgiving and Christmas," Rudi pleads, while trying to hold back the same emotions. "And for spring break, too. And for four whole months in the summer. You'll be sick of me in no time."

"I very much doubt that."

"And you can always grab one of those shuttles down here. It takes like an hour. I checked."

"Careful," the woman says, before breaking their embrace, "I just might take you up on

that.”

“You better.”

It’s then the limo enters the city, and not long after this it parks in front of Thurston Hall, which is a 9-story dormitory housing more than a thousand students, just a handful of blocks from the White House in the Foggy Bottom section of town.

Uneasily, both Rudi and Mrs. Goodwin stare through the window at the dorm, in which students are shuffling in and out. Rudi’s unease is mostly because everyone looks so conservative and well-adjusted. They look so unlike her. They look almost as if they were attending the recent Republican National Convention.

Once upon a time, Rudi thought of college as being a hotbed of radicalism and unconventionality. She thought of it as a place where she just might fit in. But she now wonders if she’s going to be even more out of place here than she was in high school. Which makes her feel something that goes beyond “second thoughts,” and she almost tells her mother-in-law to take her home — something she knows the woman would unhesitantly do.

But instead she grabs Tommy’s old backpack from the floor of the vehicle, and she takes a long deep breath before uttering, “Well, here goes nothing.”

“You have the doctor’s phone number?” Mrs. Goodwin utters back.

“I have everything.”

“You sure I can’t give you some money?”

“I’ve told you a million times — I’m getting a full ride, including meals.”

“But you still need spending money.”

“I’ll get a job or something.”

“But —”

“— Look,” Rudi interrupts, “if you want to give away your money, how about giving some to AIDS research?” She then points toward the big white building down the street and adds, “It’s not like your dear old pal Ronnie is gonna help — or care.”

“It’s not true that he doesn’t care,” Mrs. Goodwin retorts. “It’s just that medical research is not the province of the federal government.”

“Yada-yada-yada. In the meantime people are dying. Lots of them!”

“You’re just impossible!”

“That’s why you love me!”

“It’s only one of the reasons!”

Just like that, the two women grin at each other, and they take each other’s hands, and Mrs. Goodwin says, “I’m glad you’ve gotten some of your spunk back, but I’d still like to give you —”

“— No,” Rudi insists.

“Why won’t you let me spoil you just a little?”

“You already spoil me, Mom, with the one thing I really need.”

The two then hug. They hug one last time, and Rudi steps out of the limousine. Which is when she discovers that the air is so thick that she can hardly breathe it. But she ignores this, or at least she tries to ignore it, and she tosses Tommy’s heavy backpack over her shoulder and closes the door. She also crosses the street, with her unease increasing with every step, along with her desire to escape. Though she eventually makes it to the other side of the road, where she turns back to the limo, and with a slightly shaking hand she waves one last time to Mrs. Goodwin, who can’t be seen through the tinted glass. So Rudi can’t see her cry.

At this moment, the limo takes off, and Rudi wipes some sweat from her brow before

slithering inside Thurston Hall. She further glances at a bored-looking security guard sitting nearby and slithers to the front desk, where stands a heavysset woman in her mid-twenties with glasses and short brown hair.

“Can I help you?” the woman asks with a bit of fear, while trying hard not to stare at Rudi’s appearance.

“Yeah,” Rudi tells her. “I’m supposed to be living here.” She then gives the woman her name, and the woman looks it up in a nearby file cabinet before saying, “You really cut it close. Registration closes today. Most people came last week.”

“I was wavering,” Rudi says, “up to the very last moment.”

“About the dorm or the school?”

“Both.”

Chapter 15

Rudi slowly rises in the grimy steel service elevator, and as she approaches the ninth floor she starts hearing sounds. The sounds of Van Halen's "Unchained," which become deafening by the time the car stops and opens its door.

The music makes Rudi grimace. It also makes her pause in the back of the cabin while contemplating going home, and this feeling only gets stronger when she sees a small and very drunk boy fly past her, screaming with the song while playing air guitar. But what she really notices is what he's wearing: nothing but a pair of tight red Calvin Klein briefs and even redder lipstick.

"What . . ." she mutters to herself, while shaking her head over and over.

In spite of this, she steps out of the elevator, and she holds the door open while looking down the corridor to her left. It's then she sees that almost every door in view has a Reagan/Bush '84 bumper sticker on it, which makes her grimace even more. But what makes her really cringe is seeing a guy chug a large pitcher of beer in the corner of the hallway, cheered on by those surrounding him, who are also smoking pot. She cringes because, while she's not

surprised to see college kids drink and do some drugs, she's never really thought about how seeing it on a daily basis would affect her and her ability to control demons that are always lurking just beneath her surface.

Not wanting to think about this, she turns up the volume of her Walkman and looks down the other side of the hallway, where she sees a boy and girl not only kissing but also mauling each other. Seeing this is actually worse than watching the drinking or the smoking, or even listening to Van Halen. It causes her a burst of fright, and a lack of breath, which not even her music can ease. It also causes her to utter, "I can't do this," and she marches back inside the elevator and hits the button for the ground floor.

Right away, she can breathe, and she does so deeply as she watches the door slowly close. Though she also watches a hand reach in the elevator and slam the door open.

"Fucking asshole!" Rudi hollers, before marching back out into the corridor to confront the person responsible. But there's no one anywhere, which both confuses her and makes her question her sanity. At the same time, the elevator door behind her closes.

Furiously, she spins around and loudly curses. She also punches the call button with her fist.

Hearing Rudi's voice, Maria and Sandra run out of their corner room, both wearing white T-shirts and shorts. Maria further raises her plastic beer cup and tipsily calls out, "You made it!"

Reluctantly, Rudi lowers the volume of her Walkman, and she turns to the voice. She also forces a smile as Maria finishes what's in her cup and sprints toward her. Which is just before Maria jumps into Rudi's arms and cries out, "I'm so happy to see you!"

"You saw me just a few weeks ago," Rudi tells her.

"Yeah, but that was not here."

With lots of excitement, Maria drags Rudi toward her new home. Though they both come to a stop at the open door of a room where people are loudly counting, and they peek inside and see a shirtless boy on his knees, who has beer flowing into his mouth from an open tap, watched by a half-dozen people doing the counting.

“That’s Brad,” Maria whispers, while pointing at the boy, who is of medium height and build, with medium-brown hair and eyes. She then points at the boy holding the tap, who could be Brad’s twin, and not just in terms of appearance, and she adds, “And that’s his roommate Pete.”

“Uh-huh,” Rudi whispers back, not quite believing what she’s seeing.

“Forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine . . .” the crowd shouts, as Brad continues taking the hit from a nearby keg. But, just before everyone can reach fifty, beer shoots through Brad’s nose, and Pete pulls the tap away. He also turns it off and shouts, “A new world record, people!”

The “people” cheer at this, and Maria chuckles a little, too. But Rudi just shakes her head.

Noticing this as he teeters on his knees, Brad says to her: “Man, you look even more fucked up than me.”

“I can fix that,” Rudi growls, before stepping into the room with both fists clenched. But Maria quickly pulls her away, with Rudi crying out, “Fucking idiots!”

“I know we are,” Brad retorts, “but what are you?”

“Dude,” his roommate tells him, “I think you got that backward.”

“Oh,” Brad utters, before collapsing onto the floor.

Meanwhile, Rudi and Maria approach the kissing couple, with Rudi again feeling all kinds of unease.

This is when the two come up for air, and the woman sneers at Rudi and her appearance,

causing Rudi to come to a quick and instinctive halt.

“That’s our next-door neighbor Vicki,” Maria whispers to Rudi, as she tries to lead her away. “I know it’s difficult, but just ignore her.”

This Vicki is tall and beautiful. She’s so tall and beautiful that she’s been working as a model from the time she was twelve. She also has big golden blonde hair almost as tall as her, along with gaudy makeup and a pair of even gaudier Guess Jeans, which are almost painted on her. But all Rudi really notices is the sneer, as well as the giggling and whispering that comes with it.

Rudi glares at the girl, but this does nothing to stop the snickering, which is infused by something a lot stronger than beer or pot. Rudi’s glare actually makes it worse, though it is partially muted when the couple stumbles into Vicki’s room and slam the door behind themselves.

“What a fucked-up place this is,” Rudi mumbles to herself while she and Maria come upon Sandra by the door to their room. Which is the only one on the entire floor that has a Mondale/Ferraro sticker on it.

“That’s why they call this place ‘The Zoo,’” Maria says with a chortle before stopping next to her girlfriend. She also points at her and adds, “You remember Sandra, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Rudi answers, before giving Sandra a hug.

“We’re gonna have so much fun together!” Maria cries out.

“I don’t know,” Rudi tells her, while shaking her head.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry, but this place is just awful. I don’t see how I can live here.”

“It’s just that everyone’s a little messed up right now.”

“Speaking of which . . .”

“I’ve only had a few.”

“It’s not even noon.”

“Is it that late?”

“Since when do you drink?”

“Since there’s no Daddy around. And since the drinking age here’s only 18.”

Maria says this and points toward Brad’s room, and she adds, “We bought that keg legally from a place called Gillies up on Pennsylvania Avenue, and we just whisked it inside the dorm with no questions asked, not even from that moron security guard downstairs. Isn’t that just awesome?”

“Awesome,” Rudi mutters. “Boy, college sure has changed you.”

“Whoo-hoo!” Maria yells, before suddenly falling silent while looking at something behind Rudi with lots of discomfort.

Noticing this, Rudi turns around, and she sees a man in his early twenties frowning at Maria a short distance away.

This man’s a little taller than average, and he has, underneath his expression of melancholy, a handsome face, with unkempt dark brown hair and similarly colored eyes. He also has a light scruffy beard and a slight but muscular build, which is somewhat hidden by his long plaid shirt. But what Rudi really notices about him is the dog-eared Bible in his hand.

“You got a problem?” she growls at him.

The young man responds to this by turning his frown toward Rudi, which is somewhat softened by his obvious fear of her.

“Did you hear what I said?” Rudi barks, with her fists once again becoming clenched.

Though just then she gets this strange feeling about him. A feeling that there's something both familiar and unusual about him. Which makes her feel all kinds of unease.

The young man doesn't exactly reply to Rudi's bark. He just turns around and steps inside the room across the way, before gently closing the door behind himself.

"Who the hell is that?" Rudi demands.

"The Preacher," Sandra replies.

"The Preacher?" Rudi replies back.

"He's just some fundamentalist jerk," Maria tells her.

"*Fundamentalist?*" gasps Rudi, with lots of surprise.

"Just another reason why we call this place 'The Zoo.' We have just about every species, and then some — especially with you here."

"His name's actually Jared," Sandra interjects, while pointing at the man's door with her thumb. Then, while speaking with a bad Southern accent, she adds, "He's from Georgia, and he talks with a big drawl, like this. And he's always wearing long shirts and pants, even when it's 200 degrees out with 2,000-percent humidity. He's usually carrying around that Bible, too."

"And you should see the huge cross hanging in his room!" Maria blurts out.

"So," Sandra whispers, before checking to see if anyone is nearby, "you can just imagine what he thinks of us."

"Well," Rudi says, while glancing at the Chai pendant around her neck, "I'm sure he's gonna love me, too."

"Just ignore him," Maria pleads. "We all do. Even his roommate does."

"Another neighbor I have to ignore," Rudi utters. "Wonderful. Are there any neighbors I don't have to ignore?"

Both women shrug, which causes Rudi to sigh. She also shakes her head again and says, “I really don’t know about this, guys.”

“You’re gonna love it!” Maria insists. She further grabs Rudi by the wrist and drags her through their open door, before tossing up her hands and uttering, “Ta-da!”

Without much enthusiasm, Rudi glances around the modest room, and she sees three wooden dressers against the walls, with a small TV and a miniature refrigerator standing on top of one. She also sees, in addition to a large closet and a bathroom off to the left, two unmade beds in the main room and a made one in a curtained alcove facing the window.

“Which bed is mine?” Rudi asks.

“You can take either one,” answers Maria, while pointing to the unmade beds. “We’re in the . . .”

“I gotcha,” Rudi says with a knowing smile. “But . . .”

“But what?”

“Are you guys sure you don’t want to be alone?”

“We’re sure,” Sandra tells her, after placing her hand warmly on Rudi’s shoulder.

“We have plenty of privacy,” Maria adds. “Like I told you before, and like you can see now, what we don’t have enough of is friends.”

“All right,” Rudi mutters, and she takes off her backpack and tosses it onto the nearest empty bed, which is facing the door. At the same time, Maria rushes up to her and gives her another big hug, which is interrupted by the sounds of two people loudly having sex in the room next door.

“It’s girls like Vicki who give whores bad names,” Sandra remarks.

Rudi grimaces at this and sighs once again, especially as she can hear exactly what the

couple is saying. Or, more exactly, moaning.

“The walls are kinda thin,” Maria mutters.

“You don’t say?” Rudi utters, before sitting on her bed and shaking her head yet again.

Chapter 16

With her seabag across her shoulder, her headphones strapped to her ears, and Tommy's football jacket over her body, Rudi follows her roommates as they make their way through the large dining hall in the dorm basement toward the serving area.

The three soon approach a table where Brad and Pete and all their drunken friends are grading passing girls, by holding up scraps of paper numbered 1 through 10. Though when they see Rudi's glare they suddenly lower their score sheets while looking more than a bit uncomfortable.

"Sorry," Brad tells her, "we'd need imaginary numbers for you."

Brad's friends chuckle at this, and they continue their little game as Rudi clenches her fists. She also takes a deep breath while trying to keep herself from killing everything in her path. Further toward this end, she turns up the volume of her player all the way.

The three women then get their food, and they sit far from their neighbors. But the boys are still in earshot, and likely would be even if they were in Maryland.

"Sit on my face!" Brad yells out, at some hapless girl.

No longer able to control her rage, Rudi throws off her headphones, and she rises from the table, only to be stopped by Maria, who asks, “Where you going?”

“I’m gonna do something a little different to his face,” Rudi answers.

“Come on, this is college. It’s what happens when you mix immaturity with testosterone and alcohol.”

“It’s one toxic combination,” adds Sandra.

“But —” Rudi starts to say.

“— Let it be,” Maria insists. “It’s not like they’re hurting anyone.”

“Just let me hit them once. I beg you.”

“No,” Maria says, with a little smile. “Sit down.”

Grudgingly, Rudi complies, and she begins eating. She also notices Jared sitting at a table not far away, and she notices how sad and lonely he looks, with only his Bible to keep him company. Like in the hallway earlier, she sees something in him she can’t place — something that tells her that he doesn’t quite fit the caricature her two friends have painted. But she just can’t figure out what this something is, which only makes him more interesting.

“You’re coming to the party tonight, right?” Maria asks Rudi, while noticing her blank stare.

Rudi doesn’t answer. She doesn’t even hear the question.

“Rudi?” Maria utters.

“What?” Rudi utters back.

“You’re coming tonight?”

“Sure,” Rudi answers, though she still hasn’t heard a word.

Chapter 17

Rudi is sitting on her bed listening to “Moonlight Serenade” when the tape ends.

She then turns it over, and she hears a door open and close nearby, and she sees Jared, who once again is carrying his Bible. He sees her, too, and he stares at her as he passes.

He’s just some fundamentalist jerk.

Remembering Maria’s words, Rudi tries to find some hate or intolerance in Jared’s eyes. But all she can see is the same loneliness she knows all too well, so even after he’s long gone she keeps staring out the door. She does this until Maria and Sandra step out of the bathroom together, wearing lots of makeup and perfume, as well as short low-cut white dresses. Which Rudi gapes at.

“Does your dad know you dress like that?” she asks.

“Daddy is hundreds of miles away,” Maria tells her, with just a bit of annoyance. “So you ready or what?”

“Ready for what?”

“Weren’t you listening to me at all during dinner? The Sigma Nu party!”

“Sigma Nu? A fraternity party? *Me?*”

“Yes, you!”

“Are you crazy?”

Maria responds to this question by marching over to Rudi and lifting her to her feet while howling, “Come on!”

“Look,” Rudi growls, “I ain’t going to no frat party. Not ever.”

“It’s not what you think. They’re the best house on campus.”

“Is that supposed to mean something?”

“Sandra and I are even little sisters there.”

“*Little what?*”

“Just give them a chance.”

“No.”

“You once gave me a chance.”

“That was different. You weren’t mixing immaturity with testosterone and alcohol.”

“They’re not like those jerks. I swear.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Please, Rudi, I’ve told them so much about you.”

“You have? What exactly did you tell them?”

“Only good things. Come on.”

“All right,” Rudi utters, with another of her sighs, before picking up her seabag from beside her bed. “But I’m not staying long. I’m really, really beat.”

Maria smiles at this, and while pointing at Rudi’s headphones she murmurs, “How about leaving Glenn Miller home tonight?”

With some aggravation, Rudi yanks off her headphones and turns off the device, before pulling it out of her jacket pocket and tossing it onto her bed.

“And the jacket, too,” Maria goes on.

“It might get chilly out,” Rudi insists.

“It’s like ninety-something out there! With a thousand-percent humidity! And it’s gonna be even hotter inside the house.”

Angrily, Rudi rips off the jacket, exposing her plain white T-shirt, and she throws the garment onto the bed while uttering, “You happy?”

“Very,” Maria utters back with a smile, before grabbing her friend’s hands and saying, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Can we go now?” Sandra interjects.

The three then leave, and they make their way toward the elevator bank, where waiting is Vicki in a black spandex outfit that leaves less than nothing to the imagination. She’s also even more inebriated than before and is draped over a different guy than the one she was draped over earlier, from which she only undrapes when she sees the three women approach. Which is when she snickers and whispers into her friend’s ear, right before uttering “Dykes!” underneath a fake cough.

This causes Rudi to take a threatening step toward her, only to be stopped by Maria, who insists, “Just ignore her.”

“But —” Rudi starts to say.

“— You think she’d be any better if you beat her up?”

“She’d be quieter.”

“And probably more hateful.”

“Just let me hit her once. Please.”

“No. If we can ignore her, so can you.”

But Rudi can't ignore Vicki. She can't because she and her roommates must follow Vicki and her friend into the elevator and all the way down fraternity row on G Street. They afterward watch the two enter a three-story 19th-century townhouse, where lots of drunk people are hanging out, both on the stoop and in the yard, and even in the road.

“This looks like a scene right out of *Animal House*,” Rudi remarks. “So tell me, what's so different about them?”

“Well,” Maria utters, “for one, they don't care that we're gay.”

“They know?” Rudi utters back, with lots of surprise.

“They even have a couple of gay brothers,” adds Sandra.

“Get out of here.”

“That's how we hooked up with them.”

“Actually,” Maria interjects, “they've got like two of everything in there. It's like Noah's Ark.”

It's then the three reach this ark, and they begin making their way through the crowd, with Rudi desperately wanting to get away somehow.

Chapter 18

The three women have to squeeze themselves through the fraternity house door, but once in the foyer they see that the darkened house isn't nearly as packed as it appeared. That's because it's hotter than a sauna.

It's also loud, with Shannon's "Give Me Tonight" blasting off the walls from a set of speakers the size of a man, and a large one at that. Which quickly gives Rudi a headache, and she starts slithering out the door. But Maria takes her arm, and she leads her to the edge of the main room, where dozens of people are dancing in spite of the heat, including many guys in yellow Sigma Nu jerseys.

Right then one of these guys hurries by, carrying a bunch of plastic beer cups. Two of which Maria grabs.

"A two-fisted drinker!" the boy utters with a big grin. "If only you were straight, Maria — you'd be the perfect girl."

"She *is* the perfect girl," Sandra utters back, before grasping Maria's arm. Maria then offers one of the beers to Sandra, who shakes her head.

Maria shrugs, and she chugs the first cup, and she afterward places it under the second cup and starts guzzling that one, under the worried gaze of Rudi.

“What?” Maria cries out, with some exasperation, and lots of foam around her lips.

“Nothing,” Rudi says, before turning away from her slightly.

It’s then the music changes, to “The Roof Is on Fire.” It’s also when Maria notices a curly-haired boy strut into the room from an entrance down the hallway, and she frantically waves at him while screaming, “Yo, Chuck!”

Chuck screams back in kind, and he calls out, “Come on, they’re playing our song!”

Maria smiles at this, and she and Sandra rush into the room hand-in-hand toward Chuck, and they dance with him while singing the song along with everyone else in the room.

Watching this, Rudi realizes that this is her chance to take off. But she can’t stop staring at Maria, who’s both wildly dancing and drinking at the same time. Which makes her think about how much Maria has changed in the short time she’s known her, and she wonders if all the changes have been for the best. She especially wonders if Maria would’ve been better off if she’d been left in the safety of her shell.

At the same time, Rudi notices something. She notices that Maria was right — that the house really is kind of a Noah’s Ark, as among the sea of yellow jerseys are guys of many races and ethnicities, including some very Jewish-looking ones. But not wanting to spoil the stereotype she so carefully crafted in her mind she pretends not to see this, and she looks down the corridor at a lit room at the end of it, where lots of people are exiting with drinks in their hands.

Feeling an oppressive thirst, she makes her way toward the light.

Chapter 19

In the back room of the fraternity house, behind a table covered in plastic cups, a young man pours a beer. This man is wearing one of the yellow jerseys and is surrounded by four others dressed the same. He is also tall and broad-shouldered, with short dirty-blond hair and deep blue eyes set within a flawless and well tanned face. Every physical aspect of Dennis is perfect, especially his big pearly smile.

“So, Den,” matter-of-factly says the guy next to him, who’s almost as tall and almost as handsome, “who you gonna do tonight?”

This question makes Dennis smile even more. Though, after taking a long thoughtful breath, he says with a look that approaches seriousness: “Don’t be so crude, Johnny. Girls are much like fine wine. You just can’t gobble them down willy-nilly. You have to smell and taste a few before selecting just the right one.”

Everyone around Dennis chuckles at this, and he finishes pouring the beer, which he offers to the person in front of him without looking. However, when no one takes it, he looks forward and sees the annoyed expression of Rudi, who has her hands on her hips, and who now

knows that Maria had been wrong after all — that the guys here really are no different than Brad and Pete.

Meanwhile, Dennis finds Rudi very different. Her appearance causes his eyes to widen, as he's never seen a punk at GW. Not even close. She's so different that it takes him a few moments to compose himself, which he does right before uttering, "Hi, there."

"Do you have anything besides beer?" Rudi growls.

"Why, yes," he answers, before pointing to his left and adding, "We have an official alternative beverage."

With some hesitation, Rudi turns in the direction of his hand and sees a large garbage can full of a dark red punch, which has lots of fruit floating on top of it. She further takes an empty plastic cup from the table and skims the surface of the drink while saying, "Is there any alcohol in this?"

"Just a little," Johnny tells her.

Spinning toward the boy, Rudi sees him grab an empty bottle of pure grain alcohol off the table and hide it behind his back.

Rudi sighs at this, and she drops the cup into the punch and mutters, "I'll pass."

"That's probably for the best," Johnny tells her, "considering some of us pissed in it."

"*Johnny*," Dennis whispers.

"What?"

"What are you guys," Rudi barks, "like five years old?"

"Hey, I take umbrage at that remark!" Dennis barks back with a raised finger. "We're far closer to six."

Once again, everyone around Dennis laughs. But Rudi just turns around and storms off.

“There’s a soda machine in the corner over there,” Dennis calls out. “It’s only a quarter.”

Rudi responds by coming to a reluctant stop by the entrance of the room, and with even more reluctance she looks to her right and sees the machine, and she marches to it. She further looks over the selection before reaching into her bag for change.

“Hey!” Dennis utters.

Against her will, she turns to him, and he tosses her a quarter. Though she pulls out her own and tosses his back while telling him: “I can buy my own soda.” Which she does before strutting out of the room, watched in awe by Dennis’s friends, who’ve never seen a female so immune to Dennis.

Dennis, too, is awed. He’s even shaken a bit, as it’s been a long time since he’s been shot down like that, at least by a woman who didn’t already know him. He can’t even remember when it happened last.

Seeing him shaken, Johnny touches his finger on his tongue and then touches Dennis’s shoulder while making a sizzling sound, causing everyone nearby to giggle.

“Could it be that the great and omnipotent Dennis Winston has finally met his match?” says Rich, a chubby guy standing on the other side of Johnny.

“There’s no such thing,” Dennis insists with a confident smile, even if he isn’t quite as confident as he appears. Which actually excites him.

Chapter 20

Rudi makes her way out of the back room and stops to open the can of Diet Coke, and she afterward takes a nice long sip before rubbing the icy can along her hot face.

Though this is interrupted when a guy falls to his knees in front of her and throws up against the opposite wall, before passing out on the mess he's just created.

"Ugghh!" she bellows, and she steps over him and hurries toward the exit. Though, just before she gets there, she stops. She stops when the song changes, to one she's never heard before. A song that seems way out of place. A song called "How Soon is Now?"

Both the voice and the lyrics mesmerize her, and she leans against the side of the staircase in something of a daze, wanting only to keep listening to this strange but wonderful song, which somehow captures her state of mind perfectly. It does this so perfectly that she sings along with it even though she doesn't know the words. They just come out of her mouth naturally.

Though someone interrupts this, by saying, "Hiya."

With lots of reluctance, she glances to her right, where stands a drunken boy with glasses and a yellow jersey.

She tries to ignore him, and she returns her attention back to the song. She even starts singing it again. But he interrupts her again. This time by asking, “What’s your major?”

“Wow, what an original line,” she tells him, with a shake of her head. “Now I really want to fuck you.”

“So, you here with someone?” he goes on.

“The truth is I’m still in mourning.”

“Morning?” he slurs, before looking out the door and saying, “But it’s night out.”

Furiously, she spins toward him and growls, “My husband died recently.”

“*Husband?*” he mutters, unable to hide his surprise.

“He died of AIDS, as a matter of fact.”

“*AIDS?*” the boy gasps, now way more than just surprised.

She then shows him the scar on her wrist and adds, “As you can see, I’m a bit suicidal because of it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So you wanna make out now?”

“Ah . . .” he utters while pointing behind himself, “you know, I, I think someone’s calling me.”

“Then you better get going.”

Hurriedly, he runs off, exposing Dennis, who had been standing on the other side of him and whose big smile now has a knowing tinge to it. Which disturbs Rudi, as it reminds her of another knowing smile from her past. It disturbs her so much that she tosses the half-empty soda

into a nearby garbage can and hurries out of the house without hearing the end of the song.

Watching her, Dennis finds that his interest has more than just piqued. He actually can't remember it ever being so piqued. So he follows Rudi out of the house, and when he sees her skipping down the stairs he calls out, "Wait a minute!"

But Rudi won't even acknowledge him. She just rambles down the block, and he knows that he has to swing for the proverbial bleachers.

"You like Black Flag?" he shouts.

Right away, she comes to a stop, before turning to him and saying, "Did you just say 'Black Flag'?"

"I did," he answers, with another of his smiles. This one so bright that it lights the night.

"Where did you hear of them?" she asks, with her voice dripping with suspicion.

"Not only have I heard of them, I've actually seen them play. Many times, in fact."

"Bullshit."

"Why would you doubt me? Because I don't fit some stupid image? Doesn't that go against the whole point of the music?"

"How'd you know I like Black Flag?" she then demands, still smelling a rat.

"Lucky guess," he tells her, with his smile now not only bright but warm as well. It's so warm that she has to work hard to suppress her own smile, which desperately wants to come out.

This is when Dennis adds, "You know, I just bought their latest album from that new Tower Records up the street."

"Yeah?" she says, while trying to feign disinterest.

"Have you been there? They've got a whole section devoted to punk. Nothing huge, of course, but a whole lot huger than anything we had before."

“This is some kind of gag, isn’t it? Maria put you up to this.”

“You know Maria?”

“She’s my roommate — and best friend.”

“Does that mean you’re gonna become a little sister, too?”

“Sure thing, right after I decapitate myself. You, you really like punk rock?”

“Sigma Nu honor,” he tells her, while lifting two fingers high into the air.

“Is that supposed to mean something?” she tells him back.

“It means everything. So you wanna hear it?”

“Hear what?”

“The new Black Flag album!”

“Hear it where?”

“Up in my room,” he says, while pointing to a third-floor window.

“If this is some ruse,” she says back, “I swear I’ll throw you right through that fucking window.”

If anything, this threat only makes Dennis more interested, and it makes him smile even more.

Chapter 21

Rudi reluctantly reenters the house with Dennis, and they stride toward the staircase.

Though this is interrupted when Vicki drunkenly stumbles up to them.

“There you are!” she cries out to Dennis while opening her arms to him.

But he stops her. He stops her with his own arms just before she can embrace him, doing so as if she had some infectious disease.

Despite this, Vicki grabs his hands and tells him: “Let’s dance.” She also tries to drag him into the main room, but he pulls away from her and says, “Perhaps some other time.” He further starts up the stairs with Rudi, who notices Vicki glaring at her.

“What’s her problem?” Rudi asks.

“That even I have standards,” Dennis mutters.

The two afterward go to his room, where Dennis places a record needle at the beginning of Black Flag’s *My War*, which he starts. He also hands the album cover to a surprised Rudi, who sits with it on the floor against his bed.

“You weren’t bullshitting,” she says, with a shake of her head.

“And I really have seen them play many times,” he says back, “even here in DC.”

“Yeah?”

“Last spring I saw them play in an abandoned church not far from here. Henry Rollins is actually from Washington.”

“How were they?”

“As tight as any band I’ve seen, and I’ve seen a lot. And, I kid you not, the guy who played Bobby Brady on TV opened for them. You should’ve heard him curse.”

“Where else have you seen them?”

“Back home.”

“Where’s that?”

“Redondo Beach, a little south of LA. I’ve even met a couple of them once.”

“Have you been to the Cuckoo’s Nest?”

“That’s where I met ’em.”

“Why, why are you going to school out here?”

“My dad’s a congressman.”

“Let me guess — you’re both Republicans.”

“How’d you guess?”

“I seem to attract them.”

“So what do you think?” he asks, while pointing to the spinning record.

“I don’t know,” she answers, with her eyes downcast a bit as she listens to a sound that mixes punk with heavy metal, which a few years later will be called “grunge.” But right now it sounds foreign to her, and it makes her feel both uncomfortable and a little lost, and this manifests itself when she utters, “It’s real different than their old stuff.”

“Nothing stays the same, as they say,” Dennis utters back.

“Unfortunately,” she tells him, with her eyes even lower and her mind somewhere else, and not in a good place.

“I could put on something else if you want,” he says. “I’ve got all their records here.”

“Do you have the song they were playing downstairs?”

“Which one?”

“I don’t know the name. I’ve never heard it before. It was about this guy who goes to a club on his own and he stands on his own . . .”

“And he goes home and he cries and he wants to die.”

“That’s it.”

“That’s the Smiths.”

“Do you have it?”

“Who do you think made the tape they’re playing?”

Hurriedly, Dennis takes off the Black Flag record and looks for the Smiths’. He does this while saying, “It’s an import I picked up just before I came back.”

As Dennis continues to look, Rudi glances around the room, and she spots a USA Today vending machine underneath a towel, which is just below a framed and autographed Patrick Nagel poster.

“Why do you have a newspaper machine in your room?” she asks.

“J. D.,” he tells her, “he stole it for me. He’s one of the brothers here.”

“Why’d he steal it?”

“I forget.”

Right then, Dennis finds the record, and he takes it out of its sleeve while Rudi notices a

skeet shooting trophy from a country club on a nearby desk.

“You shoot things?” she asks.

Dennis doesn’t quite answer her. He just pauses in thought.

A boy slowly and quietly pushes back a branch, and there it is in the clearing: a beautiful doe grazing a short distance away.

The boy has been looking forward to this moment for weeks, ever since his dad told him that he was finally taking him on one of his famed hunting trips, after years of begging and pleading.

“All right,” his father whispers, from just behind him. “Raise the gun.”

With both awe and reverence, the boy glances at the towering man, just before raising what is for him a heavy rifle.

“Take your time,” his father insists, in a voice so hushed that it’s barely audible.

“Whatever you do, don’t rush your shot.”

The boy responds by looking through the gun’s sight, and he takes proper aim, and he gently places his finger on the trigger.

Then it happens. The doe turns toward him, with her big sad eyes. Eyes that seem tearful.

This causes the boy to shake, as this was not what he’d been expecting. He’d been expecting a game. He’d been expecting fun. He hadn’t been expecting those eyes.

“Shoot!” his father softly commands.

But the boy can’t pull the trigger. He can’t even breathe, even when his father’s command becomes harsh.

Hearing this, the doe runs off.

“You fucking idiot!” his father screams, before raising his own rifle.

“No, Dad!” the boy cries out, while grabbing the man’s arm. “Don’t do it!”

“Get away from me!” his father howls, before pushing the boy onto the ground, which is just before he shoots the deer.

“No!” the boy screams, with tears pouring down his face.

“I’m never taking you with me again!” the man screams back, before lifting the boy off the ground and bringing him to his feet. “You’re a fucking pussy! You’re even worse than a girl!”

All the boy can do in reply is continue to cry, and he only cries harder when the man slaps him across his face and begins dragging him toward the carcass.

“You’re gonna have to decide, son,” the man says. “You’re gonna have to decide whether you’re gonna be weak or strong. Because I can tell you that there’s no place in this world for the former. They get eaten by the latter. You hear me — they get eaten!”

“I said, do you shoot things?” Rudi demands, after getting no response from Dennis.

“Only things made of clay,” Dennis answers, with the eyes of the doe searing through his brain.

Rudi then looks beside the desk, and she sees a large bookcase full of all kinds of books.

“You read?” she goes on.

“Yeah,” he says, with his grin suddenly back on his face, “they kinda require that here.”

He afterward starts the record, and Rudi once again becomes mesmerized by it, and she murmurs,

“I’ve never heard anyone sing like this before. He sings, he sings like he means everything he says.”

“His name’s Morrissey,” Dennis tells her.

“Morrissey what?”

“Just Morrissey.”

“Those lyrics, they kinda remind me of something.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve read a lot of books lately. Didn’t have much else to do.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And I think, I think I read something by George Eliot —”

“— He’s actually my favorite writer.”

Rudi sneers at this, and at Dennis, who smiles back and says, “That was a joke.”

But she continues sneering, so he struts up to his bookcase while telling her: “I have all her books.” He further plucks out a hardcover copy of *Middlemarch* and tosses it to her, and he utters, “I think this is the book you were thinking of. The actual quote from it is, if I’m not mistaken: ‘To be born the son of a Middlemarch manufacturer, and inevitable heir to nothing in particular.’”

With lots of amazement, Rudi stares at the book, realizing right then that there’s a lot more to Dennis than what she can see with her eyes or hear with her ears, and perhaps there’s even more than what he can see or hear himself.

“I’m not quite as dumb as I look,” he says to her. “Though, to be perfectly honest, I only recalled the quote after reading about it in *Trouser Press*.”

“You read *Trouser Press*?” she utters, with her amazement somehow even higher.

“I’ve got some back issues over there by my bed.”

“You know,” she mutters, while looking at him with something approaching warmth, “I

just can't figure you out at all."

"That's not a bug. It's a feature."

Rudi smiles at this, and even more importantly she likes that she's smiling.

"I got you to smile!" he cries out, with his arms held victoriously over his head.

"Success!"

"It really is," she says, unable to stop smiling.

"Come on, let's dance."

"Not to this."

"How about the Violent Femmes?"

"Who?"

"You haven't heard of them?"

"I've been kinda out of it lately."

So he puts on their record, and the sounds of "Add It Up" begins echoing off the walls of the room. Which is when Dennis lifts Rudi to her feet, and he pogo dances with her while singing over the music.

This amuses Rudi, both his singing and the lyrics about a guy desperate to gain the attention of the opposite sex. But what she doesn't find so amusing is the way he keeps bumping into her.

"You're asking for it," she warns.

"How'd you know?" he asks, with a sly grin.

Once again, he bumps into her, and she body-slams him into a wall, where he collapses onto the floor in a daze, unable to understand how someone half his size could do such a thing.

"I've actually gotten thrown out of CBGB a couple of times for that," she tells him,

seemingly reading his mind and the question it's asking. "You're lucky you're still conscious."

"How?" he mumbles.

She responds by grabbing his hand, and without any effort she lifts him to his feet and says, "It's not the strength you've got, but how you use the strength you've got."

"Remind me not to piss you off."

"I think I already have."

Dennis chuckles at this, and he points at her and utters, "You know what — I like you. I like you a lot."

"I like you, too," Rudi utters back. "I like you a little."

This is when Dennis picks up a large bong from behind his desk, which has the Sigma Nu logo pasted on it. He also grabs a lighter off the desk and lights the device before taking a huge toke, and afterward he offers the bong to Rudi, who again is sitting by the bed, and who shakes her head and says, "No, thanks."

"You don't smoke?" he asks.

"Nope."

"Don't drink, don't smoke," he sings, *"what do you do?"*

"I also don't fuck," she states matter-of-factly.

This causes Dennis to fall to his knees in laughter, and he has a hard time stopping.

"I've never met anyone like you," he tells her once he's somewhat in control of himself — "not even in LA. I mean, you, you're totally fucking whacked!"

"Is that a compliment?" she asks.

"Boy, is it. You're so . . . I don't even know the proper superlative."

"I think that's the pot talking."

“In cannabis veritas.”

“You speak Latin?”

“Enough to become a pharmacist.”

“Is that what you want to become?”

“Actually, I’m gonna be an investment banker.”

“I see,” she remarks, with a mocking nod.

“Wall Street right now is like the new Wild West,” he remarks back, ignoring her irreverence.

“From punk rocker to robber baron in just a few short years.”

“The truth is I was never a punk. Or even a poseur. You see, it’s different out in LA. People just like the music. It doesn’t have to mean something.”

“It means something to me,” Rudi mutters, with her eyes lowered much like before. “Or at least it did.”

Recognizing her suddenly altered mood, Dennis jumps to his feet and calls out, “I know just what you need.”

“What’s that?” she asks, as he starts looking around for something.

“A little picker-upper,” he answers.

“No drugs.”

“I’ve got something better.”

“Yeah?”

Dennis soon finds another record and plays it, and the sounds of the Psychedelic Furs’ “Heaven” begins rising out of the speakers. He then sits next to Rudi and the two listen.

“Was I right?” he asks.

“I’ll say this for you,” she answers, while becoming lost in the song — a song of sincere and unrelenting optimism — “you have really good taste in music. Perhaps even better than me.”

He smiles at this, and he leans toward her. But she turns away and murmurs, “Don’t.”

“What’s wrong?” he murmurs back.

“Didn’t you hear what I told your friend downstairs?”

This sends shock across Dennis’s face, and he gasps, “You mean, you weren’t shitting him? You really were married?”

“And he really did die of AIDS,” she growls, and when Dennis doesn’t reply to this, she adds, “You want me to leave?”

“Are you sick?” he breathlessly asks.

“No. Unfortunately.”

“Unfortunately?”

He mutters this and grabs Rudi’s wrists, and with a stunned expression he sees her scar. He even touches it. He touches it as if he were checking whether it were real.

“Shit,” is all he can say afterward.

“Do you want me to leave?” she demands.

“Why would I want you to leave?”

“Aren’t you afraid like your pal downstairs — like the whole fucking world?”

“Listen, my mom is a doctor at the hospital over here, and not only has she had many AIDS patients, but she gets real pissed off when people treat them differently. So no, I’m not afraid.”

“I wish she had been Tommy’s doctor,” Rudi mumbles while averting her eyes a bit. “It got real bad sometimes. Not the doctor really, but just about everyone else. And no one ever did

anything about it. I got so mad . . .”

“I can imagine.”

“No, you can’t. Nobody can.”

With lots of sincerity, Dennis takes Rudi’s hand, and does so firmly. It’s actually the first time a man has done this since Tommy’s death, and while she doesn’t quite feel the same magic she felt whenever Tommy touched her, it feels good. It feels so good that she squeezes his hand. She also looks up into his unflinching eyes and whispers, “You keep amazing me.”

“You know,” he whispers back, with yet another of his smiles, “sometimes I even amaze myself.”

“That I can believe,” she tells him with her own smile, just before he wraps his arm around her and brings her close to him.

“I meant it,” she insists, “I’m not sleeping with you.”

“Who said anything about sleeping?” he insists back.

At once, Rudi bursts out into laughter — a happy laughter, which overtakes her and makes her forget all the sadness in her life, even if it does so only for a few moments. She’s actually so unsad that she even slaps Dennis’s thigh.

“I made you laugh!” he cries out, while pointing at her.

“For the first time in a long while,” she says. “And for that you deserve a reward.” She then lifts herself up a little and gives him a small kiss on the cheek.

In his short life, Dennis has been kissed many times, and in many ways. Pretty much every way, including some incredibly crude ones. But no kiss has felt quite like this. Perhaps because it’s the first kiss that has genuine affection behind it. Or maybe because it’s a kiss that means something more than just a means of arousal. Regardless of which, for a while he just sits

there dazed, even more so than when she rejected his overtures downstairs in the back room, or when she slammed him against the wall. He also feels weird sensations running up and down his torso and all over his extremities, as if a whole bunch of neurons were firing everywhere and for the very first time, and he feels his heart beating fast — faster than he's ever experienced without having physically exerted himself beforehand.

Why? he asks himself. What's so different about the girl next to him? Sure, he tells himself, she's attractive, in spite of herself. But he's had far more beautiful women, in far more intimate ways. Chasing her had been just a lark — the ultimate goal of which was nothing more than getting another notch in his belt — something he could show his brothers the following morning in glee. But now everything has changed, without his consent or understanding, and this scares him. It scares him more than just a little. But what really scares him is when he turns to Rudi and sees that she's not only unconscious but that blood is pouring out of her chest.

He gasps at this, unable to form words, let alone get them out of his mouth. Though he quickly regains his senses and places one arm under Rudi's knees and the other around her back, and he starts lifting her up.

"What?" she mumbles.

"It's all right," he cries out. "I'm gonna get you to the hospital."

"Hospital?"

"You, you're . . ."

Suddenly, Dennis freezes. He freezes because he now sees that there's no blood at all coming from Rudi's chest.

"What?" he mumbles to himself while shaking his head over and over. Which is just before he gently puts Rudi back on the floor.

He then looks at the bong, thinking that perhaps one of his brothers had spiked his stash as some kind of joke. But if that were so, he asks himself, why isn't he still hallucinating?

He has no answers, for anything that's happened to him that night. So he just grabs a blanket off his bed and wraps it around both of them. He also rests his head on Rudi's, which strangely calms him. It calms him so much that he soon drifts off into the most peaceful sleep he's ever known.

Chapter 22

Dennis wakes, and he feels a strange fear, and a loneliness, too.

At first he doesn't understand the cause of either, but he then realizes that Rudi is gone, and he calls out her name.

Though there's no reply to this, so he jumps to his feet and opens his door, and he calls out her name again. This time louder.

Again, there's no response. So he hurries to his open window, and he sees her skipping down the front steps, much as she did the night before, and he sticks his head out the window and shouts her name as loud as he can.

Much as she did the night before, she comes to a dead stop, and she reluctantly turns to him.

"Morning, sunshine," he says to her with his smiling face, which he holds up with his palms, which in turn are held up by the windowsill.

"Morning," she tells him back, not quite so smilingly.

Right then, a trio of guys step out of the house, and they grin knowingly at Rudi as they

pass her. Which causes her to become annoyed, and she says to Dennis: “I guess now I’m gonna have a reputation.”

“We’re not that kind of fraternity,” he says back.

“You didn’t . . .”

“Didn’t what?”

“While I was sleeping . . .”

“I told you — we’re an honor fraternity. And besides, to be perfectly honest, I really don’t need to stoop to things like that.”

“Did, did you say something last night about taking me to the hospital? Or did I dream it?”

“You must’ve dreamed it,” he utters, with his smile suddenly gone — something Rudi can’t help notice. She then shrugs and turns around, and she marches down the block.

“Where you going?” he cries out.

Like before, she stops, but this time she doesn’t turn around. She just utters, “I’m going home. I’ve got a lot to do today.”

“Such as?”

“Such as registering for classes, and buying books.”

“That won’t take all day.”

“I might as well get a head start on the books.”

“So you’re one of those.”

She doesn’t have an answer for this, so she simply starts off.

“You have to eat sometime,” he goes on.

She doesn’t reply to this, so he adds, “Come on, have dinner with me. Six o’clock — at

the Rathskeller.”

Again, Rudi doesn’t reply, but she does move faster.

“I’m gonna take that as a yes!” he hollers.

“It’s a maybe!” she hollers back, which makes Dennis’s smile as big and as bright as the sun.

At the same time, Rudi reaches a neighboring fraternity, and she sees something that causes her to come to a quick halt. She sees two guys on the roof — one of which is holding a frightened cat over the edge.

“I’m telling you,” he says to his friend, “cats always land on their feet.”

“Bullshit,” his friend says back.

“I’ll show you.”

“Drop that cat,” Rudi barks, with her hands gripping her hips, “and the next thing to drop will be you.”

Neither boy replies to this. They just stare at Rudi, unable to comprehend anything about her. Which just makes her angrier, and she glares at them until the guy with the cat gently releases it on the roof before it scurries off.

Rudi afterward continues on her way, but she’s so upset about so many things that she really isn’t certain whether she’s on the way back to the dorm or back to New Jersey.

Chapter 23

Dennis skips down the fraternity house stairs with a big smile and his feet barely touching the wood.

He also skips into the main room, which is stinking from stale beer coming from both the walls and the sticky floor, and he sees a half-dozen of his brothers, who are drinking the remains of one of the previous night's kegs while watching a pornographic video on a big TV in front of the room.

Seeing Dennis and his smile, Johnny smiles, too, and he reaches up to give him a high-five while howling, "You are the man!"

"I'll never again doubt you after nailing that angry punk chick," adds Rich.

"It's like Proust said," Johnny remarks, "you can fuck any chick if you're willing to stay up half the night listening to her bitch."

"*Proust?*" Dennis remarks back, with lots of incredulity.

"So I'm paraphrasing."

"The truth is," Dennis tells everyone, "the truth is I didn't actually nail her."

“But, but you at least got a blowjob, right?” Johnny asks hopefully.

“No,” Dennis replies. “It’s not like that. She’s actually —”

“— Then what were you two doing all night?” Rich interrupts. “Listening to records?”

“Well . . .”

“Say it ain’t so, Joe!” Johnny cries out.

“Maria has been telling me about this Rudi for a long time,” Chuck interjects. “Not even you have a chance.”

“Is that so?” Dennis retorts, with lots of indignation while suddenly forgetting everything he felt and experienced the night before.

“That husband of hers who died was like Superman and Byron rolled up into one,” Chuck goes on. “Even I get misty-eyed hearing about him.”

“Hey, I can be Superman,” Dennis insists, while pointing to himself. “I can be Byron.”

“Sure thing, dude.”

“Exactly how sure are you?”

Chuck responds by taking out his wallet, and he looks inside it before pulling out some cash and saying, “Fifty dollars sure.”

“I’ll have her by the end of the semester,” Dennis says, “if not sooner. Way sooner.”

“Well, I’m so sure that you won’t that I’ll give you all the way till the end of the school year.”

“You’re on!”

“Can I get in on this?” Rich asks.

“Me, too!” come the voices of others.

With even more indignation than before, Dennis turns to them and mutters, “Oh, ye of

little faith. Some brothers you are.”

“Sorry, dude,” utters Rich. “Brotherhood is one thing, but fifty dollars is something else. Besides, you failing with this girl just might restore my belief in a just God.”

Chapter 24

Rudi rises in the service elevator, not sure what to think about Dennis, or her feelings for him.

She just assumed there'd never be anyone but Tommy. But never did she count on meeting someone like Dennis — someone so unexpected and unpredictable — someone who makes her feel something approaching alive. Still, in spite of his many positive qualities, she well knows that he has many not-so-positive ones. She also knows that he isn't anywhere close to Tommy in any respect apart from looks, and she further knows that she can't possibly have the same feelings again, especially with the same intensity. What's more, she doesn't want to have those feelings again, as she believes once was more than enough for a lifetime. Finally, she asks herself, how could she even be thinking of such things with her husband not even dead a year?

Right then, the elevator door opens, and she storms out, bumping right into Jared, who's walking into the elevator, and the two glare at each other for a moment before going their own ways. But Rudi stops and looks back, and she again wonders about Jared. She wonders until the elevator closes.

She then marches down the corridor, and she soon hears the sounds of a television loudly playing from inside the closed door of her room, as well as the sounds of sex coming from the one next to it. The latter of which is the last thing she wants to hear, so she hurriedly unlocks her door and bursts through it, and she finds Maria and Sandra watching TV together in their underwear from the empty bed.

“Someone didn’t sleep in their bed last night,” says Maria with a sly grin, while holding an ice pack to her aching head.

Rudi smiles a bit at this, before closing the door and sitting next to the two on the bed.

“How you guys feeling?” she asks.

“Not as good as you, I bet,” Maria tells her.

“Nothing happened.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you two were just listening to records all night.”

“Actually . . .”

“You should be careful,” Sandra interjects, “that guy has slept with half the school.”

“Yeah,” adds Maria, “and the other half is mostly men.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Rudi insists, to both them and herself. “Trust me.”

“He’s gorgeous, Rudi,” Maria insists back.

“He looks like a Ken doll.”

With lots of exasperation, Maria turns to Sandra and utters, “She says it like it’s a bad thing. Even *I* had a Ken doll.”

“Me, too,” Sandra says, with an embarrassed grin.

Maria then returns her gaze to Rudi, and she says to her: “You know, if I were straight . . .”

“But you’re not,” Sandra retorts, before using her index finger to gently lead Maria’s face toward her own, so she can sweetly kiss her.

Watching them, Rudi can’t help smile. Though she well knows that she’s doing so with a bit of envy, and not wanting to feel this, she turns toward the television and sees a middle-aged woman with even stranger makeup than hers, who’s crying in front of a large congregation.

“What the hell are you guys watching?” Rudi asks, while shaking her head.

“*The PTL Club*,” answers Sandra.

“The what?”

“Praise the Lord!” Maria cries out.

“Why are you watching it?”

“We often watch it, just to see how damned we are.”

“A-ha.”

“And all the wailing helps drown out the sex queen next door,” adds Sandra.

“How do her roommates put up with that?” Rudi asks, while staring at the wall separating the two rooms, which is barely blocking the noise coming from the other side.

“She only has one roommate,” Sandra says, “and I haven’t seen her since the day we moved in.”

It’s then the television camera focuses on the audience in the church, and Maria utters, “I wonder if the Preacher is there?”

“I don’t think they film it here,” Sandra utters back.

“Still . . .”

Inquisitively, Rudi turns in the direction of Jared’s room, and she mutters, “Are you guys sure about him?”

“What do you mean?” Maria growls, sounding almost offended.

“I don’t know. There’s just something about him.”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

“You like him?” Maria gasps.

“No,” Rudi growls. Though at the same time she can’t stop thinking about Jared, nor can she stop looking in the direction of his room.

“Well,” Sandra says, as she gets up and approaches one of the dressers, “I’m gonna try to run some of last night off me.” She further puts on a T-shirt and shorts while Maria turns to Rudi and once again grins slyly. She also murmurs, “So, when are you seeing Dennis next?”

“What makes you think I’m seeing him at all?” Rudi retorts, and Maria gives her a look that says, “Are you kidding me?”

All Rudi can do in response is shrug, and she asks, “What’s a Rathskeller?”

Chapter 25

Rudi is exhausted after a full day of running around campus in the oppressive heat and humidity. First to sign up for classes, and then to get her books and supplies, and finally to drag them all home, and this is only made worse by wearing Tommy's jacket the entire day.

So the last thing she wants to do is go out again, and she particularly doesn't want to deal with Dennis. She even thinks about blowing the dinner off, especially as she hadn't given him a commitment anyway. But, a little after a quarter to six, she finds herself again putting on Tommy's jacket over her plain white T-shirt, and she also finds herself looking into the full-length mirror on the back of the closet door. Which is when she pictures herself with Dennis, and she sees that they're a preposterous pair. They're even more preposterous than what she and Tommy had been. Which strangely makes her more eager to see him that night, so that she can put an end to the absurdity right away.

Toward this end, she grabs her Walkman off her bed, and she stuffs it inside her jacket pocket. She also says goodbye to Sandra, who's reading a book on her bed, and she struts to the door, just as Maria tipsily stumbles inside the room with a half-empty wine cooler in her hand.

“Again with the jacket,” Maria utters, while slurring her words a bit. “Do you know how hot it is outside?”

“I think I can dress myself,” Rudi tells her.

“You’re really gonna wear Tommy’s jacket on a date?”

“It’s not a date. I’m just gonna straighten something out.”

“That sounds like a date to me,” Maria retorts, with a little smile.

“Since when did you get such a dirty mind?” Rudi growls.

“It must be from all those frat guys.”

“They’re a bad influence on you.”

“And you were a good one?”

Rudi tries to make believe this remark doesn’t sting, but she isn’t too successful, so to think of something else she points at the cooler in Maria’s hand and says, “Again with the drinking?”

“Not you, too,” Maria says back. “It’s bad enough Sandra’s always nagging me.”

Right away, the two glance at Sandra, who’s looking at her book as if she hadn’t heard a thing. Though she can’t hide the hurt.

“Look,” Maria tells Rudi, “classes haven’t even started yet.”

“But when they do,” Rudi tells her back, “you’re gonna calm it down, right?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Because if you don’t, I just might have to call the principal.”

“You’d do that, too,” Maria growls, before turning around and storming toward the door.

“That was a joke,” Rudi insists.

But Maria isn’t listening. She just rushes out of the room and slams the door behind

herself.

“*Oy vey*,” Rudi murmurs, before turning to Sandra and apologizing.

“You’re not the one who needs to apologize,” Sandra remarks, with her eyes still focused on her book, even if her mind isn’t.

Rudi then leaves the room, and she marches down the corridor in the direction of the service elevator, with her seabag across her shoulder and her headphones strapped to her ears. But even with her music playing she can hear the sound of a television coming from Brad and Pete’s open room. She also can hear that it’s broadcasting a news report about the AIDS crisis, and she can hear the two making a litany of terrible jokes about it. Even worse, they’re laughing at them, at least until they see Rudi in their doorway, with a red face and eyes full of anger.

Right then, she spits onto her hand and wipes it along the door frame.

“What’s that for?” Brad demands, with a big grimace.

“You just never know who’s infected,” she tells him, before rambling down the hall with such fury that she’s not sure that even a wall could stop her.

Chapter 26

Jared steps into the empty service elevator on the ground floor, and he presses the button for the 9th floor.

Slowly, the door closes. But Vicki just slides inside, with a big smile on her face in anticipation of another big night of booze, drugs, and sex. Though her smile fades when she sees who's in the elevator with her — a someone who's made her uncomfortable from the first time she saw him — which makes her move as far from Jared as possible as the elevator crawls upward.

At the same time, the two exchange furtive glimpses. Jared, in particular, finds Vicki interesting. While on the surface she's as vile as anyone he's known — or almost anyone — he knows from personal experience that vileness isn't always what it appears. So he tries to see if there is something else lurking inside her.

Vicki can tell Jared is probing her. She can tell that he's trying to get underneath the veneer she's worked so hard to perfect, and she doesn't like it. She doesn't like it at all. She even crosses her arms to protect herself against him. But this doesn't work. It doesn't stop his

glimpses, which are so different from those of other men, and this makes her so upset that, as soon as the elevator door opens, she flies out, almost smacking into Rudi, who — still angry from her encounter with Brad and Pete — glares at her.

All-too-happily, Vicki glares back, and the two continue glaring at each other as Vicki rushes down the corridor.

Rudi then turns around, and she almost bumps into Jared again, who has just exited the elevator himself.

“How about staying out of my way, asshole?” she barks.

He responds to this, with a look of unmistakable hurt in his eyes, which surprises Rudi, and he, too, rushes away.

“I . . .” she mumbles, well out of his earshot, while staring at him with lots of guilt on her face.

This is when the elevator door closes behind her, and she spins around and slams her fist against it while howling, “God, how I hate this fucking school! And it hasn’t even started yet!”

Chapter 27

Rudi is still furious when she steps into the cool lobby of the Marvin Center, which is a large five-story building that serves as the campus hub. She then struts toward the elevator bank, where she notices on a bulletin board a poster for a weekly lecture series taking place in the auditorium a few steps away. The series includes presidential candidate Walter Mondale in late October, but what really piques her interest is a speaker visiting the school in just a few days: Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges.

Seeing his name, Rudi recalls the story that meant so much to Tommy and her. So she thinks about writing down the date and time of the event. Though she quickly realizes that it would only bring back memories she came to the school to escape. Besides, she tells herself, it'll be taking place right in the middle of her Advanced Calculus class.

Still, she hesitates for a long time before reaching for the elevator button, and this is when she notices something next to the poster: an ad on a scrap of paper for a job at a community center not far away:

WANT TO HELP PEOPLE AND EARN A LITTLE CASH AT THE SAME TIME?

Rudi almost nods at this. She also reaches into her bag for a pen and her own scrap of paper, and she writes down the information.

Afterward, she makes her way to the top floor, and she steps inside a dark dining hall, where she sees Dennis sitting by himself at a table near the serving area.

He sees her, too, and he waves while giving her one of his big smiles.

Hesitantly, she waves back. She further takes a deep breath and turns off her Walkman before slithering toward him, feeling more and more unsure of herself with each step. Which is why she moves slower and slower. Though she's soon in front of him and his smile, and she notices a pitcher of beer on the table, which she points at while saying, "You know I don't drink."

"This is for me," he insists, before taking a sip from the large glass container and adding, "I didn't know what you wanted to drink."

Rudi grimaces at this, for a reason she isn't certain of.

"What?" he asks, while noticing Tommy's name stitched in her jacket.

"Nothing," she tells him, and she makes her way toward a soda fountain a short distance away, where she pours herself a Diet Coke.

"I ordered us a pizza," he tells her, as she steps to the register. "It should be out any minute."

She doesn't reply. She just pays the cashier and takes a seat across from Dennis, with her grimace still intact.

"Have I offended you somehow?" he murmurs.

“I’m just in a really bad mood,” she tells him.

“Not because of me?”

“Because of just about everything else. Though I have a strong feeling that you’re not going to improve it.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Hey,” comes the voice of the cashier, “your pizza’s ready.”

Quickly, Dennis jumps up and pays for the pie, and he brings it to the table, along with a couple of paper plates and lots of napkins.

Right away, Rudi sees that the pizza is covered in sausage, and she crosses her arms and utters, “I’m a vegetarian.”

“Do you know,” Dennis utters back, with his smile much bigger than before, “do you know that ‘vegetarian’ is actually an old Indian word for ‘bad hunter’?”

Dennis chuckles at this, despite knowing that he’s far from the best of hunters himself. It’s even a big part of the reason why he chuckles. Though Rudi has a much different reaction: she frowns.

“Jeez,” he mutters, “it was sure funny when I heard it.” He then moves the sausage from one half of the pie to the other and adds, “Sorry, I didn’t know.”

“You could’ve asked,” she tells him, with her arms still crossed.

“Most chicks like it when I order for the both of us.”

“I’m not a ‘chick.’”

“Sorry.”

“I bet you wouldn’t eat that,” she remarks, while pointing at the meat, “if you knew how they made it.”

“I’ve actually seen them make it,” he insists. “My mom’s Czech, and a while back she took me to this film called . . . I’m not exactly sure how you would translate it. In Czech it’s called *Postřižiny*, but that’s not even a real word in Czech. Anyway, it takes place in this small town and it’s about how everyone was shortening things after World War I — hair, hemlines — you name it. And, and they actually show them making the sausage right on screen. My mom says that nobody gets upset about that kind of stuff over there.”

“And what about you? Did it upset you?”

“Me? I couldn’t eat pig for months.”

“Really?”

“All right, so maybe it was closer to a year. But then I got over it. Life goes on.”

“A nice trite sentiment.”

“Well, excuse me. Not everyone is profound all the time.”

“Just forget about it.”

Rudi says this and takes a slice of pizza, and she blows on it while noticing Dennis’s attention is on the large projection TV against the wall to the left of her. Which makes her recall her first date with Tommy, and how he couldn’t keep his eyes off her, especially when she ate. She further recalls how he often watched her eat after that first date, even when he was deathly ill, and how he did so with great joy, as if he were witnessing something special.

Only now does she realize how incredible this was, and she only realizes it because she’s with someone who isn’t watching her — someone who doesn’t find anything special in her eating — someone who isn’t Tommy and who’ll never be Tommy.

Trying to ignore this, she takes a bite of pizza, and does so with lots of disgust, which Dennis sees when he returns his attention to her.

“I know,” he says, “it ain’t the best pizza ever. Maybe one night I’ll take you up to the Zebra Room in Georgetown.”

Reluctantly, Rudi swallows what’s in her mouth, and she drops the rest onto her plate while growling, “There’s no love.”

“Excuse me?” he utters.

“There’s this really great pizza place in New Jersey where I live. The crust is thin much like this, and the ingredients are probably not that different, either. The difference is that they put love into it, and you can taste it.”

“We can go to the Zebra Room right now.”

“You’re not listening to what I’m saying.”

“I’m not *understanding* what you’re saying.”

“You’re like this pizza, Dennis. You’re just going through the motions.”

“That’s not true.”

“The only thing that interests you about me is that I’m not interested.”

“That’s not true. You have no idea how much that’s not true.”

“Then tell me, what interests you about me?”

“I don’t know — everything.”

“It’s not my looks.”

“You’re a pretty girl.”

“I’m anything but.”

“You are. And the fact that you can’t see this only makes you prettier. What’s more, you’ve got this something that no one else has got.”

“What?”

“I can’t even describe it. It’s like this crazy energy. It just shoots out of you like arrows, just like it’s doing right now. Shit, you make me feel like a little kid who’s trying to grasp a lightning bolt.”

“How do you know no one else has this?”

“I know.”

“Because you’ve slept with half the school?”

“That’s a *slight* exaggeration.”

“How many then?”

“I . . .”

“You can’t even count them, can you?”

“I . . .”

“Dennis, you’re not a bad guy. There’s actually this wonderful decency in you struggling to rise through the muck. I can see it, and I like it. I like you. I really do. I like you more than I want to like you. But this isn’t happening. Ever.”

Rudi then wipes her mouth with a napkin and stands up, and she marches out.

“Can I call you?” he asks.

She doesn’t answer, so he adds, “I’m gonna take that as a yes!”

But unlike that morning, this time she doesn’t say “maybe.” This time she just storms out the door, and all he can do is lower his head.

Chapter 28

Rudi returns to her room, and she can hear Maria and Sandra arguing behind the alcove curtain, which does nothing to mute their voices.

“You’re such a fucking downer!” Maria howls. “And you wanna bring me down, too!”

“At least I’m not a rude bitch!” Sandra howls back. “At least, at least I don’t purposely hurt people I love!”

It’s then the two start cursing each other, back and forth, with their voices getting louder and louder.

Rudi sighs at this, and she goes into the bathroom to remove her makeup. Which is when she notices Sandra’s bottle of prescription sleeping pills in the medicine cabinet — something she wishes she never noticed.

She afterward leaves the bathroom, and not only are her roommates still screaming at each other, but the sounds of sex are pouring out of the room next door. Which causes her to collapse onto her bed and throw her pillow over her head while murmuring, “God, how I hate this fucking school. And it hasn’t even started yet!”

Chapter 29

Dennis climbs the steps of the fraternity house feeling rotten. Which is when Rudi's words begin echoing inside his head.

There's actually this wonderful decency in you.

Over the years, Dennis has heard just about every compliment from a woman. But this one is different. Not only because it was sincere and wasn't said for something in return, but because it makes him think that he can be something more than what he is — a something he only pretends to like.

Rudi's words are still echoing in Dennis's head when he steps into the darkened main room and sees a bunch of people — both men and women — watching a movie on TV.

"So how'd it go?" Rich asks with a wry smile, sensing Dennis's despondency.

Dennis responds by averting his eyes, which causes Rich to grin and rub his palms together, right before uttering, "What will I spend all that money on? Beer, perhaps?"

It's then Dennis forgets all about Rudi's compliment and he sneers at Rich while saying, "Last time I looked September had just begun."

“And May will be here before you know it.”

Dennis doesn't reply to this. He just glances around the room, and he spots a redheaded girl he's had a few cheap dalliances with. A girl who — while not looking anything like Rudi — at least has a similar body type. What's more, she's smiling at him, with what could only be described as bedroom eyes.

So it doesn't take long for the two to march upstairs to Dennis's room, and he passionately kisses her on his bed. But he just can't get excited.

Why? he asks himself, as he continues through the motions. The woman he's with is beautiful. She's more beautiful than Rudi in every tangible way. Though he quickly realizes that it's the intangible ways that mean everything, and when it comes to these the woman he's with is no match for Rudi at all. Still, he goes on pretending he's excited, and she starts undressing him.

There's actually this wonderful decency in you.

Hearing Rudi's words echo once again, Dennis stops. He not only stops pretending, but he also stops the woman from undressing him. Which is so alien to his nature that he wonders if he's the same person.

“What's wrong?” the woman gasps, with both frustration and annoyance.

“That's a good question,” he asks. “A real good one.”

Chapter 30

Rudi steps inside a large and packed and dimly lit lecture hall in the basement of a building across the street from the Marvin Center, and she takes a seat way in the back while waiting for her first Art History class to begin.

It's then she hears a familiar voice.

"We'll probably meet up in Majorca for Christmas or something," Vicki says to a boy who's sitting between her and Rudi.

"Cool," the boy says, with both his eyes and mind focused on Vicki's cleavage.

Against her will, Rudi turns to the pair, and at the same time Vicki sees her and sneers. Though Rudi ignores this, or at least tries to ignore it. But she can't ignore the snickering and the whispering of the two, especially when she notices them pointing at her through the corners of her eyes.

Eventually, while looking straight ahead Rudi growls, "Did you take lessons in rudeness or were you just born that way?"

Vicki grins in response and thinks of a comeback, and when one finally comes she utters,

“Is it true you killed someone?”

“It will be.”

“How’d you get into this school anyway? What, was it on some underprivileged scholarship?”

“Was yours in whoring?”

“Ooohhhh!” the boy gasps, before trying to hide his smile under his hand.

“Fuck you!” Vicki barks.

“Should I put my name at the bottom of the list?” Rudi asks. “You must be booked until spring.”

Again, the boy cackles, and Vicki can do nothing more than spin toward the front of the room and stew.

Chapter 31

After spending a dull hour looking at slides of paintings in the dark, Rudi hustles downtown to see about the job she read about in the Marvin Center.

As she goes there, she notices how the neighborhood changes from upscale to downtrodden right after passing the White House. She also notices all the hopelessness everywhere, and this is where she finds the small community center, which has a Help Wanted sign hanging inside one of its dirty and cracked windows.

Right then she turns off her Walkman and stuffs the headphones inside the pocket of her jacket, and she steps inside the office, where sitting behind an old desk not far from the door is a woman barking into a phone. This woman is in her mid-twenties, with ebony skin and a short Afro, and the nameplate on her desk says that her name is Jeanine.

“Look,” she hollers, “I need help. I can’t do this all by myself.” It’s then she notices Rudi standing in front of her. She especially notices her hair and makeup and clothes, and she gives her a look that says, “What the hell are you doing here?”

This causes Rudi to avert her eyes, and she sees hanging on the wall behind Jeanine lots

of pictures of her extended family, as well as multiple diplomas from John Hopkins University.

“Can I call you right back?” the woman utters, with her eyes stuck on Rudi, and she afterward hangs up and growls, “What can I do for you?”

“I’m here about the job,” Rudi says, after returning her attention to the woman.

“What job?”

“The one I read about in the Marvin Center.”

“You’re the third asshole today. When I find out who put that ad up I’m gonna wring their neck.”

“You didn’t?”

“Hell no!”

Confused, Rudi turns to the window, and she points at the Help Wanted sign and utters, “What about that?”

“I need someone who knows the streets,” Jeannine replies, “not some good-for-nothing college shit.”

“Then you need me.”

“You? *Please.*”

“Why not me?”

“Where you from?”

“Irvington.”

“Irvington what?”

“Irvington, New Jersey.”

“Where in Irvington, New Jersey?”

“Stuyvesant Avenue. It’s —”

“— I know where it is. I’m from Newark. Are you trying to tell me that you’re from the projects?”

“Why wouldn’t you believe me?” Rudi growls. “My skin too light?”

Jeannine grins at this a little, liking Rudi’s spunk. She also points to a chair by the side of her desk and says, “Have a seat . . .”

But Rudi doesn’t want to have anything. She wants to storm out of the place. Though, while telling the woman her name, she hesitantly grabs the chair before even more hesitantly sitting in front of her.

“What’s your major, Rudi?” Jeannine demands, sounding much like a police detective.

“I haven’t decided,” Rudi answers.

“You must have some idea.”

“I’m thinking Math.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It seems like one of the few subjects with objective truth.”

“That may be true, but math is far removed from what we do here.”

“What exactly is that?”

“We’re kinda like private social workers, doing the work nobody else wants to do, or even hear about.”

“Which is?”

Jeannine responds by pointing to a wall, where hangs a large map of the city that has many handwritten circle marks, and she says, “Our prime concern is getting people off the streets. Right now we’re in the epicenter of the worst homeless crisis in America, and we need to change this fact before winter. Because, while winter here isn’t like it is up north, it’s deadly cold

enough, especially when you're outside all night. And I can tell you without a doubt that we ain't gonna solve this problem with no parabolic equations."

"And you think you would with something I'd learn in a sociology book?" Rudi retorts.

"Or from some self-important college professor who's never been outside a university?"

"No. That's why I don't want a college kid."

"But —"

"— What makes you think you can help these people?" Jeannine interrupts, while pointing to those walking past the window.

"I've worked with troubled people before," Rudi insists, "at a drug counseling center back home. And I've been there, too. I ran away dozens of times, and . . ."

"And what?"

"And I've had problems with drugs myself."

"You clean right now?"

"Yeah."

"You go to NA?"

"Yeah."

"Let me see a key chain," the woman barks, while holding out her hand.

With some exasperation, Rudi digs into her seabag, and she scrounges around in it for a few seconds before pulling out a gray Narcotics Anonymous key chain, which she throws at Jeannine, who catches it and glances at it.

"Satisfied?" Rudi growls.

"The pay's shit," Jeannine tells her. "Minimum wage. Sometimes it's late."

"I don't care."

“But the question is this, Rudi: *do you care?* Because this isn’t like working in the school library or at a cafeteria — you have to care. You can’t just sleepwalk through this. You-have-to-care.”

“I care.”

“I need fifteen hours a week, at least. Sometimes more in times of emergency.”

“Fine.”

“That’s not gonna cut into your party time?”

“I don’t party.”

“Fine. Come back Monday — exactly at four. Not four-thirty or even four-ten. *Four*. I’ll take you around town and give you a tryout. You’ll get a couple of hours to show me what you got.”

Part of Rudi right then wants to tell Jeannine to take her tryout and stuff it in a small out-of-the-way place. But the other part — the part that finds the job intriguing — nods, and she gets up and starts to leave.

“Hey!” Jeannine calls out.

At once, Rudi comes to a stop and turns around, just as Jeannine flings the key chain back at her, which Rudi catches as the woman howls, “And take that damn sign down from the Marvin Center!”

Chapter 32

Rudi returns to her dorm, and she finds Sandra lying alone on her bed, staring at the ceiling.

“Hey,” Rudi says to her.

“Hey,” she says back, without emotion.

“Where’s Maria?”

Sandra shrugs.

“Look,” Rudi goes on, “if I’m in any way the cause of the problems you two are having . . .”

“You’re not,” Sandra insists. “This started well before you came.”

“What started?”

“The drinking and partying. I’m not real sure when it started exactly. Last semester sometime. But it’s getting worse. I’ve tried to look the other way . . .”

“That doesn’t help. I can tell you that from experience.”

“I guess we need to have a talk. Oh, before I forget, about an hour ago the guard

downstairs called. He said some woman in the lobby was looking for you.”

“A woman?” Rudi utters.

“He didn’t give me a name,” Sandra says. “And he hung up as soon as I said you weren’t here.”

Thinking it must’ve been Mrs. Goodwin, Rudi hurries out of the room. She also hurries down the hall, and she doesn’t even bother with the elevator. Instead, she runs down the steps. Then, once in the lobby, she hustles over to the security guard and gasps, “I heard some woman was looking for me.”

“You Rudi?” the man says.

“Yeah. Did this woman leave a message?”

“Nope. But she’s still sitting over there.”

He says this and points to a tallish and elegantly dressed woman about her mother-in-law’s age, who has long light brown hair and similar colored eyes.

With a bit of hesitation, she steps across the lobby and stops in front of the woman, and she says to her: “Hi.”

“Hi,” the woman mumbles with a faint accent, while clearly unnerved by Rudi’s appearance.

“I’m Rudi.”

“You are?” the woman gasps, with lots of surprise.

“You wanted to see me?”

“Yes. Please, won’t you have a seat?”

Rudi is even more hesitant than before, but she sits across from the woman and utters, “What is it you want?”

“My name is Katerina Lobkowicz,” the woman tells her. “Vilem is my son.”

“Oh. So, so you’re a . . .”

“A princess? Yes. But as you can see I don’t wear a tiara.”

“I . . .”

“I would’ve visited you sooner, but —”

“— How’d you find me?” Rudi asks.

“We hired someone,” the woman answers. “But you were not that easy to find.”

“Why were you looking for me?”

“So I could thank you in person,” the woman says, with her voice breaking slightly. “For what you did for my son.”

“I really didn’t do anything,” Rudi insists.

“That’s not what the doctors say. That’s not what Vilem says.”

“Is he doing okay?”

“Better. He still has a long struggle ahead of him, but now there’s at least hope. You’ve given us hope.”

“Really I . . .”

“The man we hired to find you said that your home is not far from the hospital. Is that correct?”

“Yeah.”

“So will you be returning there when you’re not at school?”

“Why are you asking?”

“Perhaps you could come over for tea one afternoon when you’re back, at our Manhattan apartment. Perhaps during the Thanksgiving holiday.”

“I don’t know.”

“Please, Vilem would be so happy to see you. He talks about you all the time.”

“He does?”

“We’re thankful he talks about anything.”

“I still don’t know.”

“Will you at least think about it?”

“I’ll think about it.”

Right then, the princess falls to one knee in front of Rudi, which more than surprises Rudi.

The woman also takes Rudi’s hand before gently kissing it, and she whispers, “Thank you again.

Thank you for giving us back our son.”

Chapter 33

Rudi is sitting in her Advanced Calculus class, listening to the teacher describe Cauchy sequences in a dull monotone voice, when she glances at the clock on the wall and sees that it's just past 3:20.

In spite of promising herself to forget about Borges' lecture that day, she hasn't been able to get the details of it out of her head during the entire class.

2:00 - 3:30. Marvin Center Auditorium.

Soon, she can't think of anything else, and she jumps up and rushes out of the room. She further rushes into the sweltering heat, in the direction of the Marvin Center many blocks away, and she makes it inside the lobby just as a small group of people are exiting the auditorium.

While praying she's not too late, she sprints inside the hall, and she almost bumps into the person she least expects to see there: Jared. He, too, is surprised to see her, and for a few moments the two look into each other's eyes unsurely before Jared walks off. At the same time, Rudi hurries toward the podium, where a middle-aged Asian woman with blonde hair is helping an old man collect his things. A man whose right eye is almost shut.

“Mr. Borges?” Rudi calls out, as she comes to a stop a short distance from him, with sweat pouring down her face.

“Yes?” the man answers with a thick Spanish accent, while looking at Rudi in a way that suggests he can’t see her well.

“Hi.”

“Hello.”

“My name is Rudi.”

“That is a pretty name,” he says to her with a gentle smile that makes her feel warm all over.

“Thanks,” she utters. “Actually, I wanted to thank you for something else.”

“Thank me for what?”

“Your stories. They were a great comfort to my husband before he died. And to me, too. Especially ‘The Secret Miracle.’ It actually inspired our wedding.”

Rudi says this and lowers her suddenly watery eyes, and she adds, “It also gave us hope. And that’s no small thing.”

“I gather your husband was very young,” Borges says to her.

“Yes,” she answers, with her eyes still downcast.

“I am sorry for your loss.”

“Yeah, well,” Rudi mutters while wiping her tears, which have mixed with her perspiration to the point that the two are indistinguishable, “I don’t want to take up any more of your time. Again, thanks.”

She then turns around and rushes off.

“Please wait,” Borges calls out.

Quickly, Rudi comes to a stop, and she spins toward the man.

“My assistant and I were just about to have an early dinner,” he goes on, “and if you . . .”

“I couldn’t,” Rudi tells him.

“Please. I do not know anyone in this city, and Miss Kodama here is already terribly bored with my company.”

“That is not true,” the blonde woman insists, with just a bit of exasperation.

“Please,” Borges tells Rudi. “You would be doing me a favor.”

Rudi agrees, and the three go to the Red Lion, which is a little brick restaurant a short distance away, where they have a quiet dinner. It’s so quiet that barely a word has been spoken by the time the waiter collects their plates.

Finally, Rudi finds the courage to ask the man a question that has long been on her mind, and she takes a quick sip of water and utters, “I’ve been wondering . . .”

“About what?” Borges asks, happy to get some kind of conversation started.

“Your stories — they don’t read at all like fiction, even the fantastic elements. Especially them. They read like you’re retelling actual events. Events that you have first-hand knowledge about.”

“That, of course, is my style.”

“I realize that, but still . . . I can usually tell when something’s phony. I especially know when what I’m reading is bullshit — excuse my language. I know when something is made up. And I don’t get that feeling when I read your work.”

“What exactly do you want to know?”

“Have the things you’ve written about actually happened?”

Borges smiles. Another gentle one.

“Are you smiling because it’s true,” Rudi goes on, “or because you think I’m crazy?”

“Maybe it is a little of both,” he tells her. “You see, I am not your typical fiction writer. I do not have the imagination to make up plots and characters and other such things. I write only what I know intimately. So maybe I am a little crazy, too. And maybe I am not so ashamed of it.”

“The thing is lots of strange things have happened to me over the past few years,” Rudi goes on. “Unexplainable things.”

“Such as?” Borges asks.

“It’s so weird, because I used to be such a realist — to the extreme. I never believed in anything I couldn’t see, nor did I believe in anybody, because how can you really see someone — see what they really think? I only believed in fact. The fact that this whole world is rotten. Then, then came along Tommy, my future husband. And with him came these strange visions, and it wasn’t just me who had them. He shared them with me.”

“What kind of visions?”

“I’m not real sure. Maybe they were slithers of our subconsciouses, or maybe they were glimpses of our future, in some twisted sort of way. I don’t know, maybe it was even Heaven. At least Tommy thought so. And when we kissed — when we kissed we heard music.”

Once again, Borges smiles.

“I’m not speaking metaphorically,” Rudi insists.

“My dear,” Borges insists back, “where do you think the metaphor comes from?”

“So you don’t think I’m crazy?”

“That I cannot answer. But do you remember when you were a small child? You probably saw all sorts of fantastic things, especially in the dark of night. Am I right?”

“I suppose.”

“Then, when you got older, these visions ceased. But did they cease because they never existed or because your mind learned to ignore them?”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

“Neither do I. As a writer, I ask questions. That is what we are good at. We get into trouble when we believe we have the answers.”

“Sometimes,” Rudi goes on, “sometimes I see my husband. Not all the time, of course. I mean, I don’t see him right now. I only see him when I hit bottom — when I desperately need to see him — when my life depends on it.”

“I have experienced something like this, too,” Borges tells her.

“You have?” Rudi mutters.

“I was very close to my mother. And in times of great need I swear I am speaking to her, and she to me. Not only in my dreams, but when I’m awake as well. Of course, a doctor or a scientist would tell us that we are imagining all this. We are imagining it because we want to imagine it.”

“And you believe them?”

“I believe this, whether right or wrong — wise or foolish: I believe when people form a close connection — a very close one — it can form a life of its own. And whether this life is real or only perceived doesn’t matter. You should be happy to have formed such a connection. You should cherish it.”

Now it’s Rudi’s turn to smile, and soon afterward the three leave the restaurant together, and under darkening skies they climb down a small set of stairs. Then, when they reach the bottom, Rudi hugs the old man, who hugs her right back.

“You’ve helped me a lot,” she murmurs.

“I’m glad,” he murmurs back, and she starts slowly backing up while saying, “Thank you for dinner.”

“Thank you,” he says back, before taking a card from his inside jacket pocket, which he hands to her while adding, “If you would like, you can write me.”

“You better be careful,” she tells him, after taking the card, “I just might take you up on it.”

“It would make me happy. You see, when you get as old as me, you begin to wonder about your legacy. I think not just writers or famous people wonder about this. I think we all do. So that I’ve touched someone — that I’ll perhaps be remembered a little is important to me.”

“You’ll be remembered,” Rudi insists, a bit emotionally. “And more than just a little.”

Chapter 34

Rudi comes home, and she finds Maria alone in their room watching TV on the empty bed, with a full beer can in her hand.

“Hi,” Rudi mutters.

“Hi, yourself,” Maria utters.

“Where’s Sandra?”

Maria shrugs, and she adds, “I’m not my sister’s keeper.”

“How long are you two gonna keep this up?”

“Can we talk about something else?”

“Like what?”

“Mrs. Goodwin called.”

“Thanks.”

“And she wasn’t the only one who called you. Dennis called again, too.”

“Yeah?”

“That must be the fifth time he’s called you this week, at least that I know about. And,

what's more, he almost sounded sincere. What did you do to him?"

"Nothing. That's why he's calling."

"Ah," Maria says with a grin, "I see. It's all part of your strategy."

"Nope," Rudi says back. "I've never had a 'strategy,' and I never will."

"Oh, come on, that's how you get all these gorgeous guys to fall madly in love with you."

"Can we talk about something else?"

"Like what?"

Rudi is just about to mention Maria's drinking when she's interrupted by the groans of two people from next door, along with the sound of a banging bed.

"Doesn't she ever take a night off?" Rudi howls, before picking up a pillow and throwing it at the wall. "I barely got to sleep last night."

"I bet it's quieter in Dennis's room," Maria murmurs with a sly smile, before chugging her beer. She afterward belches and crushes the can, before rising to her feet and stumbling to the refrigerator.

"How many is that?" Rudi asks.

"One for every time Dennis has called you," Maria growls, while yanking out another beer.

Chapter 35

After yet another boring Art History class, Rudi hustles out of the building, not wanting to be late for her tryout with Jeannine. But she doesn't take more than a few steps outside before Dennis jumps in front of her with one of his smiles, which causes her to stop with a loud sigh.

"Hi," he utters, while continuing to smile.

"Hi," she utters back, while unable to prevent a small smile from forming on her own face.

"You're a hard lady to get a hold of."

Rudi doesn't exactly reply. She just hurries off, with Dennis following her much like a puppy dog.

"I guess you didn't get my messages," he goes on, "as in plural."

"I guess you didn't get mine," she tells him, while picking up her pace a bit.

"What message?" he utters, while keeping up with her.

"At the Rathskeller."

"Rudi —"

“— Perhaps you don’t understand what the word ‘no’ means. Maybe I should ask your mother how to say it in Czech.”

“It’s actually very close: ‘*ne*.’”

“*Ne*,” she repeats. “Now have you got it?”

“I’m stubborn.”

“So am I.”

She says this and hurries even faster, but again he jumps in front of her, causing her once again to stop and sigh. She also demands, “Now what?”

“You remembered,” he says.

“Remembered what?”

“That my mom was Czech. Most girls don’t remember anything I tell them. Sometimes they don’t even remember my name. But you, you remembered something utterly insignificant — something I just mentioned in passing.”

“So?”

“So that means you actually cared about what I had to say. Which means you actually care, period.”

“Just fuck off,” she tells him, with a shake of her head, though she has to say this through another smile.

“I’m not giving up,” he insists, before walking off with lots of confidence and optimism.

While watching him do this, Rudi wonders why she can’t stop liking him, and she only stops wondering when someone sticks their finger into her back. Which causes her to spin around, and she sees an angry Vicki, who had been following Rudi and Dennis and listening to their entire exchange while getting more and more jealous.

“What do you want?” Rudi growls.

“Don’t you see how embarrassing you are?” Vicki tells her, with an enormous sneer.

“What are you talking about?”

“You don’t really think someone like Dennis would be interested in someone like you?”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

“I guess you don’t have a mirror in your room.”

“I guess yours is on the ceiling.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“And you’re a whore.”

Vicki responds to this by trying to slap Rudi’s face. But Rudi easily catches her hand, and she bends it back, causing Vicki to fall to her knees squealing in pain, which in turn causes everyone nearby to stare at them.

“Do that again,” Rudi barks while trying to control her rage, “and it’ll be your very last act.”

“Let go of me!” Vicki shouts.

Rudi complies, by tossing Vicki’s hand away, and she storms off.

“You freak!” Vicki screams from her knees. “You fucking freak! Everyone hates you! We all laugh at you behind your back! Even your dyke roommates!”

Rudi seems to ignore this. But her eyes lower just slightly while wondering if what Vicki said might be true. Which is when she takes out her comfort music.

She’s still listening to it when she rushes inside the community center, where she sees Jeannine rummaging through a file cabinet not far away.

“Sorry I’m late,” Rudi mutters, after taking off her headphones and stuffing them into her

jacket pocket.

Jeannine doesn't react. She just keeps looking through her cabinet. Though eventually she points at a clock on the wall and growls, "What time is it?"

"4:15," Rudi answers, with a bit of exasperation.

"And what time did I tell you to show up?"

"4:00. Look —"

"— Go home, Rudi."

"Look, I'm sorry — I got tied up beyond my control."

"I said, go home."

Rudi almost does this. "What's so great about this job anyway?" she asks herself. "And why would I want to work for such a horrible person?" But the job does mean something to her, so she again tries to speak, only to be interrupted once more.

"I told you I need someone who cares," Jeannine utters.

"I do care," Rudi utters back. "I do."

Finally, Jeannine turns from her files, and she looks at Rudi. She looks at her as if she were gauging her somehow.

"Come on," Rudi pleads, "you said it was just a tryout — so give me a tryout. What do you have to lose? You don't even have to pay me."

Chapter 36

Rudi and Jeannine take the Metro subway to Union Station, and they meander through the streets outside it, where Rudi can't help notice all the homeless people. She also wonders what it is about train stations that attract people like this. Then she recalls how Penn Station in Newark had once attracted her, and she realizes that these people are probably much like her, looking for the same thing she sought: an escape, regardless of how improbable it is.

Noticing Rudi's glances, and misinterpreting them, Jeannine says, "You scared?"

Rudi reacts to this by giving her a look that says back, "You must be joking," and she adds, "What are we doing here?"

"Like I told you before, we're trying to get these people off the streets."

"Are there shelters nearby?"

"Not enough. And they have way too few beds."

"So how are we supposed to help them?"

"The Lord will have to provide."

"Funny, I didn't take you for being religious."

“If I weren’t, I’d never be able to come to work. Because this is what I see every day. *Every fucking day*. It just gets worse and worse all the time, and without faith I would never believe it could get better.”

It’s then Jeannine comes to a stop, and Rudi along with her.

“What?” Rudi utters.

Jeannine responds by pointing down the road at a disheveled teenage girl, who’s sitting in filth by the mouth of an alley with her head down.

“Who’s that?” Rudi asks.

“Our first customer,” Jeannine answers, and with Rudi a couple of steps behind her she marches up to the deathly pale girl, who’s got dirty black hair and sad blue eyes.

“Hey, Stac,” Jeannine murmurs, in a voice so sweet that it surprises Rudi.

Stacey, though, doesn’t react to it, or even seem to notice the woman.

“How you doing, sweetie?” Jeannine goes on.

Again, the girl doesn’t react.

“Have you given any thought to my offer?” the woman then asks.

This time Stacey at least reacts, though only to shake her head.

“I’ll get you home,” Jeannine insists. “I promise.”

But Stacey just shakes her head over and over, and she says, “I don’t want nothing from you. Just leave me alone.”

Instead, Jeannine kneels in front of the girl, and she gently takes both her hands while telling her: “You don’t want to get assaulted again, do you?”

Angrily, Stacey yanks her hands away, and she turns from the woman. She also looks as if she’s about to cry. Which Jeannine notices, and with rising exasperation she pleads, “Stacey,

please.”

This is when Rudi grabs Jeannine’s shoulder, which startles Jeannine and causes her to jump a bit. She further furiously spins toward Rudi, and in a hushed tone barks, “What is it?”

“Can I talk to you?” Rudi whispers, while pointing backward with her thumb.

“Not now!”

“It’s important!”

Jeannine sighs. She sighs deeply, but she stands up and marches with Rudi a few steps backward, where she growls, “What’s so important?”

“Let me talk to her,” Rudi says.

“No one’s stopping you!”

“Let me talk to her by myself.”

“Why?”

“She’s never gonna open up to someone like you.”

“What do you mean, *someone like me?*”

“Someone old.”

“I’m 27!”

“That’s a million years old when you’re her age. Come on, you remember what it’s like.”

Jeannine pauses in thought, before shaking her head and saying, “I don’t know.”

“Just give me fifteen minutes,” Rudi begs. “The fifteen minutes I was late.”

Once again, Jeannine sighs. Though she also sees some other customers across the street, and she points to them while saying, “All right. I’ll be over there. But be careful — she probably has some kind of weapon.”

“Trust me,” Rudi tells her, “I can take care of myself.”

Rudi afterward sits next to Stacey, and she sees Jeannine staring at her skeptically from across the street, and she waves the woman away.

“All right — all right!” Jeannine mouths with her hands raised, before heading toward the homeless people nearby. Though as she does she can’t help peek at Rudi in a nearly continuous manner.

Ignoring this, Rudi turns to Stacey and murmurs, “Hey.”

But Stacey doesn’t reply, or even acknowledge Rudi is there. She just keeps looking down into the filth.

“You’re not gonna believe this,” Rudi goes on, “but I’ve been right here. Right where you are now. It was on a different street in a different city, but it was the same exact place.”

Stacey shakes her head, over and over.

“It’s true,” Rudi insists. “I used to hang out on the streets all the time when I was your age, usually strung out on something. I had no mom, no dad. Not really.”

“I only wish that were true,” Stacey mutters.

“What do you mean?” Rudi mutters back.

There’s no answer, so Rudi adds, “Did they do something to you?”

Still, the girl won’t answer, so Rudi says, “It’s cool. You don’t have to tell me. To be real honest, I never liked it when people tried to get involved in my shit. So I sure ain’t gonna be a hypocrite and do the same to you. You don’t have to tell me nothing. We could just sit here all day long.”

“Just leave me alone,” Stacey growls, with her voice breaking a bit.

“I’m not doing anything to you.”

“You want to send me home to . . .”

“I don’t want to send you nowhere. I told you, we can sit here all day if you want. Or longer. We could even hang together. Trust me — no one will ever lay a hand on you with me around.”

Right then, a couple of tears fall down Stacey’s cheeks.

“What’s wrong?” Rudi asks. “Did I say something?”

Stacey doesn’t want to answer, but Rudi keeps pressing. She presses until the girl finally utters, “Lay a hand on me.”

“Did someone . . .” Rudi mumbles.

“Just leave me the fuck alone!” the girl shouts. “You don’t care! Nobody does!”

“I care! I fucking care! Who fucking touched you?”

“My . . . he . . .”

“It’s okay. I get it. You don’t have to say the words.”

“And my mom just let him!” Stacey howls, with tears pouring down her face.

Rudi now looks as if she’s about to cry, too, and she tells the girl: “It won’t happen again.”

“I won’t go back!”

“You’re not going back!”

“You’re gonna make me go back! I know it! And I’d rather die!”

“I don’t blame you for not believing me. I wouldn’t believe me, either. But I’m not leaving you, and I’m not letting anyone take you back.”

Hearing not only Rudi’s words but also the truth in them, the girl stops crying, and she looks at Rudi, and then they both cry. They also hug each other.

Watching this from across the street is Jeannine, who’s so shocked that she almost falls

over herself.

Chapter 37

Inside Union Station Jeannine and Rudi lead a still frightened and very hesitant Stacey toward a smiling grandmotherly woman.

“It’s all right, Stacey,” Jeannine murmurs to the girl, with her arm tightly around her. “Mrs. Simms works for that organization I was telling you about.”

“Come, child,” Mrs. Simms says, while offering her hand. “We don’t want to miss our train.”

Stacey, though, is even more hesitant, and she turns to Rudi, who mouths, “I promised.”

Stacey nods, and she takes the woman’s hand, and the woman slowly walks off with her while saying to Jeannine, “I’ll call you as soon as we get where we’re going.”

“Thank you,” Jeannine says. She then rubs her eyes a bit and marches out of the station with Rudi, who realizes that at least one person that day is going to escape. Though, as they make their way once again down the sad streets, she starts to feel a lot of doubt. “Is Stacey really going to be all right?” she asks Jeannine.

“She will be now,” Jeannine insists.

“You sure? I promised her.”

“MARC is really good with these situations. It works a little like the old Underground Railroad. They’ll get her away and give her a new identity, and a new family. She’ll be safe. You have my word.”

It’s then Jeannine stops, and she says to Rudi: “So how does it feel?”

“Feel?” Rudi says back, as she stops with her.

“Helping someone.”

“It feels kinda good. More than kinda.”

Jeannine smiles at this, but her smile fades when she sees a heavyset and unkempt middle-aged woman rambling toward them. A woman who has all her belongings in the shopping cart she’s pushing. A “bag lady,” as they are called.

“Oh, brother,” Jeannine murmurs to herself, with a shake of her head.

“What?” Rudi murmurs back.

The woman is now only steps from them, and Jeannine forces a smile and utters, “Hi, Thelma.”

Reluctantly, Thelma comes to a stop, and she turns to the woman and without emotion utters back, “Fuck off.”

“Nice to see you, too,” Jeannine adds. At the same time, Thelma looks at Rudi and grimaces, and she says, “Your hair’s even more fucked up than mine.”

Rudi nods at this a couple of times while trying to keep her mouth shut. Which is difficult, especially as there’s something about Thelma that annoys her — something that has nothing to do with the woman’s insults.

“And I’ve seen blind women with better makeup,” Thelma goes on.

“Yeah, well, who asked you?” Rudi barks, unable to hold back anymore.

“Mind your mouth, bitch,” the woman barks back, “or I’ll mind it for you!”

“Go ahead and try!”

Angrily, Thelma reaches inside her cart, and she finds a thick wooden stick, which she pulls out and threatens Rudi with.

Rudi doesn’t flinch at this, but Jeannine still jumps in front of the woman anyway and grabs her wrist while telling her: “Let it be, Thelma. Just let it be.”

Right away, Thelma yanks her arm away. But she also tosses her stick back into her cart and starts off. She does this while howling, “Just keep that cunt away from me!”

This makes Rudi furious. It makes her so furious that she clenches her fists and moves toward the woman, only to be stopped by Jeannine, who says to her: “Just let it be.”

This calms Rudi, and she takes a deep breath and utters, “I’m sorry.”

“The tryout’s over,” Jeannine remarks matter-of-factly.

“What?” Rudi mutters, with great shock.

“I said, it’s over.”

“But she . . .”

“The job’s yours.”

“What?” Rudi again mutters, with even greater shock.

“You did real good today,” Jeannine tells her with a big smile. “Better than good. You may have even saved a life, and I bet not many people can say that as they’re coming home from work tonight.”

“I didn’t do so well with her,” Rudi says, while pointing at Thelma as she rambles down the block.

“Please,” Jeannine tells her, “that woman would drive Job to murder. Just stay clear of her. She’s a lost cause.”

“I thought you had faith.”

“Now don’t you go using my words against me,” Jeannine threatens, while wagging her finger. Though she makes this threat with another big smile on her face. She then backs into the street, toward a decrepit building across the road, which has a sign out front that states: “Last Chance Mission.”

“So shall I see you tomorrow?” she asks Rudi.

“At 4:00,” Rudi tells her. “Not 4:15. 4:00.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Jeannine utters, as she turns around and strides up to the mission’s front door, which she opens.

“Where you going?” Rudi asks, with more than a little curiosity.

Jeannine responds by pointing inside the building and saying, “I volunteer here whenever I have the time and opportunity. And energy.”

“After putting in a full day’s work?”

“People need help 24/7 — not just during working hours.”

Jeannine says this and heads inside the building, only to stop when Rudi cries out, “Hey, wait up.” Which is just before Rudi rushes across the street and up to her.

“Don’t you have some partying to do?” Jeannine asks.

“Actually, I don’t,” Rudi insists.

“This is volunteer work, as in ‘no pay.’”

“I’m familiar with the word.”

Jeannine shakes her head a bit at this, before motioning Rudi inside and saying, “*Après*

vous.”

“*Merci beaucoup,*” Rudi says back.

“Just get in,” Jeannine howls, while playfully pushing Rudi forward, and the two women stepped inside the mission, where they see a small line of homeless people in front of a man. This man has long and graying auburn hair and an equally long and graying auburn beard, and he is warmly hugging an old woman beside a ramshackle chapel.

“Who’s that?” Rudi asks, while pointing at the man.

“That’s Reverend Samson,” Jeannine answers.

“*Reverend?*” Rudi mumbles, with lots of surprise.

Seemingly in response, the minister breaks his embrace with the woman, revealing both the large crucifix around his neck and the old peace sign T-shirt underneath it.

“As you can see,” Jeannine goes on, “he’s not exactly your archetypal minister. He was even at Woodstock.”

“Really?” Rudi mutters, with her surprise turned up a notch.

“Really,” Jeannine tells her, before pointing to a buffet table on the other side of the room while adding, “Why don’t you give them a hand.”

“All right,” Rudi says, as she scurries off toward the small group of people preparing the food. At the same time, Jeannine rushes up to the minister, who cries out, “Baby doll!” just before giving her a big hug, which she happily returns.

“Boy, did I need this today!” she tells him, when they break their embrace. Which is when the minister says to her: “There’s always plenty where that came from.”

She grins at this and murmurs, “So how’s it going?”

At once the man’s expression turns sour.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“They just keep coming,” he answers, while shaking his head, “more and more every time I turn around. I don’t even know how we feed them all. I feel like I’m Jimmy Stewart in that old Christmas movie — that if there’s even one stalk of celery left at the end of the night we’re a success.”

“Well,” she says, “I brought you some help tonight.” She then points at Rudi, who the minister looks at with raised eyebrows and a tilted head, as even to him she’s strange looking.

“Her name’s Rudi Weiss,” Jeannine goes on. “She’s a student at GW.”

“GW?” the minister mumbles almost inaudibly, while continuing to stare at Rudi askance. “I wonder if she knows —”

“— She just started working for me today.”

“Is she any good?”

“Good? That girl, she’s something else.”

“Like the Eddie Cochran song.”

“Even better.”

Chapter 38

Rudi serves a thick stew to the ever-increasing crowd, which includes Thelma, who stops in front of her. The two then glare at each other, and they glare even more when Rudi throws some stew into Thelma's bowl, causing it to splatter a bit on the woman's tray.

"Watch your back," the woman growls.

"I watch everything," Rudi growls back.

"Let it be," comes Jeannine's voice from behind her.

With a bit of a sigh, Rudi turns to the woman and says, "Sorry. That woman just gets to me for some reason. I wish I knew why."

"How's it going otherwise?" Jeannine asks.

Rudi can't answer. She can't because she's interrupted, by the sound of crying, which causes both she and Jeannine to turn their heads. It's then they see, on the other side of the room, a woman in her early twenties sitting on a bench trying to comfort a shrieking baby. Which she does while her other child — a little girl of three — starts wailing, too.

Watching this, Rudi feels a strange tug. It's strange because she's never cared for kids

before, especially small crying ones. So she can't understand where this tug comes from. But then she faintly recalls when she was the little girl's age, and how she cried and cried after her mother left. She cried for weeks.

"Can you take over for me?" Rudi asks Jeannine, before marching toward the crying little girl, doing so as if she's not in control of her actions. Then she sits on the bench and takes the child into her arms, and she cradles her, and the child unflinchingly clenches Rudi.

But the child's mother is frightened of Rudi and her appearance, and she almost screams for help. Though when she sees her daughter calm a bit in Rudi's arms, she calms, too. At the same time, an instinct wakes inside Rudi, likely the result of feeling those little fingers clutching her so desperately. Which invokes happiness and warmth everywhere. She realizes that the child is almost like a drug, except that the stimulation isn't artificial.

Along with these feelings come an overwhelming desire to soothe the troubles of this little girl, so while gently rocking her Rudi whispers, "What's wrong?"

"I wanna go home!" the girl hollers through her tears.

Rudi responds to this by looking at the girl's mother, who looks back at her in embarrassment, and Rudi tells the child: "You are home."

"This is not our home!" the girl screams. "I wanna go home!"

"Home is not a place, silly. Home is where people love you. You're always home."

The girl keeps crying, but with a little less intensity, and this intensity keeps decreasing. Soon, she closes her eyes and falls asleep in Rudi's arms, and this makes Rudi feel even warmer and happier. It also makes her close her own eyes, and she has a dream of sorts, not unlike the kind she used to have with Tommy. Only in this dream she's sitting on a floor surrounded by a nearly endless array of little girls of various ages and races and ethnicities, who are all looking

up at her with such love and affection that she can't stop smiling.

"I'll take her now," comes a soft voice, which causes the dream to end. It also causes Rudi's eyes to open, and she sees the woman reaching for her child, with her baby now sleeping comfortably beside her in a bassinet, which is next to a set of suitcases.

"Oh," Rudi mutters, as she gently hands the woman her daughter.

"Thank you," the woman mutters back, before hugging her child while looking as if she herself were about to cry.

"Is there anything else I can do?" Rudi whispers.

The woman shakes her head, but she also mumbles, "I don't know what we're gonna do. My husband, he, he walked out on us. And I couldn't pay for anything. I've got no job, no skills. I didn't even finish high school. I don't know what we're gonna do — where we're gonna go. I don't even know where we're gonna sleep tonight."

Visibly moved, Rudi points to Jeannine by the buffet table, and she says, "That's my boss over there. Maybe she can help." She further jumps to her feet, and she hurries toward Jeannine, watched by Thelma, who's been watching Rudi ever since she picked up the crying child, and watching with wonder not even she can hide.

Quickly, Rudi reaches Jeannine, and she explains the woman's situation while expecting Jeannine to jump just as she had. But her response is a big sigh and a slight shake of her head, knowing that helping the family would take many hours, if not half the night.

"Have her come to the office first thing in the morning," she eventually says.

"Why not now?" Rudi pleads.

"Because I'm exhausted now. I've been up since five, and I'm not superhuman."

"I'll help."

“Rudi.”

“People need help 24/7.”

“What did I say about using my words against me?”

“Just look at how frightened she is. They have nowhere to go right now.”

“All right,” Jeannine relents. “I’ll go make some calls in the minister’s office. But don’t you promise her anything yet.”

“All right,” Rudi says. “What can I do?”

“You can start clearing the tables. There should be someone in the kitchen to take the dinnerware. And then do me a really big favor.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t help anyone else tonight.”

“No promises,” Rudi says with a grin, which Jeannine can’t help return, right before she scurries off. It’s then Rudi picks up a handful of trays and struts toward the kitchen, and she notices the woman on the bench, looking at her with great hope in her eyes. So, while she promised not to make any promises, she does so anyway. She moves all the trays to one hand and raises her free thumb, which makes the woman smile. She even leaps a bit.

Meanwhile, Rudi backs into the swinging doors of the kitchen, where she hears the sound of running water coming from a nearby sink, so she turns around. She also becomes shocked, because she sees who’s washing dishes a short distance away with his sleeves rolled up: Jared.

Hearing someone enter, he turns as well, and he looks at Rudi with just as much shock as what she’s expressing toward him. He’s so shocked that he stops washing the glass in his hand. Though he soon composes himself, and he nods toward the counter by the sink, and with a mild Southern accent he says to her: “You can leave the trays there.”

Rudi, though, can't move, as she's still too shocked. It takes a while before she can even blurt out, "You work here?"

"This is my church," he utters.

"This?"

"That surprises you?"

"I, I just imagined you belonged to one of those cathedral-like places, like the one on TV."

"Which one?"

"I don't know, the show with that woman with even wilder makeup than mine."

"That would be Tammy Faye Bakker," Jared says with a bit of a grin. "Along with her husband Jim." Jared afterward turns back to the sink and continues with the dishes, and he adds, "They're frauds. Like most of those people on TV. They're probably the reason you have such a fucked-up view of Christianity."

"How do you know what my view is?" Rudi growls, while surprised at Jared's language.

"I can see it in your eyes," Jared tells her, before turning toward her once again, this time holding a plate. Which is when he says to her: "Just like I see it in the eyes of your roommates. They're always looking at me as if I were about to burn them at the stake or something."

"Isn't that what you would do if you could?" Rudi retorts. "Don't you know what they are?"

These words send a flash of anger through Jared, and he smashes the plate against the edge of the sink, causing it to fly apart onto the floor. He also howls, "Jesus didn't judge, and neither do I!"

Though this anger doesn't last long, and he falls to his knees to pick up the shards of

ceramic, doing so while murmuring, “At least I try not to judge. I’m not always successful, especially when it comes to myself.”

In reaction to this, Rudi feels embarrassed, because she now sees that Jared is far from his caricature, much as she suspected but hadn’t tried to find out. What’s more, she knows he’s as human as anyone could be, and she finds herself drifting toward this humanness.

Jared, too, feels embarrassed — at his explosion, and he hopes Rudi will just leave. So he feels even more embarrassed when she comes toward him, and when she places the trays on the counter.

Desperately, he tries to ignore her, but once he’s collected all the pieces of plate, he looks up and sees her cupped hands and her expression of compassion, which is the very last thing he expected from this wild-looking punk girl. It’s so unexpected that it takes him many seconds to drop the shards in Rudi’s hand.

He then rises to his feet, and he watches Rudi throw the remains of the plate into a garbage pail. He also picks up some utensils from the bottom of the sink and starts washing them. Though he stops when he sees Rudi offering him her hands, and he mutters, “What?”

“I’ll dry,” she mutters back, before taking the utensils and drying them off with a dishtowel from the side of the sink.

The two afterward continue working in silence, with both unsure of the other while at the same time eager to learn more, and this silence is only broken when Reverend Samson enters the kitchen carrying a large stack of trays. He then smiles and says to them: “Look at this. Just look at it. And to think people are always telling me that kids today are only interested in having a good time.”

Rudi and Jared respond to this. They do by glancing at each other, before turning toward

the minister.

“I’ll be done soon, Reverend,” Jared says to the man.

“Take your time, son,” Samson utters, while placing his trays beside the two. “Take your time. And thank you.”

Respectfully, Jared nods, and the minister turns to Rudi and says, “And thank you, too, Rudi.”

“You’re welcome,” Rudi replies, while feeling a bit discomforted by the minister’s sincerity. A minister so unlike any she’s ever known, heard about, or imagined.

“You’re the one who’s welcome,” he replies back, “any time.” He further gives her one of his big hugs and whispers, “God bless you.”

“You, too,” she whispers back, in spite of the words seeming foreign to her.

He soon breaks their embrace and makes his way out of the kitchen, with Rudi’s eyes locked on him, where they remain even after he’s gone.

“He’s some character,” she utters.

“He’s the real thing,” Jared utters back. “That’s why you’ll never see him on TV, or in some cathedral-like place.”

The two afterward return to the dishes, and Rudi notices something about Jared that causes her to become even more shocked than before. She notices the marks on his arms. Marks she knows all too well: track marks.

She now not only can’t move, but she also can’t breathe while realizing the young man next to her — the one who seemed so different from her — so alien — is neither different nor alien. She knows that she probably has more in common with him than with anyone else at school.

It doesn't take long for Jared to see what she's staring at, and he tells her: "They're real, too."

She nods, not doubting him at all. But still she keeps staring, which he misinterprets as doubt.

"Go on, touch 'em," he goes on. "I don't mind."

Hesitantly, and with a slightly shaking hand, she reaches out her hand and touches the marks, and her eyes began tearing up a bit.

"I paid a lot for those," he remarks. "So much that I'm kinda glad they don't go away. Every morning brings humility."

"I know what you mean," she mumbles.

"Do you?" he asks skeptically.

"There, there's an NA group over at GW."

"Yeah?"

"It meets Wednesday nights at the Marvin Center. Room 432."

"I'll have to check it out."

"You'll be welcome there. I'll make sure of it."

He nods at this, realizing, too, that she isn't nearly as different from him as he expected.

The two then once again continue with the dishes. Though this time, as they hand each other the near endless plates and glasses and utensils, their hands and fingers meet incidentally. They also linger, fulfilling a need both of them have. One of the most basic human needs there is: the need to touch and be touched. So this lingering only increases.

Chapter 39

It's late at night when Rudi and Jared finish with the dishes, and they step out of the kitchen and find that the mission is almost empty, apart from Reverend Samson and a few stragglers, including Thelma.

Not seeing Jeannine or the mother and her children, Rudi runs up to the minister and says, "There was this family here —"

"— They left with Jeannine a little while ago," the man interrupts, with a smile. "They're gonna be just fine."

Rudi smiles back, seconds before Jared comes up beside her. Which is when the minister tells the two: "You guys have done way more than your share tonight. Why don't you get out of here and have some fun."

"We had fun," Rudi insists, before glancing at Jared, who blushes a bit, which the minister both notices and grins at.

This is when the two say their goodnights to the minister and make their way out, and Rudi notices Thelma glaring at her from near the entrance, and she glares back, even if she

doesn't know why.

Afterward, Rudi and Jared go to the Metro station, and the mostly silent ride home is also filled with uncertainty. They are uncertain what they're feeling, apart from knowing that they're feeling something.

Later, as they climb the stairs of the Foggy Bottom Metro station near their dorm, Jared notices something about Rudi. He notices the Chai pendant around her neck, and he says, "I like your necklace."

"Yeah?" Rudi says back. "It's Hebrew for —"

"— 'Living.'"

Surprised at this, Rudi comes to a stop, and she looks at Jared in disbelief.

"I'm something of a Judeophile," he tells her as he stops alongside her with a mild smile.

"Get out of here," she tells him back, with a smile that's anything but mild.

"I even spent last summer working on a kibbutz in Israel."

"Really?"

"Way out in the Negev Desert. It was amazing. You should've seen the sunsets!"

Not knowing how to respond to this, Rudi continues up the steps, and so does Jared. But suddenly she stops again, and she lowers her head.

"What's wrong?" he asks, after once again stopping alongside her.

She won't tell him, but he keeps pressing, and she finally mumbles, "I believed all the horrible things people said about you, based on nothing. Even though people prejudge me all the time."

"It's all right," he insists.

"It's not. I'm ashamed. I'm so ashamed."

“Don’t be. I did the same thing to you.”

“What?” she utters, while looking up at him.

“When I first saw you,” he tells her, “I thought, who is this crazy girl? I had never seen anything like you before. I even wondered if you were gonna kill me in my sleep.”

“Get out of here,” she cries out, with a big smile.

“I’m serious,” he says, with his own big smile.

She doesn’t exactly believe him, but she again climbs the steps, and he follows her.

“So what do you think of GW?” he asks.

“Not much,” she answers. “I mean, the classes are okay, but the people . . . not so much.”

“I had no idea I’d have such a hard time fitting in. I haven’t made a single friend.”

“That’s not true,” she tells him, right before taking his hand. “You’ve made one.”

This causes Jared’s face to brighten. Though right then he notices some of the other things Rudi is wearing, and he notices them with great wonder. Though he keeps quiet about it, and the two continue toward the dorm holding hands.

They’re still holding them as they walk down the hallway toward their rooms. Which they do while moving slower and slower as Jared tells Rudi about his plans for the future.

“They’re gonna pay for medical school, too,” he says to her. “And then, then they’re gonna send me all over the world to help people.”

Rudi doesn’t respond to this, and noticing her blank stare, he says, “I guess, I guess that sounds kind of corny.”

“Actually,” she says back, as they reach their respective doors and come to a halt, “it sounds kind of wonderful. You’re kind of wonderful.”

Just like magnets, the two start moving toward one another without control. Closer and

closer they get, and when their lips are only barely apart, they close their eyes in anticipation of what's to come. This happens just as Rudi's door opens, which is just before they hear a woman gasp.

Reluctantly, they both open their eyes, and they see that a kiss has just eluded them.

"Well, goodnight," Jared mutters, even though he really doesn't want their night to end.

"Goodnight," Rudi mutters back, while also not wanting the night to end.

"Maybe I'll see you around."

"You definitely will."

He smiles at this and at her, and he slowly steps inside his room and closes his door, and Rudi just as slowly turns around, and she sees Maria staring at her in shock. She also sees that her roommate is well past drunk.

"You," Maria slurs, while unable to stand straight, "you almost kissed the Preacher."

"Don't call him that anymore," Rudi growls.

"But —"

"— and from now on we're gonna be nice to him, and we're gonna treat him with respect."

"But . . ."

Rudi doesn't wait for Maria to finish her sentence. She just storms into their room and slams the door behind herself. She also goes right to bed. Though that doesn't mean that she gets any sleep.

On this night, her lack of sleep has nothing to do with Vicki, even if she isn't any quieter than normal. On this night she can't sleep because her mind is awash in something called hope, and as she clutches her pillow in the early hours of the morning, she wonders if something she

believed was impossible could actually happen. She wonders if she could fall in love again.

Chapter 40

With the dead leaves of mid-October blowing down the sidewalk on an unseasonably cold and windy afternoon, Rudi turns down her Walkman and approaches a small group of homeless men who are standing around a heating grate.

In the six weeks she's been on the job, she's come to know many such people, and she likes most, and most like her, too. They also respect her, knowing that she isn't some phony do-gooder, but someone much like them — someone they can relate to.

"Hey, guys," she says with a smile as she stops beside them, doing so as if it were the most natural thing in the world — without fear or apprehension — and without condescension.

Right away, the men call out her name, and they smile back.

"How you doing?" she asks, saying it as if she really means it. Which she does.

"We're still hanging around," the tallest of the men says to her.

"Speaking of which," she tells them, "there's a new shelter on 2nd and D Street, with lots of beds."

"Yeah?" another of the men replies, without much excitement, which is a sentiment the

other men clearly share.

“It’s a nice place,” Rudi insists. “I’ve been there.”

“But would you stay there?” the tall man asks.

“I’ve stayed in worse, believe me. Just take a look at it. You don’t like it, you walk out.”

“All right.”

“Pass it on.”

“All right.”

It’s then Rudi sees an emaciated middle-aged man wearing an army jacket. She sees him sitting in a small nearby park by himself, staring out into space as if he were comatose.

Reflexively, she starts toward him. Though one of the men stops her, and while shaking his head he says to her: “Don’t do it.”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“He’s messed up big time. Dangerous messed up.”

Ignoring this, Rudi continues toward the man, though she does so a bit apprehensively and without paying attention to anything else. Which is why she bumps into something.

Startled, she spins around and sees that she’s facing an angry-looking Thelma, whose shopping cart is pressed against Rudi’s thigh.

“Look where you’re going!” Thelma howls.

“Sorry,” Rudi tells her.

“Don’t be sorry — move!”

Rudi complies, while saying to the woman, “So how are you?”

“Fuck off,” Thelma says back, and she takes off.

Watching her, Rudi once again finds her fascinating for some unknown reason, and while

forgetting both the man in the park and Jeannine's directive to forget the lost cause in front of her, she follows the woman.

"Hey," she utters.

"Didn't you hear what I said, cunt?" Thelma utters back.

"Actually, the name's Rudi."

"That's a man's name."

"It's spelled with an 'i.'"

"I don't care what it's spelled with, I've never heard of no girl named Rudi."

"Well, my real name is Gertrude."

Sharply, Thelma comes to a stop, and so does Rudi, a few steps behind her, so she doesn't see the woman's blank expression.

"What's wrong?" Rudi asks.

The woman doesn't answer, but a number of seconds later she mumbles, "What's wrong with 'Gertrude'?"

"What's right with it?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's a horrible name."

"Why, I'll have you know that Gertrude Stein was one of the greatest writers there ever was."

"Maybe. But it's still a horrible name."

Thelma shrugs at this before continuing on, and Rudi continues as well.

"Why are you following me?" Thelma demands.

"I just wanted to let you know that there's a new shelter on 2nd and D," Rudi tells her.

“I don’t stay in shelters.”

“Why not?”

“Thieves. The people there — they’re a bunch of thieves. And I’m not even talking about the homeless people.”

“But —”

“— You can only depend on yourself, honey. And only sometimes.”

Thelma says this and the two come upon a broken-down and seemingly abandoned brownstone. Though as they pass it a young man about Rudi’s age and height steps out of the building wearing an expensive custom-made suit, accompanied by two huge men in their thirties who are almost as well dressed and who are carrying expensive leather attaché cases.

The young man, who’s got a pockmarked face with light olive skin and dark hair, notices Rudi at once. He also smiles at her, finding her look exotic, and while making all sorts of wrong assumptions about her he calls out, “Hello, there.”

Briefly, Rudi glances at the man before turning back to Thelma and saying, “Listen —”

“— I said, hello!” the man interrupts, in a much louder voice.

“Fuck off!” Rudi howls.

Surprised at this, Thelma looks back at Rudi, and she sees the man rambling down the steps of the brownstone and rushing toward them. So she whispers to Rudi: “You better watch out.”

“No one talks to me like that!” the man hollers, now only steps from Rudi. “No one!”

“I just did, asshole,” Rudi tells him.

“You . . .”

With his face bright red, the man reaches toward Rudi, and he almost grabs her when his

two goons grab him.

“Let me go!” the young man screams.

“Remember what your cousin said!” the larger of the two goons screams back.

“Fuck my cousin! He’s not my boss!”

“Hector, please.”

Soon, Hector calms a little, but he still calls out to Rudi: “You witch! You fucking witch!

You will know me again!”

Rudi doesn’t even react to this, which just makes him madder.

“You certainly know how to make friends,” Thelma tells Rudi.

“Just like you,” Rudi tells her back.

“You can stop following me now.”

Reluctantly, Rudi comes to a stop. Though not without saying, “You gonna be at the mission tonight?”

“Maybe,” Thelma answers. “If I get hungry.”

“Maybe I’ll see you there.”

Thelma doesn’t reply, and Rudi mutters, “*Oy vey*.” Though she keeps staring at the woman. A woman who keeps fascinating her.

Rudi’s fascinated by her once again that night in the mission. She spots her eating alone at a table, and she gets some food for herself and brings the tray over to the woman, and she asks, “You mind if I join you?”

Thelma glares at her, but Rudi sits across from her anyway. Which causes Thelma to drop her utensils onto her tray, and with lots of exasperation she utters, “Why?”

“Why what?” Rudi utters back.

"I'm no lesbian, if that's your game."

Rudi chuckles at this. She also says, "They tell me you're a lost cause."

"They're right," Thelma says back.

"Maybe I like lost causes."

"Well, I don't."

With lots of fury, Thelma jumps out of her seat, and she struts off with her tray, causing Rudi to sigh and lower her eyes. Which Jeannine stares at as she sits next to her.

"I see you ain't giving up," Jeannine utters.

"Perhaps some of your faith is rubbing off on me," Rudi replies, while lifting her eyes toward her boss.

"Careful, because once it rubs on you it's not so easy to rub it off."

"I'll take that under advisement. Tell me, what do you know about her?"

"Thelma? Not much. She showed up about a year ago. No friends, no nothing. It took me months just to get her name."

"Do you ever wonder about these people. I mean, really wonder?"

"About what?"

"About their stories. About how they got here and what they were before. Do you ever wonder who they really are?"

"Sometimes. But what about your story?"

"My story?"

"You and that hunky dishwasher. Now that's an interesting story."

"There's no story," Rudi insists, though she blushes a bit.

"Uh-huh," Jeannine mutters, with a knowing nod.

“I’m actually still in mourning.”

“You’re kidding — at your age?”

Rudi’s only response is to avert her eyes.

“So that’s who Tommy is,” Jeannine goes on, while pointing at the name stitched into Rudi’s jacket. “What happened?”

“It’s a long story,” Rudi tells her.

“You wanna talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“All right. But if you change your mind . . .”

“What about your story?” Rudi asks, after unaverting her eyes.

“My story?” Jeannine asks back.

“You married? Or have a boyfriend?”

“The Lord hasn’t led me to the right man just yet. Or him to me. But it’ll happen.”

“You’re sure of it?”

“As sure as I am of the sun rising tomorrow.”

Chapter 41

Rudi struts into the mission's kitchen, and she sees Jared washing dishes.

"Need a drier?" she calls out, with a big smile on her face.

"And how!" he calls back, with an even bigger smile.

In no time she's standing next to him, and they begin their nightly ritual of slowly passing dinnerware, with their faces expressing all the joy that comes from it.

In the past month and a half, the two have become close friends, and they spend lots of time with each other, even outside of the mission. They often eat their meals together at school, they study together, and they go to NA together, and they usually do these things under the surprised gaze of fellow students, who can't understand why a Jewish punk girl from New York would hang out with an evangelical Christian from the South.

With these gazes frequently comes snickering, too, especially from Vicki. Not that the two care. To Rudi, Jared is just about the perfect person. He's open-minded and smart and warmhearted. While to Jared, Rudi is the best friend he could imagine. He can be himself with her, and he feels free whenever she's near.

He also has feelings for Rudi that go beyond friendship, especially as — even before he met her — he desperately wanted to love and be loved. However, despite believing she feels the same — and despite their near kiss — there’s always something separating them — something he guessed upon when they left the Metro station after their first evening in the mission together. He has always avoided bringing it up, but right then, as they touch and touch by the sink, he decides he can no longer hold back.

So, upon returning to campus, he suggests they go to a nearby park — something they often do to get away from the crudeness of the Zoo and all the temptations there. They then sit on a bench and Jared takes a long deep breath before saying, “Can I ask you something?”

“What?” she says back.

“If it’s too personal . . .”

“Jared.”

“Are you married?”

“Did someone tell you?” Rudi asks, with lots of surprise.

“Your ring,” he says, while pointing at it. “I wasn’t sure, but when I was in Israel I saw women wearing their wedding rings on that finger. And, of course, there’s the name on your jacket.”

“I’m sorry.”

“About what?”

“I should have told you about him.”

“I should have asked.”

“The truth is, the truth is I’m not married. Officially, I never was.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I have all night.”

Rudi doesn’t reply.

“Please,” he softly pleads. “I want to know.”

“Well,” she says, with her eyes drifting toward the stars, “it all started when I was in jail . . .”

Rudi proceeds to tell Jared everything. She tells him her whole story, even though she’s not too sure how he’ll respond to it, especially the parts about Tommy having AIDS and their living together before they were married.

Afterward, he doesn’t say a word. So she looks down from the stars and she turns to him, and she sees that his face is full of tears. Which causes her to tear up a little herself.

“You all right?” she mumbles.

“That was the most beautiful story I’ve ever heard,” he tells her, while unable to stop crying. “I’ll remember it till the end of time.”

With a bit of a smile, she takes his hand, and she leans her head against his strong shoulder.

“But never again say that you weren’t officially married,” he insists. “Your marriage was as official as any there ever was or will ever be. And it didn’t just last ten minutes. It didn’t. You’ll be married forever and ever.”

Jared’s words make Rudi cry. She cries as hard as he does, and her face still shows remnants of these tears when she steps inside her dorm room late that night. It’s then she sees that she and Jared haven’t been the only ones crying, as lying on her bed is Sandra with a face that is still wet.

In the period Rudi has grown closer to Jared, she has also grown apart from her roommates, to the extent that she really hasn't been paying attention to their increasing problems or to Maria's increasingly erratic behavior. But she now knows that she can no longer avoid it.

"Where's Maria?" Rudi asks, after checking her alarm clock and noticing that it's well past one.

"Out," Sandra growls.

"Out where?"

"I don't know. And I don't care!"

Rudi responds to this by making her way to Sandra, and she sits on her bed before murmuring, "I don't believe that for a second."

"Every night," Sandra utters. "Every night she gets fucked up. I've tried talking to her about it, like you said, but . . ."

"Maybe you need to try harder."

"I can't. I'm afraid. I'm afraid I'll push her away for good."

"I know."

"No, you don't. I'm sorry, but you don't. I can't lose her. I just can't. There's no one else out there for me but her."

"You want me to talk to her?" Rudi asks.

"Could you?" Sandra blurts out, with just a bit of hope in her voice.

"I just don't know if she'll listen to me, either. We haven't exactly been bosom buddies the last couple of months."

"But she loves you."

"She loves you, too."

“But she worships you.”

“No,” Rudi mutters, with a shake of her head.

“She does,” Sandra insists. “You’re her hero. She’s told me so.”

Rudi doesn’t know what to say to this, so she just sighs.

“Do you think she’s an alcoholic?” Sandra goes on.

“I don’t know,” Rudi answers. “I really don’t know what her problem is, but I’m gonna find out.”

Chapter 42

In an alley next to a cheap Chinese restaurant Thelma secures both her shopping cart and herself behind a dumpster. She also grabs a worn but heavy blanket from the cart, and she sits on a bed composed of stacks of old newspapers before covering herself with the blanket.

For many minutes she just sits there looking bitter, much like she usually does. Though she then reaches under her many layers of clothing and takes out a small silver locket from around her neck, which she stares at before hesitantly opening it.

Inside this locket is an old black and white picture. A picture of a smiling baby girl. Which causes Thelma's bitter expression to melt away, making her look like an entirely different woman, and she changes even more when she starts crying.

Chapter 43

Rudi stays up late waiting for Maria to come home, but she never comes home at all. So she gets Maria's class schedule from Sandra and goes to all her classrooms that day, both before and after. What's more, not only does she skip large parts of her own classes but she skips work, too.

But there's no sign of Maria anywhere, and feeling a little desperate she goes to the Sigma Nu house, where sitting on the front stoop are Dennis, Johnny, and Rich, who are all drinking beer out of plastic cups.

Seeing Rudi approach, Dennis looks at her warmly — something she notices but tries to ignore as she stops in front of them.

"Hi," she utters.

"Hi," they utter back, more or less in unison.

"I'm looking for Maria," Rudi goes on, while trying to conceal her fright. "You guys haven't seen her, have you?"

It's then Chuck exits the house, looking even more frightened than Rudi, and he says to

her: “You worried about her, too?”

“None of you have seen her at all?” Rudi pleads.

“I saw her a couple of nights back,” Rich says, “at the Black Rooster. She was pretty messed up. We tried putting her into a cab, but . . .”

“If you see her again, could you call me?”

“Sure.”

“Maybe, maybe you can ask the other guys, too.”

“We will,” Dennis tells her, with a seriousness that surprises her. It surprises her almost as much as the concern everyone there clearly feels for Maria.

Chapter 44

Early in the morning Sandra shakes Rudi awake.

“What’s wrong?” Rudi mumbles. “Did you find her?”

Sandra replies by pointing at Maria, who’s passed out on the empty bed in her clothes, with both her arms and legs sprawled out.

“When did she get in?” Rudi whispers.

“I don’t know,” Sandra whispers back. “I tried to wake her — she’s got a midterm later this morning. But . . .”

“It’s okay. Why don’t you take off.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

Sandra afterward starts out. Though she can’t help glance at Maria one last time before leaving. Which is when, with a loud sigh, Rudi rises off her bed and marches up to Maria. She further shakes her. She shakes her even harder than she herself had been shook, and she keeps shaking her while calling out her name.

“Leave me alone,” Maria growls, with her eyes still shut.

“Sorry,” Rudi growls back, “but that hasn’t worked.”

Rudi then picks Maria up in her arms, and she carries her toward the bathroom — something that causes Maria to finally open her eyes.

“What are you doing?” she howls.

“It’s called an intervention,” Rudi answers.

“Let me go!”

But Rudi doesn’t listen. Instead, she kicks in the door and brings Maria over to the tub.

“Let me go!” Maria screams.

“Will do,” Rudi tells her, before dropping her into the tub. Which is just before she turns the shower on full blast, and on full cold.

With lots of agony, Maria cries out. She’s feeling so much agony that her mind can’t even form words. Though finally she yells, “What the fuck are you doing?”

“What the fuck are *you* doing?” Rudi yells back.

Maria doesn’t reply. She instead tries to stand up. But Rudi just pushes her back into the tub.

“You have to stop this,” Rudi insists.

“Stop what?” Maria screeches.

“Your fucking drinking!”

“Fuck you!”

“You’re hurting everyone around you, especially Sandra. She loves you, you dumb bitch!”

“Fuck her, and fuck you, too!”

“Just tell me why?” Rudi asks, with her voice suddenly calm.

“Why what?” Maria asks back, with her voice anything but calm.

“Why are you drinking so much?”

“I can drink if I want to! I’m not a fucking addict like you!”

“That’s right — you’re not. So why? Why are you doing this?”

Maria doesn’t reply. She just stews there, with the water drenching her.

“Please, tell me,” Rudi pleads. “Sandra is not the only one who loves you. I love you, too.”

Slowly, Maria begins to break down, and once this process is complete, she lowers her head and mumbles, “I . . . I just want to be normal.”

“*Normal?*” Rudi gasps. “You’re the most normal person I know!”

“I want to be like everyone else!”

“Fuck everyone else! Everyone else sucks!”

Right then, Maria starts to cry, and she looks up at her friend and mutters, “I, I want to be like you.”

Rudi responds to this by falling to her knees, and she hugs Maria, quickly becoming as wet as her.

“I thought it would be so easy,” Maria shrieks, as she weeps on Rudi’s shoulder. “I thought it’d be easy once I came out and went to college. But it’s worse now. It’s so worse!”

“What do you mean?” Rudi asks.

“Everyone hates me.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is! You don’t see the dirty looks. You don’t hear the snickering and the jokes. I see

and hear this fucking everywhere!”

“Is this about Vicki? I swear I’ll kill — ”

“— It’s about everyone! I’m so alone here. Do you know there’s something like ten thousand undergraduates at this school, and yet — besides Sandra and me — there are only four fucking people in the Gay & Lesbian Student Alliance. Four!”

“I still don’t understand why you’re drinking so much.”

“When I drink, I don’t hear anything. I don’t see anything. I’m no longer alone. I’m just like everyone else.”

Angrily, Rudi removes her arms from around her friend, and she looks into Maria’s eyes and tells her: “You’re better than those assholes.”

“No,” Maria insists, with a shake of her head. “I’m not. I’m not better than anything. I’m a freak.”

“That’s Vicki talking! She’s the freak — not you!”

“No.”

“You’re not a freak. And not everyone hates you. Those Sigma Nu guys like you.”

“They, they’re just hoping to see Sandra and me kiss.”

“They’re worried about you, Maria. I saw it in their eyes yesterday. You were right about them. I was wrong.”

Again, Maria shakes her head. She shakes it over and over.

“You know,” Rudi goes on, “there’s this Sex Pistols album called *Never Mind the Bollocks*. The title basically means ‘ignore the bullshit.’”

“So?” Maria utters.

“So whenever some asshole makes you feel worthless or mad, just tell yourself this again

and again: never mind the bollocks!”

Rudi then grabs Maria’s face with both hands and she screams, “Say it with me!”

But Maria won’t do it.

“Say it!” Rudi demands. “Fucking say it!”

“Never mind the bollocks!” Maria yells.

The two afterward repeat this again and again before clutching each other in an embrace so warm that neither cares about the freezing water falling upon them.

This embrace continues until the phone rings. Thinking it’s Sandra, Rudi rushes out of the bathroom, and while drying her hair with a towel she rushes to the device and grabs it. She further utters, “Hello?”

“Hi, is, is this Rudi?” says a familiar voice.

“Yeah.”

“It’s me, Dennis.”

“Oh, hi.”

“I just wanted you to know that a couple of guys saw Maria last night at Odds. Maybe she’ll be there again tonight.”

“It’s all right. She’s fine. She’s gonna be just fine.”

“That’s great. Tell her, tell her we care.”

“She knows.”

“Well, I, I’ll let you go.”

“Dennis?”

“What?”

“Thanks.”

“I didn’t do anything really.”

“I think I owe you a dinner.”

“Nah.”

“You mentioned something about a pizza place in Georgetown.”

“You remembered,” he mutters, and she could almost see his smile.

“I remember,” she mutters back, with her very own smile.

Chapter 45

Rudi leaves her Linear Algebra class, and she approaches the Marvin Center, where she sees lots of people congregating outside the building and two limousines parked nearby.

It's then the back door of one of the vehicles opens, and a smiling Walter Mondale steps out and waves to the mostly supportive crowd. Though not far away a small group of protesters representing the Young Americans for Freedom start waving signs while chanting, "Mondale, go home!"

Rudi wants to ignore this, as she needs to get to work and doesn't like Mondale any more than she likes Reagan. Still, she feels there's something wrong about attacking a guy down 20 points in the polls with less than two weeks before the election. So, while Mondale slowly makes his way through his fans, Rudi strides beside a handful of people who are heckling the hecklers, and she sees that one of these hecklers is Vicki.

This angers Rudi for many reasons — foremost because Vicki's lifestyle is far from conservative. But she's also angered because she truly believes Vicki has been Maria's prime tormentor, and this anger comes out.

“Hey, Vicki!” she shouts. “Aren’t you afraid Reagan will ban abortion?”

Vicki doesn’t respond. She just keeps shouting at Mondale and waving her sign.

“Man,” Rudi goes on, “you’d have more kids than that old woman in the shoe!”

“You only wish you’d need an abortion!” Vicki yells, after turning to Rudi. “A guy would have to be deaf, dumb, and blind!”

“Funny, Dennis isn’t any of those things. Maybe that’s why he’s going out with me this weekend and not you!”

These words cause Vicki to spin away from Rudi, and she returns to her anti-Mondale chants.

“People like you,” Rudi hollers, “you’re always trying to hurt others. It’s because you’re such filth — you lash out at anything that’s good. Well, why don’t you do the whole fucking world a favor and drop dead!”

Vicki shrieks in response, and with a face full of fury she again turns toward Rudi, and she tries to slam her sign onto Rudi’s head, and she’s only stopped when some of her friends grab her and drag her away while trying to calm her.

Watching this, Rudi is perplexed. She really doesn’t think she said anything to garner such a violent reaction, and she wonders whether she crossed some line she can’t even see. Then, as she makes her way to work — no matter how many times she tells herself that Vicki deserved every word spoken to her that day — she can’t help feel guilty. Which only gets stronger and stronger.

Chapter 46

Rudi brings her tray of food over to where Thelma is again eating by herself in the mission.

“Is this seat free?” Rudi asks.

Thelma sighs in reply.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Rudi says, before sitting across from the woman.

“Why won’t you leave me alone?” Thelma demands.

“I’m stubborn,” Rudi tells her, with a little grin.

“*Oy vey*,” the woman mutters.

“What did you just say?” Rudi mutters back, unable to hide her surprise.

“It’s a Yiddish expression,” Thelma tells her, with lots of exasperation.

“I know,” Rudi utters, while showing the woman her Chai pendant.

“So you’re one of them. Figures.”

“And you?”

“I ain’t nothing.”

“Yiddish expressions just roll off your tongue for no reason.”

“I picked it up somewhere.”

“Yeah, me, too. I wonder where?”

Right then, Rudi really does wonder. She wonders if the two aren’t just random strangers.

“Pass the salt,” Thelma barks.

“Pass the salt, what?” Rudi barks back, while picking up the small white canister.

Thelma sighs again, and she glares at Rudi. She also growls, “Pass the salt, *Gertrude*.”

Rudi smiles at this, and Thelma can’t help smile back just a little. Which makes Rudi smile even more, and nothing can make this go away.

She’s still smiling later on when she backs into the kitchen with a stack of trays while calling out, “Hey!”

With some surprise, the middle-aged man doing the dishes turns to Rudi, which causes her lots of surprise.

“Where, where’s Jared?” she mumbles.

“He had a problem with his roommate,” the man says.

“What kind of problem?”

“I don’t know.”

Chapter 47

Rudi returns home, and she hustles over to Jared's door, from which she can hear the sounds of the Grateful Dead.

She thinks right then about knocking, but she doesn't for a number of reasons. First, she isn't sure if he's busy or even awake. But she also has never been inside his room before or has even stood in his doorway. He's never offered and she's never said anything about it, thinking it might be something his religion doesn't allow.

So while telling herself she could ask Jared about his roommate the following day, she goes inside her room, where she hears the soft sounds of her roommates making love behind the curtained alcove.

She smiles at this, happy her two friends have made up and are more in love than ever. She further takes off Tommy's jacket and sits on her bed while trying to mask her feelings of envy, and her desire to be making love to someone, too.

With this in mind, she takes out her Walkman and listens to "Moonlight Serenade," and she feels all kinds of happiness wash over her. But these feelings don't last long, as they're

interrupted by sounds coming from Vicki's room. Sounds that aren't soft at all. If anything they're harsher and louder than normal, as there are two guys with Vicki that night. Even worse, Rudi can tell exactly who they are: Brad and Pete. Which disgusts her, as she can't imagine anything more disgusting than those three together. It disgusts her so much that she jacks the volume of her Walkman all the way up. But this does nothing to mask the noise. Nor does putting a pillow over her head. Or even putting two.

The noise gets so bad that she jumps out of bed and rushes into the hallway, where she can hear "In the Court of the Crimson King" coming from Jared's room. She also now knows that he's likely awake, and forgetting anything that could stop her from approaching him, she closes her door and gently knocks on his.

There's no answer, even after she knocks again, this time a little louder. So with a bit of a sigh she turns around and slithers back to the torture waiting for her in her room. She does this just as Jared's door opens, and she spins toward it, seeing not only Jared standing there in gray sweats but also odd red light coming from inside his room.

"Hi," he whispers to her, with a little smile.

"Hi, yourself," she whispers back, with her own little smile, while realizing at this moment just how much he means to her — how he has the magical ability to make all her problems disappear.

"You all right?" he goes on.

"I was gonna ask you that."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone at the mission said you had a problem with your roommate."

"Come in," he tells her, while waving her into his room.

“You sure?” she tells him back.

His reply is another of his smiles, which drives her past his door, and she at once notices the source of the red light: a lava lamp on the bureau. She also notices Jared’s roommate lying face-first on his bed.

“What’s wrong with him?” she murmurs, while pointing at the boy.

Jared responds by quietly closing the door behind himself, and he says, “He drank a fifth of vodka.”

“A fifth? You sure he’s still alive?”

“He’s fine. I’ve been keeping an eye on him.”

“Even though he doesn’t like you?”

“What does that have to do with it?”

Warmly, Rudi looks into Jared’s eyes while recognizing how the platitudes of his faith aren’t just platitudes to him. He not only believes them but lives them, too.

“You want me to turn the music off?” Jared asks.

“Why?” she asks back.

“I’m guessing this isn’t your thing.”

“I like it, actually. My stepdad has this record.”

“Reverend Samson let me borrow it. He has like every record from the sixties.”

“He’s pretty cool.”

“You wanna sit down?”

“Where?” Rudi says, after seeing that the two chairs in the room are covered in clothes and just about everything else, and Jared points to his bed.

“You don’t mind?” she utters, unable to hide her surprise.

“Why would I mind?” he utters back.

She smiles at this and sits on his bed, and he joins her. Then, not knowing what else to do, she glances around the room, and she sees hanging on the wall by the bed a small crucifix made from tree branches, which is held together with an old piece of rope.

“So that’s it,” she mutters, while pointing at it.

“What?” he asks.

“The cross,” she tells him, right before he reaches up and takes it down while staring at it a bit numbly.

“From the way everyone was describing it,” Rudi says, “I thought it was the one from Golgotha.”

Jared chuckles at this, and he mumbles, “Not quite.”

“Something tells me there’s a story behind it.”

“A long one.”

“I have all night.”

“You wouldn’t be interested.”

“Like you weren’t interested in my story?”

“My story involves faith.”

“I don’t mind.”

“As you probably have noticed, I don’t preach — not to anyone — not even to you. I don’t like it. I didn’t like it when it was done to me, and I don’t like doing it to others. It’s very personal to me, my relationship with God.”

“I’d still like to hear the story. Please.”

“I, I can still remember the night,” Jared begins, with a blank gaze. “I can even see the

rain.” He then points at his roommate and adds, “I was even worse than him. Much worse. I ODed, I think. I’m not really sure. All I know is that I was laid out by a road somewhere and couldn’t move. And the rain — it kept coming down, harder and harder. I thought it was gonna drown me, and I really hoped it would. I hoped and hoped.”

Suddenly, Jared falls apart a little, and Rudi caresses his thigh, which helps keep him together.

“The next thing I knew,” he continues, “I was in a mission not far from the bus station where me and my friends hung out. And the people there — they were taking care of me. Which I couldn’t believe, because I hated these people. Man, did I hate them. We all hated them, my friends and I. We used to mock and curse them all the time when they came by. We even stole from them and vandalized their place, and the strangest part is that they always knew it was us, but they never did anything about it. And now, now they were actually helping me. Or at least trying to help me.”

Jared now pauses, and he places the cross down on the bed before looking up at Rudi and telling her: “I say ‘try,’ because I wanted nothing to do with them. Like I told you, I hated being preached. All the endless patter about damnation and hellfire. I’ve heard it ever since I was a kid. And even then I knew it was bullshit. But the thing is, the thing is the people in this mission, they didn’t preach a word to me. Not one. Perhaps they knew it wouldn’t work. Instead, they healed me. They healed me even when I was spitting obscenities at them. Then, then they waited. They waited for faith to come to me. Which is really the only way it can.”

“Did it?” Rudi asks, even though she knows the answer.

“Well, there was no ‘on the road to Damascus’ moment, or anything like that. Even today I struggle with faith. I struggle all the time. There hasn’t been one day that I haven’t wanted to

go back to that bus station. I want the junk so badly, Rudi. I want it right now. It owns me, and I like it. I fucking like it.”

Understanding Jared all too well, Rudi takes his arm, and she grips it tightly. Which is when he picks up the cross again and tells her: “I made this when I was strung out. Which wasn’t so easy with my hands shaking so much. But I did it somehow. I say only by the grace of God, and I don’t care what anyone else thinks, not even you. And whenever the badness comes, like it’s coming right now, I clutch this.”

Rudi right then clutches Jared, and he clutches her back, and they cradle each other.

“A pillow,” she mumbles.

“What?” he mumbles back.

“I use a pillow. That’s what I clutch.”

“See, we’re not that different.”

“We’re not different at all. I’ve never met anyone less different.”

She says this and the two lean back, and they look into each other’s eyes, and much like in the hallway after their first evening in the mission, they move toward one another. Then, just like in the hallway, when their lips are only a fraction apart, they close their eyes in anticipation of what’s to come. Only this time they kiss.

But the kiss is limp and weak, and without passion, for either of them, and they soon break apart, with both of them looking embarrassed.

“Sorry,” Rudi whispers.

“I guess,” he whispers back, while trying to hide his disappointment, “I guess we’ll just have to remain friends. That’s not such a bad thing.”

“I’m so sorry,” Rudi utters, before turning from him and lowering her head.

He responds to this, by gently placing his fingers under her chin, and he lifts her head and points it toward him while telling her: “Don’t ever be sorry for how you feel.”

“You want me to go?” she mutters.

“Why would I want you to go?”

“Do you?”

“Do you want to go?”

“No,” she answers, while shaking her head in a near incessant manner. Which causes him to smile, and it causes her to ask, “Can I stay tonight?”

“You can stay for as long as you want,” he says, with his smile still on his face, and she forces a smile before falling back onto his bed. Which is just before she turns on her side away from him, with sad and hopeless eyes.

Seeing this, he lays his frame next to hers, and he wraps his strong arm around her body. She in turn wraps her hands around this arm, and she says to him: “I want you to know something. I want you to know that if I could love anyone else, it would be you.”

It’s then he kisses her. He gives her a gentle kiss on the cheek, which sends her drifting off to a wonderfully peaceful sleep. A sleep he soon shares.

But their sleep is quickly broken, by loud screaming. A woman’s screaming.

Thinking it’s Maria, Rudi pushes Jared’s arm away and jumps to her feet, and she runs into the hallway, where she discovers that the screaming isn’t coming from her room but from the one next door. Vicki’s.

Apprehensively, she steps toward her neighbor’s room, with the screaming only getting louder and more frantic. At the same time, a bunch of doors around her fly open, followed by the peeking of heads, including two belonging to her roommates.

It doesn't take long before Rudi reaches Vicki's room, and she hesitantly reaches for the doorknob, which she even more hesitantly turns and finds unlocked. She further opens the door, exposing a horror that shocks even her, as standing a short distance away in front of the closet mirror is a hysterical and naked Vicki, who's got "SLUT" painted all over her back with red nail polish. It's so shocking to Rudi that she can't move. She just stands there with her mouth agape. She stands there until she hears Jared gasp, "Oh, my God."

Right away, she turns to him, and she slams the door behind them before rushing up to Vicki. Then, while forgetting just how much she hates the girl, she grabs her and drags her to her bed, where she covers her with a blanket while trying to calm her. But Vicki, who's both drunk and drugged, won't stop shrieking and flailing her arms and legs, and Rudi can barely control her.

"Nail polish remover!" Rudi yells at Jared, who's still standing by the door in shock, still unable to process what his eyes have seen.

"Jared!" Rudi hollers.

"What?" he mumbles.

"Nail polish remover!" she repeats. "There must be some in the bathroom!"

Jared nods his head, but he doesn't budge.

"Now!" Rudi screeches.

Finally, Jared comes out of his shock, and he sprints into the bathroom, and he fumbles around the sink. But he can't find what he's looking for, so he looks in the medicine cabinet.

But there's no nail polish remover. All he sees is a large array of prescription pill bottles. An array way too large for such a young person. It's so large that he picks up the closest bottle, which is labeled "Ondansetron" — something he stares at with a puzzled expression, as it seems familiar.

“What are you fucking doing?” Rudi screams, over Vicki’s continuing cries.

“I’m looking!” he screams back, before putting back the pill bottle. He afterward looks in the cabinet under the sink and finds a large circular box, which he opens, and he sees something even more peculiar than the drugs: the head of a mannequin.

“Come on, Jared!” Rudi pleads.

Jared responds by returning the box, and he continues to look in the cabinet. Eventually, he finds some nail polish remover, and he calls out, “I’ve got it!”

“And bring a washcloth,” Rudi shouts — “a damp one!”

At once, Jared grabs a small towel from the sink, and he dampens it and takes it and the nail polish remover and runs into the main room, where Rudi is still struggling with Vicki.

“Leave me alone!” Vicki hollers, while shaking all over, with tears pouring down her heavily made-up face.

“I’m trying to help you!” Rudi hollers back, just as Jared comes up to her.

“No!” Vicki shrieks. “I don’t want it!”

Ignoring this, Rudi pushes the girl onto the bed face-first and straddles her waist, before taking what Jared has brought. Though at the same time Vicki bucks, almost knocking Rudi onto the floor.

“Hold her arms down!” Rudi orders Jared, and he falls to his knees and grabs Vicki’s elbows, and he has to hold them with all his strength.

It’s then Rudi removes the blanket from Vicki, and she empties some nail polish remover onto the towel, and she scrubs the vileness off her. But this does nothing to calm Vicki, who’s even more hysterical than before, especially as she now understands who’s helping her — the two people she wants help from the least.

“Stop!” she screams. “Get out of here! Both of you!”

“You idiot!” Rudi screams back, as she continues scrubbing. “I’m getting it off you!”

“Just leave me alone. I . . . I deserve it. I fucking deserve it.”

“No,” Jared quietly howls, with his face just inches from Vicki’s. “You didn’t deserve this. Nobody deserves this. Nobody.”

His words calm Vicki a little, and she looks at him, and when she’s finally able to focus her eyes she slurs, “Aren’t you gonna say it?”

“Say what?” he asks.

“You know.”

“I don’t.”

“‘Repent! Repent!’ Isn’t that what you people always say?”

Jared smiles a bit at this, recognizing something in her. He recognizes himself, and he murmurs, “I think you’ve seen *Elmer Gantry* once too often.”

With lots of confusion, Vicki turns to Rudi, and she asks, “Who’s Elmer Gantry?”

The question makes Rudi grin. She also grins at Jared while saying, “Not him. That’s for sure.”

But Rudi’s grin doesn’t last long, as she hears through the walls the sound of Brad and Pete cackling in the next room, and this causes a violent rage to rise inside her, which quickly overwhelms her. It overwhelms her so much that she stops scrubbing and jumps off the bed, and she marches toward the door.

“What’s wrong?” Jared asks, frightened by her anger.

“I’ll be right back,” Rudi tells him, just as she thrust open the door.

“Where you going?”

“Just stay with her!”

“*Rudi.*”

But Rudi doesn't listen. She instead storms into the hallway, slamming the door behind herself — watched by all the peeking heads, including those of her roommates.

Not paying attention to any of them, she hustles up to the room on the other side of Vicki's, where the two boys are still cackling. She further bangs her mighty fists onto the door while howling, “Open up! Open the fuck up!”

Right away, the cackling inside the room comes to a halt, and the door opens just a bit.

“What do you want?” Brad growls.

Rudi answers by smashing her hands into the door, not only knocking Brad backward off his feet but also causing the door to swing open, and she bursts into the room, before slamming the door closed.

Quickly, Brad regains his footing, and while trying to hide his fear he once again growls, “What do you want?”

“I know what you did to her,” Rudi tells him, while pointing toward Vicki's room.

“Yeah?” Brad says. “So?”

“So why don't you try that with me?” she murmurs, before motioning him toward her with her finger.

Brad smirks at this, and he smirks at his roommate, too. He then stumbles toward Rudi while saying to her: “Let's see how tough you really are.”

Soon, he's in front of Rudi, who slams the heel of her palm into his nose, sending him backward onto the floor screaming in pain, where he holds his bleeding face while howling, “You broke my fucking nose!”

“You psycho!” Pete screams, while rushing at Rudi. He further throws a feeble roundhouse punch at her, which she easily blocks. In the same motion, she grabs his arm and snaps it behind his back, making a loud cracking sound, which is followed by an even louder cry. Which is just before she flings the boy into the corner of a desk, causing him even more hurt as he collapses onto the floor.

“You broke my fucking nose!” Brad whimpers, as he squirms on the floor.

Still fuming, Rudi steps up to the boy, and she whispers, “Listen, you two, and listen carefully: if I hear one word of what you did to that girl tonight — *one fucking word* — I’m gonna break all your fucking teeth. Both of you! Do you understand me?”

Neither of them reply, so Rudi leans toward Brad’s face and howls, “Do you understand?”

“Fuck you!” Brad howls back, and Rudi kicks him as hard as she can in the gut, causing him to gasp both in pain and shortage of air.

“Do you fucking understand?” she screams, while shaking all over.

“All right,” Brad mumbles, as soon as he can speak again. “All right. Just leave me alone. Please.”

Rudi complies, and she takes a look at Pete, who’s softly crying by the desk while holding his broken arm. She afterward storms out of the room, doing so even more violently than she had stormed into it. She also slams the door once more, and she again sees all the peeking heads, who are looking at her in shock.

“Go back to your rooms!” she commands, which is followed at once. At least by everyone other than her roommates. “You, too!” she screams at them, while threateningly pointing her finger.

Quickly, they obey, and Rudi reenters Vicki's room, where she ignores Jared's shock and continues her scrubbing. Though this time much harder than before.

"What did you do to them, Rudi?" Jared murmurs.

Rudi doesn't reply. She just keeps scrubbing.

"*Rudi*," he pleads.

"We just had a nice little chat," Rudi insists, through her clenched teeth.

"You should've just —"

"— Don't tell me what to do!" Rudi hollers, looking as if she's about to literally explode. "I'm sick of everything here! I see such terrible things every day! Every fucking day! People are such shit! All of them!"

"No," he tells her, before gently taking her hand. "Not all of them."

Before this moment, Rudi didn't think anything would ever calm her again, but just as Jared's words calmed Vicki, they calm her, too.

Soon, she finishes removing the nail polish, and without saying anything she jumps off the bed and returns to her room.

Right then, Jared isn't sure what to do, so he mumbles to Vicki: "Are you gonna be okay?"

She nods her head. She does this without looking at him, and he reluctantly releases her and stands up, and he makes his way to the door. Though when he gets there, he can't help turn back to Vicki, and she sees her silently crying, which reminds him of his own despair.

So it takes all his strength to walk out the door.

Chapter 48

Jared is eating breakfast by himself in the cafeteria when a young woman walks up to him carrying a tray of food. A woman he doesn't recognize.

This is because it's the first time he's seen Vicki without makeup or flashy clothes, or with her hair tied back.

"Oh, hi," he mutters, once he realizes who she is.

"Hi," she mutters back, with melancholy that's out-of-character for her. There's then a brief pause, after which she adds, "Where's Rudi? I usually see you guys eating together."

"She has an early class today."

"Oh."

Once again, there's a pause, which is broken when he asks, "You wanna join me?"

Vicki doesn't respond in words. She just sits across from him, and with both of them looking at each other uneasily she utters, "I'm not as bad as you think."

"I'm not as good as you think," he utters back.

She nods, rather unconvincingly, and the two start nibbling their food while continuing

their uneasy staring.

“So . . .” she eventually says, after dropping her knife and fork.

“So?” he says back, before putting his utensils down, too.

“Aren’t you gonna tell me how I can save myself?”

“No one can tell you that. And anyone who professes they can is a liar.”

“You mean, you don’t have any pamphlets?”

“Pamphlets?”

“Or Bible passages?” she tells him, while pointing to the dog-eared book next to his tray.

“I wish there was some magic I could give you,” he tells her back. “I really do. I’d take it myself. But there just isn’t.”

“Then what’s the Bible for?”

“It can only reinforce what you already believe. It can’t change what you don’t.”

“Then, then how do I save myself?”

“With me, the first step was accepting who I am.”

“What if I don’t like who I am?”

“That’s the second step.”

The two then finish breakfast, and as they’re going in the same direction they go there together. They do this slowly and unsurely and silently, looking straight ahead with the same uneasy expressions they had in the cafeteria.

Jared can now sense that there really is something underneath Vicki’s veneer. There’s something decent and vulnerable and kind. Also, much like the night before, he sees a lot of himself in her, and he strangely finds her attractive, even if he tries to convince himself that this isn’t what he’s thinking.

At the same time, Vicki isn't sure what to think about Jared, and this scares her a little, because men are something she's always been certain of. From the moment she hit puberty she's known what they were about and what they wanted, and she's used this for her own benefit. But Jared doesn't eye her like others do, and even though she purposely made herself as unattractive as possible that morning he hasn't shied away from her, either. He even seems interested in her, just as he seemed the night before when she saw his warm protective eyes and heard his sweet calming voice. The oddest part of it all is that there seems to be no stratagem behind this interest, just as there seemed to be no stratagem behind his help the previous night. He clearly isn't trying to bed her, and just as clearly he isn't after her soul.

So what is his interest? she keeps asking herself, and she has no answer, so she just gives up and says, "What's your major?"

"I'm pre-med," he tells her.

"You know, I've never actually met anyone here who was pre-med. Though I do know some people who are pre-wed."

Jared chuckles a bit at this, and he says to her: "And you?"

"Definitely not me," she tells him, with an emphatic shake of her head. "That's the very last thing I'll ever be."

"I mean, what's your major?"

"I don't have one. There's not much point."

"Why?"

"It, it's not important."

Ondansetron.

Right away, the image of the pill bottle in Vicki's medicine cabinet pops into Jared's

head, and it won't pop out. So he tries to remember where he heard about this drug and what its purpose is. But nothing comes to him, and he tells himself that it probably isn't anything special. He tells himself that people take all sorts of drugs for the simplest of conditions.

"Can I ask you something?" Vicki says.

"Sure," Jared says back, with the image of the pill bottle finally leaving his head.

"I can't understand why Rudi did what she did last night."

"If you understood Rudi, you'd understand why. You'd understand that she couldn't've done anything else."

"So, so you guys are . . ."

"We're friends. Good friends."

"Are you even allowed to have girlfriends?"

"Sure," he says with a bit of a grin. "It's encouraged, in fact."

"It is?" Vicki utters, with some surprise.

"Without love the world can't continue."

Right then Vicki comes to a stop in front of a building, and Jared stops with her, and while pointing toward the entrance she says to him: "This is me."

"Oh," Jared says to her back, with an expression indicating that he's a little disappointed that their time together is at an end.

"So maybe I'll see you later," she utters.

"Like at breakfast," he utters back.

"Sure."

She says this and hesitates for a few moments, before walking off.

"Hey," he calls out, and she comes to a quick stop and spins toward him, unable to hide

the hope on her face.

“If you’re not busy tonight,” he goes on, “Rudi and I will be studying at the library.”

“Where?” she asks.

“In the third-floor lounge. At about eight.”

“Oh. You know, I really don’t know.”

“Yeah, I forgot, it’s Friday. You must . . .”

“Actually, I was gonna take it easy tonight.”

“I totally understand. Perhaps some other time.”

“Maybe I’ll be there.”

“All right.”

“All right.”

Quickly, Vicki turns around, and she skips to the door with just a hint of a smile on her face. A smile Jared shares.

Chapter 49

Vicki steps inside her Art History class, and she sees Rudi sitting in her usual spot in the back. Then, while taking a deep breath, she slides up to her and utters, “Hi.”

Rudi responds by turning her head and looking at Vicki, and much like Jared she doesn’t quite recognize her.

“Can I sit down?” Vicki adds, and Rudi finally realizes who she is, and she shrugs and returns her eyes up front while Vicki sits next to her.

“I saw Brad and Pete earlier in the hallway,” Vicki mumbles.

“Yeah?” Rudi tells her, with lots of disinterest.

“They looked pretty messed up.”

“Accidents happen, especially when you’re careless.”

“They were so frightened that they wouldn’t even look me in the eyes.”

“They’re not the most courageous of men even under the best of circumstances.”

“The terrible thing is, the terrible thing is that I don’t even remember hooking up with them. I was pretty messed up, too, I guess.”

“I’ve done terrible things myself when I was messed up. You just have to move on. There’s nothing else you can do.”

“I don’t know what to say to you, Rudi.”

“Don’t say anything.”

Vicki doesn’t obey. With her voice breaking, she says, “After the way I treated you . . .”

“What does that have to do with it?” Rudi says back, while trying hard not to show any emotion.

“No one’s ever done anything for me. At least not without motive. And you had no motive at all. You should’ve been laughing at me.”

“Forget about it.”

“I won’t.”

Vicki says this and gently places her hand on top of Rudi’s. Which discomforts Rudi, as despite what happened the night before she truly believes that she hates Vicki. Still, she makes no attempt to remove her hand, and she quickly becomes just as emotional as Vicki.

“I saw Jared earlier, too,” Vicki goes on.

“Yeah?” Rudi mutters, as apathetically as she can.

“He mentioned that you guys were studying later, and he, he kinda invited me.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not sure about it though.”

“Yeah, you must have better things to do on a Friday night. I’m always kind of embarrassed about it, to be honest.”

“It’s not that. I, I wouldn’t want to intrude on you.”

“You wouldn’t. Jared and I are just friends.”

“You know, I used to think he was weird,” Vicki murmurs.

“Me, too,” Rudi murmurs back, with a little smile. “But if you want my opinion, he’s the best guy in this whole school. And it’s not even close.”

Chapter 50

Rudi steps inside the Gelman Library, and she makes her way to the nearly empty glass-enclosed lounge on the third floor, where she sees Vicki and Jared sitting together. She also sees them pretending to be reading when they're clearly far more interested in each other than the textbooks in front of them.

Rudi smiles at this. She does while thinking the two are an even more ridiculous pair than she and Jared had been. But at the same time she sees how natural they look with one another. They look as if they not only belong together but that they've always belonged together. So she starts backing out of the room, realizing that she's the one intruding.

"Rudi!" Vicki quietly calls out, causing Rudi to come to a quick stop.

Vicki afterward waves Rudi toward the pair, and reluctantly Rudi complies, and the three silently begin studying together. Though Rudi can't help notice the furtive glances the two keep giving each other when they think the other isn't looking, and finally she whispers, "You know, I really need to do some research for this paper I'm working on." She then stands and packs her things, and while looking at the uneasy glances of the two she adds, "But don't let me interrupt

you guys.”

“Well,” Vicki murmurs, “I probably should . . .”

“Stay,” Rudi insists. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

“Sure thing,” Jared says to her, with a knowing smile — something Rudi returns, right before hustling to the door. Though her smile doesn’t last long, as she happens to glance at the two through the glass as she hurries by, and she suddenly feels pangs of envy.

Meanwhile, Vicki and Jared continue studying, and they stay late at the library. They stay so late that Vicki manages to do more studying in one evening than she’s done in her entire college career. Not that she minds. She especially doesn’t mind sitting next to Jared, who makes her feel so comfortable about herself. She doesn’t have to be witty or sexy or provocative. She can just be Vicki, and it’s this Vicki Jared likes. He likes the colorful butterfly she’s morphed into. He also likes that she likes him, and likes being around him.

While still feeling high, the two leave the library, and after lots of meandering they come to a reluctant stop in front of Vicki’s door.

“Tonight was kinda fun,” she tells him with a smile.

“Yeah,” he tells her back, with his own smile.

“I never thought of studying as fun before.”

“It’s kinda rare, I think.”

“Well,” she mutters as she reaches for her doorknob, “I should . . .”

Right then, Jared offers her his hand, which surprises her a bit, as she almost never shakes anyone’s hand — let alone a guy’s. But she hesitantly shakes it anyway, and he says, “Breakfast tomorrow?”

“On Saturday?” she utters, with even more surprise than before.

“You don’t eat on Saturdays?”

“Usually I’m nursing a hangover. Usually a bad one.”

“You think you’re gonna have one tomorrow?”

“Probably not,” she tells him with a chuckle. “Though I guess there’s always a possibility of a flashback.”

This causes him to chuckle, too, and he says, “So we’re on? About eight or so?”

“All right. Maybe, maybe we could do something afterward.”

“Actually, I gotta work.”

“Oh. Where do you work?”

“At a homeless mission by Union Station.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it’s not exactly glamorous.”

“You’re such a better person than me,” she tells him, with a shake of her head.

“That’s not true,” he insists.

“It is.”

“I can prove you’re wrong.”

“How?” she asks.

“Come with me tomorrow,” he answers.

“You gotta be kidding — me at a homeless mission?”

“It’ll be fun. Even funner than the library.”

“I don’t know, Jared.”

“Please.”

“I’ll think about it.”

He smiles at this, and at her. He also starts backing up toward his door, and he's so lost in thought that he backs right into it. Which makes Vicki smile, too.

Chapter 51

Jared has to drag Vicki through the mission door by the hand to get her inside.

“Come on,” he pleads. “Nothing is gonna happen to you. I promise.”

“This is not a good idea,” she insists, while shaking not only her head but just about everything else. Then, when she sees all the homeless people nearby, she comes to a halt and tells Jared: “I’m going back to GW. Right now.”

“All right,” he says with a sigh, and he releases her hand. Which is when she spins around and hurries to the door. But she quickly stops when she notices Jared isn’t coming with her, and she turns to him and howls, “Aren’t you gonna walk me to the train?”

“I have to work,” he tells her, with just a hint of a smile.

“This is not funny!”

“It’s not?”

“You don’t expect me to walk through this neighborhood by myself, do you?”

“I’ll walk with you, right after work.”

He says this and smiles again — this time much stronger — and he marches toward the

kitchen.

“Jared!” she screams.

But he just waves and continues on, and at once she notices a whole bunch of people staring at her, which makes her only more frightened, and in this state she begins backing up. Though she doesn’t back up far, as someone grabs her hand, causing her to both screech and almost shoot through the ceiling.

“Sorry about that,” Rudi says, as Vicki returns to earth.

A minute earlier, when Rudi saw Vicki enter the mission, she couldn’t believe her eyes. She actually did a double-take, as Vicki was the last person she ever expected to see there. But now she’s all smiles.

“You work here, too?” Vicki utters, with lots of relief, knowing that at least she’s safe.

“I volunteer here,” Rudi answers.

“But you’re Jewish.”

“So?”

“But, but I thought punks hated religion.”

“We only hate the bad kind.”

“I’ll be honest with you,” Vicki murmurs, as she nervously scans the room, “I’m scared out of my mind.”

“You could’ve fooled me,” Rudi says, while trying to suppress a smile, which is soon replicated on Vicki’s face.

“Maybe you could walk me to the Metro.”

“I’ll tell you what: all three of us will walk there together later. Right now, I’m gonna introduce you to Reverend Samson.”

Rudi says this and drags Vicki by the hand, much like Jared had.

“I, I’m not real religious,” Vicki insists.

“Neither am I, really,” Rudi tells her. “Come on.”

“You think Jared would mind?”

“Mind what?”

“That I’m not real religious.”

Rudi smiles at this, and she keeps dragging Vicki while saying to her: “What you have to understand about Jared is that every preconception you have of him is likely wrong.” She further introduces Vicki to the minister, and a little later the two serve lunch together.

Heavily leaning against Rudi, Vicki passes out peas to the endless multitude passing in front of her while careful to avoid looking into the eyes of those she’s serving. It’s then a little old man with a scruffy face comes up to her.

She gives him some food, and with a gravelly voice he says to her: “Thank you.”

This is the first time one of the people there has spoken to her, and she looks at him and sees his warm expression, and hers becomes warm as well. She also tells him: “You’re welcome.”

He nods at this and continues on, and Vicki can’t believe how good she feels, and she turns to the next person in line. Then, while looking the woman straight in the eyes, she empties a heaping spoon of peas onto her plate and says to her with a huge smile: “Here you go, ma’am.”

Watching this, Rudi has a huge smile, too, and she playfully nudges Vicki’s arm, and Vicki does likewise.

Chapter 52

Jared slowly raises his head above the kitchen sink, just before Vicki squirts water at him from the sink's hose.

"Gotcha!" she hollers.

"I got both of you!" comes Rudi's voice, as she splashes water from a bucket onto them.

This causes the two to scream, and Rudi screams, too, when Jared grabs her, sending her flying on top of both him and Vicki. Which is just before the three wrestle on the drenched floor, with their laughter drowning out the sounds of everything else.

So they don't even notice when Reverend Samson steps inside the kitchen wearing an old Ten Years After T-shirt. Nor do they notice the great joy the man finds in watching them play. Though they do notice him say, "This reminds me of a movie."

Right away, the three jump to their feet, with their heads hung low, and Jared murmurs, "Sorry about all this, Reverend."

"Sorry about what?" the minister says to him. "This reminds me of *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*. Have any of you seen it?"

The three respond by raising their heads, and they glance at each other before looking at the minister with lots of confusion.

“It’s one of those old hippie movies,” Samson goes on. “Donovan even did the score. Anyway, it’s all about Saint Francis. He was a spoiled brat until he finds his way. Then he starts rebuilding a broken down church for the poor, and before he knows it all his former spoiled brat friends start helping him. And before I know it all of GW will be helping me.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Rudi retorts, with a shake of her head.

“Actually, Rudi,” the man retorts back, “I’m gonna depend on it!”

The minister afterward leaves the kitchen, and the three friends clean it up while continuing their laughter and horsing around, which they’re still doing when they return to their dorm rooms early that evening.

“So what do you guys want to do now?” Vicki asks, feeling happier than she can ever recall, especially without having to drink, swallow, or inhale something beforehand.

“Well,” Rudi says, “I have sort of a date.”

“Really?” Jared says back, with some surprise.

“I think I know who it is,” Vicki interjects, with a bit of a grin.

“He’s just a friend,” Rudi insists.

“Uh-huh,” Jared utters.

“So I need to get out of these clothes.”

“Have fun,” Vicki tells her.

“You, too,” Rudi tells her back, before giving her a little hug, as well as a kiss on the cheek.

“What was that for?” a surprised Vicki asks.

“I don’t need a reason.”

Rudi says this and steps into her room, and Vicki turns to Jared and says, “She’s really nice. So unlike what I thought.”

“So are you,” Jared utters.

“Well,” Vicki utters back, before pointing her thumb at her door and adding, “I’d better get out of these clothes, too.”

“And then?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said you wanted to do something.”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Maybe we could get a pizza and listen to some records,” he says hopefully.

“I don’t know,” she says back. “To be real honest, I don’t like gospel music.”

“Me, neither. What about the Stones?”

“As in ‘the Rolling Stones’?” she mumbles, with great surprise.

“I have a bunch of their albums,” he says. “Including this great live one.”

“I was actually backstage with them once.”

“Are you serious?”

“It was so wild!”

“You can tell me about it over dinner.”

She shakes her head, and she tells him: “You wouldn’t want to hear about it. Trust me.”

“You think it would horrify me?”

“Yup.”

“You have a lot to learn about me. So shall we say my room in a half-hour? I’ll order a

pie. You like pepperoni?"

"Sure. But . . ."

"I'll see you then," he says to her before rushing into his room so she can't change her mind.

Chapter 53

Dennis is singing “Luck Be a Lady” as he skips down the house stairs wearing a tight black turtleneck sweater that does nothing to conceal his ample curves. He then shimmies into the main room, where many of his brothers are watching a pornographic video on the TV. Which he looks at with his head tilted.

“I didn’t even think that was possible,” he jokes, before adding, “I’ll have to try that.”

“Big date tonight?” Johnny asks.

“One can hope,” Dennis answers.

“With who?”

“*Whom*,” Rich interjects, while gazing at the TV in a trance-like state.

“Excuse me, Emily Dickinson,” Johnny growls. “With *whom*?”

“With a certain punk chick,” Dennis tells him.

“Are we gonna lose our bet tonight?”

“One can hope.”

“I still don’t believe it,” Chuck insists.

“You wanna double the bet?” Dennis asks.

“You’re on.”

Dennis reacts to this by shaking his fist, and he hurries down the corridor to the back room, where he opens the door leading to the driveway and stares at a large white Eldorado convertible. He smiles at it, too.

“You’re almost as pretty as Rudi!” he cries out.

He’s still smiling as the Eldorado rumbles up Pennsylvania Avenue in the direction of Georgetown, with its top down in spite of the chilly weather. It’s then Rudi turns to him and says, “You know what they say about guys with big huge cars?”

“What’s that?” he says back, with his smile having turned into a knowing grin.

“That they are overcompensating for a certain deficiency.”

“Well,” he utters, before turning to her and saying, “that’s certainly true in my case.”

Finding Dennis’s grin intoxicating, Rudi has to grin back. Which just makes him grin more. At the same time, she leans back in her seat and closes her eyes.

“My foot is already on the floor!” Maria hollers, and Rudi opens her eyes and spins her head, and she sees that Maria is driving the car in broad daylight, swerving in and out of traffic with tears pouring down her face.

“Maria?” Rudi mutters in shock.

“What about her?” Dennis says, and Rudi sees that she’s staring at him. “You okay?” he adds, while glancing at Rudi’s frightened face.

“Yeah,” she mumbles, while trying to convince herself that it’s true.

The two then arrive at the Zebra Room, and as they wait for their meal, a waiter walks by with a pizza so large that it could feed an army.

“That’s not what we ordered, is it?” Rudi asks, with lots of shock.

“Nah,” he tells her, with a dismissive wave.

“That’s insane.”

“Supposedly, if four or fewer people can eat the whole thing, it’s free. Though I’ve never heard of anyone actually doing it.”

“How disgusting,” Rudi growls, with a bit of a sneer.

“You haven’t even tried it yet,” Dennis jokingly retorts.

“There are people starving just a short distance from here. They’re starving right now.”

“You can’t save the world, Rudi.”

“Says who?” she barks.

Dennis smiles at this. He smiles because — while he’s heard people express similar sentiments before — he’s never heard someone actually mean it. Though Rudi misreads his smile, and with a bit of aggravation she says to him, “What’s so amusing?”

“You’re the most amazing chh . . . you’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met. And I haven’t even seen you without your clothes.”

“And you never will.”

Dennis responds with another of his knowing grins, and Rudi again can’t help grin back. Which remains on her face when a waitress brings them a pie loaded with every vegetable topping the restaurant offers but still far smaller than the monstrosity that just passed them.

Rudi soon pulls out a slice, and she blows on it a bit before bringing it to her mouth. Which is when she notices that Dennis isn’t looking at her. He’s looking at his own food, and she tries to tell herself that this is exactly what she expected. But she can’t hide her disappointment as she takes a small bite.

“Well?” Dennis asks, right after she swallows.

“Better than the Rathskeller,” she answers, “that’s for sure.”

“Can you taste the love?”

“It’s not exactly love. But it’s closer.”

Chapter 54

Vicki and Jared spend the evening on Jared's floor.

There they stay for hours, eating and listening to music while getting higher and higher off each other. They also continue the horsing around they've been engaged in most of the day, which peaks when the two tickle each other so much that they can barely breathe through their laughter.

Though this suddenly stops. It stops when Joe Cocker's "You Are So Beautiful" begins playing on Jared's stereo. It's then they lean up against his bed and look into each other's eyes, and he softly sings over the lyrics. Which causes Vicki to become a little weak, as she's never heard anything so wonderful before, nor has she seen anyone look so deeply into her eyes.

"Can I ask you something?" she murmurs, as the song comes to an end.

"What?" he murmurs back.

"Is it, is it against the rules for you to kiss?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

“On whether the kiss means something.”

Without even having to think about this, she kisses him.

It’s an innocent kiss. The most innocent she’s ever experienced, even in childhood. Not only are their eyes closed but so are their lips, and their bodies are apart. What’s more, their hands are doing nothing more than caressing each other’s back. Still, it’s the most powerful kiss she’s ever known. It’s a kiss that makes her swoon, which she thought only happened to people in stories.

Jared’s swooning, too, as he becomes lost in her kiss. A kiss that breathes life into him and erases all the horrors of his life. It also makes him feel that everything will be all right just as long as the kiss never ends.

Neither one wants the kiss to end, and their lips remain locked for what seems like hours, during which the magic spell cast upon them only gets stronger. Though Vicki soon feels a nearly overwhelming urge. An urge for something stronger than a kiss, which she knows Jared can’t fulfill. So she brakes their embrace and tells him: “I think I should be going.”

“All right,” he tells her back, well understanding why she needs to leave. He then stands up and lifts her to her feet, and the two reluctantly leave his room, with Vicki looking sad.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, as they stop at her door.

“I was just fooling myself,” she tells him. “But now . . .”

“Fooling yourself about what?”

“I was just thinking, I don’t know, I was thinking I could be something — something I’m not.”

“You can be anything you want.”

“I wish that were true.”

“It is. I believe in you, Vicki. All you have to do is believe in yourself, too.”

He says this and kisses her. A kiss that isn’t nearly as innocent as the one before, and which makes her swoon even more, and this kiss frightens her, knowing that she can’t control what’s happening. So she pushes him away, and she says to him: “We better stop.”

“Breakfast Monday?” he asks.

“I guess you’ll be in church tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” he tells her. “Most of the day.”

“I have to be honest with you about something. I’m not —”

“— Religious?”

“Yeah.”

“But you’ve got something way better than religion.”

“What’s that?”

“You have a good heart.”

“I don’t. Not really.”

“You do, and that means more than anything else.”

This is when he turns around, and he walks back to his room.

“Jared?” she calls out. Which causes him to stop and spin back to her, and she murmurs,

“Would you like some company tomorrow at church?”

“If that’s what you really want,” he murmurs back. “Don’t do it for me.”

“I want to.”

“I get up pretty early.”

“When?”

“I usually head down to breakfast at around 6:30.”

“All right. Just knock on my door.”

She says this and steps inside her room, feeling a giddiness she doesn't want to end. Though it fades when she goes into her bathroom and sees all the pill bottles in the medicine cabinet, and it disappears completely when she takes off her wig. Which she throws onto the floor, right before falling to her knees and crying.

Chapter 55

The Eldorado parks in front of Thurston Hall, and Dennis walks Rudi to the front door of the building.

“I guess a nightcap is out of the question,” he says.

“You guess right,” she says back.

Still, he leans toward her, only to be stopped by her palms.

“It was a nice evening,” she tells him. “Don’t ruin it.”

“All right,” he tells her back. “I won’t push it. So, so do you have any plans for Thanksgiving?”

“I’m going home. I can’t wait to see everyone, especially my mother-in-law. I miss her a lot.”

“Most people don’t even like their mother-in-laws. My mother can’t stand hers.”

“We used to hate each other big time. But she’s really the only reason I’m alive.”

“I owe her a debt then.”

“I’ll be sure to tell her that. What about you? What are you doing for Thanksgiving?”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Why not?”

“Well, my mom’s gotta work, and, to be real honest, she’s never quite understood the holiday in the first place.”

“How long has she lived here?”

“Since ’68, when the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia.”

“So you were born there?”

“Yeah. I can even remember the tanks in the streets. I thought it was a big game. And do you know that my name is actually Zdeněk? That’s the only way the authorities would let them register me. They have this official book of names that you have to follow. Ironically, all these names are of Catholic saints, in spite of the country being officially atheist.”

“You’re named after a saint?”

“Funny, isn’t it?”

“How’d your parents meet?”

“My dad was an international lawyer before he got into politics.”

“And what about him? Aren’t you gonna do something with him on Thanksgiving?”

“He’s always in campaign mode. He’ll likely spend the day trying to get money from someone somewhere. Besides, we’re not close.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me, too.”

“You know, you always seem like the very last guy in the world who’d ever be lonely.”

“It’s not true.”

Again, Dennis leans toward Rudi, who again stops him with her palms, and who again

says, “Don’t ruin it.”

“All right, all right. I can be patient.”

“Can you?”

“I didn’t say I was good at it.”

Rudi chuckles at this, and he chuckles right back, right before telling her: “You know, we’re gonna have our annual Christmas ‘slash’ Chanukah party soon after the break.”

“Yeah?” she utters.

“You think you could stop by? I’m sure Maria and Sandra will be there.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes.’”

Chapter 56

Jared gently knocks on Vicki's door.

But there's no reply, so he knocks again. This time a little harder.

"Yeah?" she utters.

"It's me, Jared," he utters back. "You still want to come with me?"

"Actually, actually I'm not feeling too well."

"Is there something I can do?" he asks, while recalling all the medicine in her bathroom, even if he really doesn't want to recall it.

"No," she tells him.

"I could take you to the clinic," he goes on, "or even to the hospital."

"That's all right. I'll be fine."

"You sure?"

"You better get going. You'll be late."

"All right. Will I see you later?"

"Maybe."

“And breakfast tomorrow?”

“Maybe.”

But Jared doesn't see Vicki, either later that day or at breakfast on Monday, and she avoids him everywhere else during the days that follow.

The message she's conveying by this is clear and he tries to accept it and move on. But he just can't get her out of his head. Nor can he get out the kiss they shared. What's more, he can't sleep or eat or study, or be functional in any way. So one morning he gets up early and waits for her outside the dorm on a bench. He waits for more than two hours.

Finally, she comes out and sees him, and she rushes off.

“What's wrong?” he calls out, after jumping to his feet and following her.

“I'm in a hurry,” she insists.

“Can we have lunch or something?”

“I'm pretty busy.”

“Dinner?”

“I can't talk right now.”

Vicki says this and runs off, with him staring at her hopelessly.

Ondansetron.

Once again, the name of the drug she's taking pops into his head, and he wonders if it's the cause of her strangely altered attitude toward him. At first he wonders if it's a side-effect of the medication, then he wonders something else. He wonders something worse.

He's still wondering about it when he and Rudi climb the steps of the Foggy Bottom Metro station together after a night in the mission, and seeing that he's upset, she asks him what's wrong.

“Nothing,” he tells her.

“Jared.”

“I told you — it’s nothing.”

“It’s Vicki, isn’t it?”

Right away, Jared stops, and so does Rudi, and he says to her: “She shutting me out for some reason.”

“Did you say something to her?”

“I . . . I don’t think so.”

“You want me to talk to her?”

“I don’t want to get you involved.”

“I’m already involved. You’re my friends.”

“She’s probably just not interested in me.”

“I’ll talk to her tomorrow right after class.”

Rudi says this and the two go home, and she enters her room and finds her roommates watching TV with the glummost of faces.

“Who died?” she asks.

“Reagan won,” Maria utters.

“49 states,” adds Sandra.

“Oh, well,” Rudi says, “at least Tommy’s happy.”

“I can’t understand how he could’ve been a Republican,” Sandra mutters while shaking her head.

“If there’s anything I’ve learned,” Rudi tells her, while glancing at the wall separating their room from Vicki’s, “it’s that labels don’t mean a thing. You have to peel them off if you

want to discover the real truth. Just like you two don't fit the crude stereotype of gay women, Tommy didn't fit the stereotype of a Republican. Probably no one fits any stereotype. It's just easier to believe they do."

Chapter 57

Art History class ends and Rudi follows Vicki out the door, and she says to her: “You must be excited.”

“About what?” Vicki utters, without looking at Rudi.

“Reagan.”

“Actually, I’m not really into politics. There was just some guy in the YAF I liked.”

“What about Jared? Don’t you like him?”

Vicki sighs at this, before coming to a stop. She then turns to Rudi and says, “I’m not right for him.”

“Don’t you think he should decide that?”

“I’m not good enough.”

“That’s what I used to think about myself. And I almost lost out on someone because of it. Someone incredible.”

“Tommy?” Vicki mumbles, while pointing at the name on Rudi’s jacket.

Rudi nods.

“Jared mentioned something about it,” Vicki goes on. “I’m sorry. It must be terrible being without him.”

“It would’ve been much worse if I never got to love him,” Rudi tells her.

“You sure?”

“As sure as I am of the sun rising tomorrow.”

Vicki then starts off again, and she says to Rudi: “Jared needs to find himself a nice virginal church girl. Someone he could live happily ever after with in some little white house with a picket fence.”

“What if he doesn’t want that?” Rudi calls out. “What if he wants you?”

“He doesn’t have that option!”

Vicki yells this and runs off, and while watching her Rudi is not sure what to think of her remarks. Nor does she know what to say to Jared when she steps inside the mission’s kitchen and sees him turning toward her with lots of hope in his eyes.

“Sorry,” she mutters.

“It’s all right,” he says.

“It’s not that she’s not interested. That I’m sure of.”

“I think I know what the problem is.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve only been pretending I didn’t.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll tell you when I’m sure.”

Chapter 58

Jared marches into the Himmelfarb Health Sciences Library, and he stops in front of a librarian and says, “I’m looking for some information about a drug called Ondansetron.”

“What kind of drug is it?” she asks.

“That’s just it — I don’t know. But I think I read about it in a medical journal sometime in the past year.”

“You don’t know which journal?”

“I read a lot of them.”

“Let me see what I can do.”

Chapter 59

Rudi enters the mission's kitchen, and she sees that Jared is even more upset than a few days earlier. So she slides up to him and murmurs, "All right — what is it?"

But he doesn't say a thing.

"Tell me," Rudi insists.

"Can I ask you something instead?"

"What?"

"It's very personal."

"What?"

"If it's too personal . . ."

"Jared."

"If you could go back in time, knowing all you've suffered because of Tommy's death, would you do it again? Would you still love him?"

"I don't see how I would have a choice. I didn't the first time. But why are you asking me?"

He answers her by lowering his head, and she gently puts her fingers underneath his chin and raises his face toward her.

“Tell me,” she whispers.

“Vicki’s sick,” he says. “Very sick.”

“What?”

“She doesn’t even know I know.”

“Oh, my God,” Rudi mutters, before turning away from Jared as she thinks of something.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Back, back when I didn’t like Vicki I told her to ‘drop dead.’ She got so upset. I couldn’t understand why. But now I do.”

“You didn’t know.”

“I know now. And I feel terrible.”

Slowly, Rudi turns to Jared, and she takes his hand and says to him: “I know exactly what you’re going through, and I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

“What should I do?”

“Only you can tell you that.”

Chapter 60

Jared thinks all night about what he's going to say to Vicki. He also thinks about the consequences of this for both of them. He even tries to come up with options, even though he knows that there are none.

Then, as soon as the sun rises, he crawls out of bed. He further puts on one of his plaid shirts and a pair of jeans, and he goes outside, where he sits on a bench and waits for Vicki. He waits until nearly noon, and when she leaves the dorm and sees him and his melancholy, she turns from it and scurries off.

"We need to talk," he calls out, as he stands up and follows her.

"Not now," she insists.

"You can't keep avoiding me."

"The truth is, Jared — the truth is that you're just way too slow for me. I'm sorry, but it's the truth."

"I really wish that was the truth. It would be a lot easier to accept than cancer."

Right then, Vicki comes to a stop, but she doesn't turn around. She just mumbles,

“How . . . how’d you know?”

“Does it matter?” Jared asks, as he stops a few steps from her.

“It matters!”

“When I was in your bathroom that night I saw . . .”

With lots of anger, she spins toward him, and she howls, “So that’s what this has all been about!”

“What are you talking about?”

“You were just pretending to like me. You felt sorry for me.”

Looking as if she’s gonna cry, Vicki again scurries off. But he goes after her and quickly catches up with her. He also grabs her shoulder, and he forces her to face him while telling her:

“That’s not true! The only pretending I did was pretending that I didn’t see anything! I pretended because I desperately wanted to pretend!”

“Do you know what kind of cancer I have?” she growls. “Do you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he insists.

“It matters! I have cervical cancer. Do you know anything about it?”

“I know about it.”

“Then you know why I’ve been trying to cram a lifetime into a few years. Because the odds are I won’t live to see twenty-five.”

“Odds can be beaten. I did it.”

“You don’t know anything about anything, Jared. You live in some Christian fantasy world, where the very worst thing is being late for church.”

“You’re wrong!”

“I don’t want your pity!”

“What about my love?”

“*Love?*” she incredulously utters.

“I know it’s crazy. I barely know you. I guess, I guess I’m just the type of person who either loves fast or not at all.”

“Do you have any idea how I contracted this disease?”

“I know. I know exactly.”

“Then how could you love me? I’m a fucking whore!”

“No,” he tells her, while shaking his head. “You’re not.”

“Go home,” she mutters with rising emotion as she hesitantly steps backward. “Go home and find someone who’s as good as you. It’s not me.”

“I’m not good!” he cries out.

“You are!”

“I’m a junkie, Vicki! A worthless fucking junkie!”

“No,” she mumbles, before coming to a stop and shaking her head. “You’re just making that up.”

“I am,” he says, and he starts unbuttoning the cuffs of his shirt while asking her: “Did you ever wonder why I wear long shirts and pants even when it’s scorching hot out?” He then rolls up his sleeves, and she sees his track marks, and she gasps in shock. Though she also continues shaking her head while trying to convince herself that the marks aren’t real, and to further convince herself of this she tells him: “I don’t believe it.”

“Do you believe this?” he tells her back, before ripping his shirt off, sending buttons flying everywhere and exposing marks all over his torso. Which is when he says, “I’ve been ashamed. Ashamed of my own body! But I don’t care anymore! It’s you I care about!”

“No,” she once again mumbles.

He responds to this by unbuckling his belt, and while removing his jeans he utters, “It’s all over my legs, too. I’ll show you!”

“Jared, people are watching!” she screams, while noticing the stares of a handful of students not far away.

“I don’t care!” he screams back, and he continues with his jeans, only to be stopped when she runs up to him and grabs his wrists.

“You think you’re bad,” he softly goes on. “You think you’re bad because you’ve fucked around some. But you wanna hear a story about real bad?”

She doesn’t reply. She just starts crying.

“I had my first smack when I was fourteen. At sixteen, my mom threw me out. And I don’t blame her — all I did was lie and steal. I even hit her — my own mother! I can’t live long enough to make up for that! I can’t do enough good deeds! Nothing will ever make up for it! Nothing!”

Jared then pauses to wipe his eyes, and he says, “You called yourself a whore just now. But you don’t even know the meaning of the word! After I got thrown out, how, how do you think I survived? I had to hustle.” Again, Jared pauses. He does this so he can grab Vicki’s arms, and he shakes her and howls, “Do you know what that means? Do you?”

Vicki shakes her head. She does this with tears pouring out of her.

“Me and the other pretty boys in town,” Jared tells her with a sneer, “we would hang out at the bus station waiting for the good old boys to drive by, so we could, so we could . . .”

Vicki won’t let Jared finish. Instead, she takes him into her arms and continues her crying on his shoulder, and she mutters to him: “It’s okay, Jared. You don’t have to tell me any more.

You don't have to tell me anything ever again. I believe you, and I love you, too. I love you so much. And I don't care what you've done — you're good. You're so good."

"So are you," he tells her, before caressing her cheek with his shaking hand. "So are you."

"But I'm gonna tell you right now — I'm gonna be a lousy girlfriend."

"Probably," he mutters.

"What?" she utters in surprise, before breaking their embrace and looking him in the eyes.

This is when he grins at her and says, "But you'd make one hell of a wife."

Chapter 61

Mrs. Goodwin can't stop smiling at Rudi as the two wait at Reservoir for their pizza, and Rudi has the very same problem.

An hour earlier, Rudi arrived at Newark Airport and the first thing she wanted to do — even before dropping her things off at home — was to visit her favorite restaurant. Though her mother-in-law isn't so enthused about it.

“You know,” she says, “I would've taken you anywhere tonight.”

“And you have,” Rudi says back.

“I would've even taken you to the best restaurant in New York.”

“Instead you've taken me to the best restaurant in the world.”

“Aaggghh. You're just like Tommy.”

“I take that as a great compliment. The ultimate one.”

It's then Mr. Agnellino comes over to them with a pie, and he places it on the table, and when he sees Rudi's smiling face he tells her: “It's so wonderful to have you with us again.”

“You have no idea how wonderful,” she tells him back, as she takes hold of his hand.

“I’ve missed you, and your pizza. You don’t know how much.”

He thanks her in reply and excuses himself, and Rudi hurriedly yanks out a slice. Then, after barely blowing on it, she takes a huge bite, with bliss covering her face.

“Let me tell you,” she afterward says to her mother-in-law, “the pizza in DC just sucks. And you can’t even get a bagel down there. At least not a real one.”

“Friday I’ll have Elizabeth pick up a big bag from the place up the street,” Mrs. Goodwin tells her.

“How is Elizabeth?”

“She’s doing just fine. She’s very excited to see you.”

“I can’t wait to see her, too.”

“And she’s not the only one excited. The rabbi was asking me if you’d be coming to service on Saturday morning.”

“I’ve never been to service. What’s it like?”

“To be honest, it’s not particularly thrilling. But we can stop by near the end of it.”

“All right.”

“What other plans do you have for the weekend?”

“We’re still going to the Crosses for Thanksgiving, right?”

“Of course.”

“Well, Friday I’m gonna visit some friends during the day and then have dinner with my dad and some mystery woman.”

“Really?”

“Then on Saturday, believe it or not, I’m actually having tea with royalty.”

“Are you serious?” Mrs. Goodwin gasps in shock.

“I’m serious,” Rudi insists.

“How did you manage that?”

“I don’t know. This guy I met in the hospital — he’s supposedly some kind of prince.”

“A real prince?”

“I guess so.”

“What’s his name?”

“Prince Vilem of . . . of somewhere in Europe.”

“Vilem? Strange, I’ve actually heard of someone with that name before. But I can’t think of where.”

“Well, anyway, his mother hired a private investigator to track me down. She even came to my dorm.”

“Why would she do all that?”

“I don’t know. She seems to think I helped her son.”

“Did you?”

“It was nothing.”

“I’ve heard this refrain before.”

“Mom, everyone makes a big deal out of the things I do when they’re nothing.”

“Maybe you make too small a deal out of them.”

Rudi shrugs, and she utters, “Hey, you know, this tea thing is going to be in Manhattan. So maybe afterward we could have that dinner in New York.”

“What a great idea,” the woman blurts out, while rubbing her palms together in excitement.

“You can even pick out the place.”

“I can’t wait.”

“But I’m not wearing a dress.”

“That won’t be a problem. I know some great places in Little Italy. Who knows, maybe we can even wean you of this dump.”

“Not likely.”

“But, Rudi, you have to wear something nicer than a T-shirt and jeans.”

“*Mom.*”

“The same thing applies for temple, and it especially applies for meeting royalty.”

“I don’t have anything nicer.”

“Then let me buy you something.”

“No.”

“Please. Make an old woman happy.”

“Don’t call yourself that — you’re not old.”

“I won’t if you let me buy you something.”

“All right,” Rudi relents. “But this is gonna be your Chanukah gift to me. Under no circumstances are you to buy me anything else.”

“Deal!” Mrs. Goodwin utters with a grin, even though she hasn’t the slightest intention of holding up her end of the bargain.

Right then, Rudi continues eating, and her mother-in-law takes a small bite of pizza herself before saying, “I’m so happy you’re home.”

“Me, too,” Rudi says back in between bites, and she takes the woman’s hand and adds, “I’m so happy I have a home.”

“You don’t know how many times I almost jumped on that shuttle.”

“What stopped you?”

“I don’t know. I wanted to give you some space.”

“I don’t need any space from you. Not ever.”

“So tell me about school.”

“I tell you about school all the time over the phone.”

“But not the things I want to know.”

“What is it you want to know?”

“Something interesting.”

“Like what?”

“Come on, something interesting must’ve happened in two and a half months.”

“Well, let’s see . . . some friends of mine are getting married. The wedding’s gonna be on Christmas Eve, in fact.”

“How romantic.”

Rudi shrugs, and she tells her: “Right afterward I’ll take a train home.”

“Why a train?”

“The station’s only a few blocks away, and, besides, I’m sure all the flights on Christmas Eve are already booked.”

“Not on first class.”

“Not a chance.”

“All right. Just let me know when the train’s coming in and I’ll pick you up at the station.”

“Ma, it’ll be in the middle of the night.”

“Just let me know the time.”

“All right.”

Again, the two start eating. Though soon a little grin forms on Mrs. Goodwin’s face and she says, “You’ve told me about your friends, but what about you?”

“What about me?” Rudi asks.

“There must be some interesting boys at school.”

“*Mom.*”

“What?”

“No one will ever replace Tommy.”

“Who’s talking about replacing?” the woman murmurs, before reaching her finger underneath Rudi’s Chai pendant and saying, “I’m talking about *living*.”

“I don’t see you dating up a storm,” Rudi utters.

“That’s different. I’m an old woman.”

“Again with the ‘old woman.’ You’re not old. You’re beautiful, and I’m sure lots of guys are interested in you.”

“I’m sure lots of them are interested in my money. But they’re not the men I want to talk about. So?”

“So?”

“Are there any interesting boys at school?”

“No one special.”

“That’s not a no.”

“It’s not a yes, either.”

Chapter 62

Rudi and her mother-in-law step in front of a large brick manor, and Rudi rings the bell while thinking back to when she first stood in front of the place, at the beginning of a journey that would change her life, along with many others.

Soon, the door swings open, exposing Pam, who wishes the two a Happy Thanksgiving before giving Rudi a big warm hug. Which Rudi returns before also hugging her former foster father, who begins talking with Mrs. Goodwin as Pam leads Rudi through the packed and noisy house.

“I made lots of yams for you,” Pam tells her.

“Terrific,” Rudi says, with a little smile.

“Oh, and your stepdad is here. He even brought someone.”

“Where is he?”

“I’m taking you there right now.”

She says this and Rudi notices all the families, with lots of little children, and that recurring pang of envy hits her once again.

“So,” Rudi says, while trying to keep this feeling under control, “how many kids have you got staying with you now?”

“Two,” Pam answers. “Including a girl. I’d actually like you to meet her. I was thinking maybe, maybe you could talk to her a little. She’s . . . well, you know, she’s not exactly overjoyed about staying here.”

“I think I’ve heard this story before.”

“Will you talk to her?”

“Of course.”

The two women then step inside the kitchen, where a short distance away stands Mr. Reese, who’s eating an appetizer next to a middle-aged woman.

Right away, he sees Rudi and calls out her name, before gobbling down the rest of the food in his hand. He further hustles over to her and gives her one of his bear-like hugs.

“I’ve missed you a lot,” he whispers.

“I’ve missed you, too,” she whispers back.

They afterward break their embrace, and he turns around and points to the woman he’s with, who’s standing behind them and looking more than just nervous. More than once, she had been warned about Rudi’s appearance, but still she can’t hold back her surprise and fear.

“This is Nancy,” Mr. Reese utters.

“Nice to meet you,” Rudi says with a smile, while offering the woman her hand, and as the woman shakes it all her nervousness and fear magically disappear.

“Can I borrow your daughter for a while?” Pam interjects, after taking Rudi’s arm.

“Sure,” Mr. Reese says. “We’ll talk later, kid.”

“You got it,” Rudi says back, while Pam drags her into the den, where a sullen girl of

fourteen is sitting by herself on an easy chair, with her arms crossed and her head down. Which reminds Rudi of Stacey and the events by the train station.

“This,” Pam says, once she and Rudi are beside the girl, “this is Ellen.”

“Hi, Ellen,” Rudi murmurs. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

The girl shrugs.

“You go to Columbia?” Rudi asks.

“She’s a freshman there,” Pam answers, once it becomes obvious Ellen isn’t going to answer herself. “Stephen’s her guidance counselor.”

“What a surprise.”

“Well,” Pam utters, “I really should be checking the turkeys.” She then starts out of the room while mouthing her thanks to Rudi.

“So,” Rudi says to Ellen, as she turns back to her, “you like Columbia?”

Not surprisingly, Ellen doesn’t answer, and Rudi says, “Yeah, I didn’t like it much, either. Actually, I thought it sucked.”

Ellen tries hard not to react to this. She tries and tries, but she can’t help smile just a bit.

“But hang in there,” Rudi continues. “You couldn’t ask for better foster parents. They really care.”

“They’re getting paid to,” Ellen mumbles.

“Hey, take a look at this place. You really think they need a couple of bucks from the government? They do this because they care. I’m telling you from experience. They haven’t received money for me in two years, and yet they invited me into their home on Thanksgiving. Think about that.”

Once again, Ellen shrugs. At the same time, Rudi reaches into her seabag for a scrap of

paper and a pen, and while writing something down she tells the girl: “If you ever want to talk, here are my numbers — both at home and at school. Call me anytime.” She further tries to offer the paper to Ellen, who just ignores it. So Rudi places it on the end table nearby and says, “I mean it — call me.” She afterward heads out, and Ellen mutters, “Is it true you used to beat up boys?”

With some surprise, Rudi stops and turns toward the girl, and she asks, “Where did you hear about that?”

“The kids at school still talk about it. They say you beat up the entire football team.”

“That’s a *slight* exaggeration,” Rudi retorts, with a chuckle. A chuckle Ellen reluctantly returns.

“Dinner’s ready!” Pam calls out, and Rudi offers Ellen her hand, and when the girl makes no move to take it, Rudi utters, “Come on.”

Ellen sighs. But she also takes Rudi’s hand, and Rudi lifts her out of the chair before the two make their way into the kitchen together.

Chapter 63

Rudi and her stepdad make their way into the Crosses' backyard, arm-in-arm.

"That was some meal," he says, while rubbing his big stomach with his free hand.

"Yeah," Rudi says back.

"I haven't eaten like that since . . . well, I don't even know."

"Nancy doesn't cook?"

"We haven't gotten that far yet. We've just had a few dates."

"She's real nice."

"Believe it or not, she's the first since . . . you know."

"Mom?"

"Yeah."

"Can I ask you something, Dad?" Rudi murmurs, with the image of a certain woman entering her head.

"Sure," Mr. Reese answers.

"You really don't have any pictures of her?"

“I really don’t.”

“You don’t know where I could find one? Maybe from a friend or a relative?”

“She didn’t have many of either, as far as I know. And I didn’t keep in touch with them after she left. Actually, they didn’t keep in touch with me. Why are you asking?”

“I don’t know.”

“You were never curious before.”

“I am now.”

“Why?”

“What was she like? I mean, what did she look like?”

“I don’t know — a lot like you. She was bigger, though. I mean, heavier.”

“How heavy?”

“Rudi, what’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why are you asking me all these questions?”

“Do you, do you ever wonder what happened to her?”

“All the time.”

It’s then a smiling Nancy opens the back door, and she calls out, “There you are!” Which is just before she struts up to Mr. Reese and gives him a little kiss, causing Rudi to once again feel that unrelenting pang.

Chapter 64

Rudi and Mrs. Goodwin go to Bloomingdales in the Short Hills Mall on Black Friday morning, in spite of a holiday mob that makes parking and shopping almost impossible.

After lots of squabbling over what to buy, they come to a sort of compromise, with Rudi selecting a harlequin blouse that reminds her of something Siouxsie Sioux once wore. She also selects a pair of jet-black slacks and equally black boots.

“Well?” Rudi asks, after striking a pose with the outfit outside the fitting room.

“Not terrible,” says her mother-in-law, who’s holding in her hand a black Givenchy dress, which she shows Rudi while saying, “But you’d really look stunning in this.”

“*Mom.*”

“It reminds me of what Audrey Hepburn wore in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.”

“*Mom.*”

“All right, all right. Just as long as you don’t look like Mel Vicious.”

“Sid Vicious.”

“Him, too.”

Rudi chuckles at this, and the two afterward make their way out of the mall and out of the parking lot, and they drive to an auto repair shop on a small side street a few blocks from South Orange Avenue.

“How will you get home?” Mrs. Goodwin asks Rudi from inside her Jaguar.

“I’ll take the bus,” Rudi says. “Or I’ll just walk.”

“Let me give you some cab fare.”

This time Rudi doesn’t even say “*Mom*.” She just gives her a look that expresses it, before giving the woman a kiss and saying goodbye to her. She then marches into the shop, where she asks a clerk for Owen.

“He’s in the manager’s office,” the man tells her, while pointing to a room a short distance away, and Rudi hustles there. Which is where she sees Owen in a pair of blue coveralls, sitting behind a metal desk doing some paperwork.

Right then, she smiles at him. She smiles without saying a word, admiring the man she so unexpectedly came to care about, and she keeps silently smiling until he notices her.

“Rudi?” he gasps with great surprise, even though she told him she’d be stopping by during the latest of their regular telephone conversations.

With her smile now even bigger, Rudi spreads out her arms as wide as she can, and he jumps out of his seat and runs over to her, and not only does he give her a big hug but he also spins her around the room until she’s dizzy.

“Oh, my God!” he howls, before he puts her down.

“It’s so good to see you!” she howls back. “How was your Thanksgiving?”

“Fine. And yours?”

“Wonderful. Just look at you — you’ve made manager already.”

“Assistant manager. The manager is off today.”

“Still . . .”

“Hey, would you like to get some lunch?”

“I was gonna invite you.”

“Let me just get my coat.”

He says this and the two step outside the office, and they approach an old wooden desk by the edge of the garage, where Owen picks up his jacket. It's there Rudi notices a picture on the desk, of a young woman.

“Who's that?” she asks with a bit of grin.

“Nobody,” he answers, right after knocking the picture over face-first.

“Nobody? You put pictures of nobodies on your desk?”

“Really, it's nothing serious.”

“She looks pretty serious to me.”

Owen responds by lowering his eyes. He also mumbles, “She, she's not you.”

These words make Rudi uneasy, at her inability to return the love Owen so clearly feels for her. Though at the same time she wonders something. She wonders if the love she does feel for him is sufficient to make her happy. She tells herself that, while it would never be like what she had with Tommy, nothing would anyway. At least with Owen she'd be loved unconditionally. He'd give her everything he had. He'd worship her and support her and be true to her, in every way. What's more, she could leave that ridiculous school and move back home near the people she misses, and no longer would she have to escape, nor would she be lonely or have any pangs of envy.

All she has to do is leap into Owen's arms. That's all she has to do, and she almost does

this. She almost gives herself to him right there. But she quickly realizes that this would be the ultimate escape. Even worse, it would be a lie.

Chapter 65

Wearing her new outfit, Rudi steps inside Congregation Beth El with her mother-in-law.

It's the first time she's been inside a synagogue and she's a little nervous, and she only becomes more so when they walk into the prayer hall and she notices all the stares. Then, when the two sit in the back, she can hear the mutterings all around her. Mutterings from people who know all too well who her husband was and how he died, and she only makes it through the service because Mrs. Goodwin is clutching her hand the whole way through.

The woman is still clutching Rudi's hand after the service when the two stand in the adjacent banquet hall, where drinks and pastries are served. It's there the stares and mutterings continue, and not a single person comes up to greet either of them.

"We'll just say hello to the rabbi and leave," Mrs. Goodwin whispers to Rudi, who's unnerved despite the apathetic expression she feigns.

"All right," Rudi whispers back, before clutching her mother-in-law's hand even harder.

"I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry about."

“I’m apologizing for them. Unfortunately, people are very ignorant.”

“Tell me about it.”

“They’ll be sorry about it one day. They’ll hang their heads in shame. Not just the people in this room, but all over the world.”

It’s then Rabbi Orenstein steps inside the banquet hall. Right away he sees Rudi and hurries up to her with a big smile. He further hugs her, which many of the people around them notice and notice with great surprise.

“It’s so wonderful to see you again,” he says, after breaking their embrace. “How are you?”

“Much better,” she tells him, “thank you. Actually, I never got a chance to thank you for all you did for my husband and me. I can never thank you enough for your kindness and support.”

“You’re welcome. You know, you’re also more than welcome to join our congregation.”

“I’ll think about it,” she tells him, even though she knows she won’t.

Chapter 66

A limousine comes to Mrs. Goodwin's house, and it takes Rudi and her mother-in-law into the city.

The trip reminds Rudi of a similar one. The one in which Tommy took her to see Richard Hell at CBGB for her birthday. The one in which he put aside just how sick he was feeling so he could make her happy for one single day. So it doesn't take long before Rudi's emotions begin overwhelming her.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Goodwin asks, as soon as she notices this.

"The memories," Rudi tells her, with a bit of a broken voice, "they're everywhere."

"Oh, sweetheart."

"Could you put your arm around me, please."

The woman complies, and Rudi tells her all about that magical night.

"You raised such a wonderful man," she says afterward. "You have no idea how wonderful."

"I have an idea," the woman tells her. "Thanks to you."

Eventually, the limo makes its way up Central Park West in Manhattan, and Rudi is feeling a little better. But then she notices a horse and buggy riding through the park, and thinking there's likely a couple inside it, she gets a little emotional again.

Seeing this, and seeing what Rudi's looking at, Mrs. Goodwin murmurs, "If you'd like, we could take a ride in one later."

"No, thanks."

"You sure?"

"Tell me," Rudi utters, wanting to both change the subject and retake control of her emotions, "what kind of etiquette things do I need to worry about today?"

"Etiquette things?" the woman says back.

"You know, like superfluous utensils."

"Well, if they offer you cake or something like that, eat it daintily, and with a napkin. And make sure you cover your lap beforehand. Oh, and cross your legs whenever you sit down."

"Anything else?"

"Do you know how to curtsy?"

"I'm not curtsying to anyone. Not even the Queen of England."

"I'm sure you'll do just fine. I have great confidence in you."

"Yeah?"

"The way you handled yourself today at temple was nothing short of remarkable. I'm very proud of you. I certainly wouldn't've held up as well."

"I very much doubt that."

"There would've been lots of black eyes today."

The woman says this just before the limousine pulls up beside an apartment building not

far from the Museum of Natural History. Which is when Mrs. Goodwin smiles at Rudi and says to her: "Have a wonderful time, dear. You have the phone number of the limo?"

"I've got it," Rudi replies. "But, but what are you gonna do?"

"Don't worry about me. I know lots of people in this town."

"All right," Rudi mutters before hugging and kissing the woman. She also whispers, "Thank you."

"For what?" Mrs. Goodwin whispers back.

"I don't need a reason."

Rudi then jumps out of the vehicle, and she waves toward the back tinted window as the limo drives off, and she makes her way toward the building.

Standing in front of it is an immense and bloated doorman in a fancy red uniform. A man who looks as friendly as an impacted wisdom tooth and who doesn't even react to Rudi's presence.

"Excuse me," she tells him, "I'm here to see the Lobkowiczes."

Still, the doorman doesn't react. He just keeps looking straight ahead. So Rudi repeats herself, and she repeats herself again.

Still, the man doesn't respond.

"What's your fucking problem?" she hollers.

This catches his attention, and he glares at her while growling, "What do you want?"

"I said, I'm here to see the Lobkowiczes."

"You to see the Lobkowiczes?" he utters, with lots of condescension.

"Just call them. Please."

"Go on, get out of here. Before I kick your ass up and down the block."

“I’d like to see you try.”

The man responds by grabbing Rudi’s shoulder, and she responds back by grabbing his arm and flipping him over her — sending him crashing against the pavement while crying out in pain. She further leans down and grasps his lapel with one fist while cocking her other in front of his horrified face, and she barks, “Are you gonna call them, or do I have to kick your ass up and down this block?”

He does what she orders, and he does it quickly, and Rudi soon makes her way to the penthouse apartment, where a dour butler leads her inside. The princess then greets her in the foyer, wearing the same Givenchy dress Mrs. Goodwin had wanted to buy her, and Rudi can’t help grin at this. The princess also grins a little. She grins at how well Rudi is dressed, having expected the same ragamuffin she met in the dorm.

“Thank you so much for coming,” she tells Rudi.

“Thank you for inviting me,” Rudi tells her back.

“I do hope the doorman downstairs didn’t give you any trouble. We’ve been trying to have that man fired for years.”

“Trust me, he gave me no trouble at all.”

The princess smiles at this, and the two walk deeper into the home, with the woman saying to Rudi: “I apologize that my husband couldn’t attend today. He’s in Zurich on business.”

“That’s all right,” Rudi says, not knowing what else to say. She actually feels intimidated by everything around her, which reminds her of her first visit to Mrs. Goodwin’s house.

“Vilem’s brother is also not here,” the princess goes on. “He’s studying right now at the Sorbonne.”

“You don’t say?”

The two at this moment step inside a large Victorian parlor, where Vilem is impatiently waiting in his wheelchair wearing a gray Armani suit, and Rudi almost doesn't recognize him, as he looks much healthier and happier. He also has a short beard that gives him a regal appearance.

Seeing Rudi, his face lights up, which his mother notices with great joy.

"Hi," he mumbles as he rolls his chair up to her.

"Hi, yourself," she tells him, before offering him her hand, which he takes and brings up to his face, much as he did in his hospital room. "How are you doing?" she asks.

"Better," he says. "And you?"

"The same."

"Well," the princess interjects, "if you let go of Rudi's hand, perhaps we can have some tea."

Vilem chuckles at this, and so does Rudi, and he reluctantly releases her. Afterward, the three chat in the parlor over tea, with the princess becoming more and more impressed with Rudi. While the woman before felt gratitude toward Rudi, she also thought of her as utterly uncivilized, even after forgetting she'd been in a mental hospital with her son. But now she realizes Rudi is anything but uncivilized, in spite of the roughness of her appearance. She finds her smart and cultured and witty, and she realizes that Rudi has a strength of character and a dignity she's never experienced before — traits she knows complement those of her son, both good and bad. So all sorts of plans start forming in her head, especially when she sees the way her son continues to look at Rudi and the way she makes him feel about himself.

"So Rudi," the woman utters as they finish their tea, "am I to understand you're related to Annette Goodwin in some manner?"

"Yes," Rudi says. "Kinda. I was married to her son."

“I was very sorry to hear about his death.”

“You knew him?” Rudi utters, with lots of surprise.

“I know Mrs. Goodwin a little,” the princess answers.

“You do?”

“We met a number of years ago at a fashion show in Paris.”

“Paris?”

“What a time we had together. Karl just adored her.”

“Karl?”

“Karl Lagerfeld, of course.”

“Of course.”

“We’ve also worked on some fundraisers together. I’m sure you know about all the millions she’s raised in the fight against AIDS.”

“She has?” Rudi mutters, with even more surprise than before. She’s so surprised that she almost drops her teacup.

“I can tell you that it was not a popular subject among us,” the princess goes on. “Most of us wanted to keep our heads in the proverbial sand. She had to yank them out. I’m being almost literal.”

“I had no idea. Since when has she been doing this?”

“For at least a year now. She is truly a wonderful woman.”

“I couldn’t agree more. You know, she’s gonna pick me up later.”

“She is? Why don’t the four of us have dinner together? There is a suitable establishment down the street.”

Right away, Rudi calls the limo’s car phone, and the driver then calls Mrs. Goodwin at

her friend's apartment, and she in turn calls Rudi at the Lobkowiczses. Which is when Rudi tells her about the dinner invitation.

"Why didn't you tell me it was the Lobkowiczses?" Mrs. Goodwin cries out.

"I had no idea you knew her," Rudi tells her.

"There are lots of things you don't know about me."

"Apparently."

Chapter 67

The princess, Vilem, and Rudi step outside the building, watched by the doorman, who holds open the door with one hand while holding his aching back with his other. He also glares at Rudi, who pretends not to notice.

“That is indeed strange,” the princess murmurs to Rudi.

“What is?” Rudi murmurs back.

“The doorman had no problem with his back a few hours ago.”

“Accidents will happen.”

It’s then the limo arrives, and Mrs. Goodwin burst out of it and runs up to the princess, and the two kiss each other’s cheeks before commencing a rapid-fire conversation in French. Rudi is lost after “*Comment allez-vous*,” and she just stands there in awe of her mother-in-law, who she now sees as something just above a goddess.

“Did you have a good time?” the woman asks Rudi, after finishing her talk with the princess.

“Did I,” Rudi says, and while pointing to the princess she adds, “What do you think of

her dress?”

Mrs. Goodwin responds by carefully looking at the outfit, and she has to hide her grin underneath her hand.

“Do you like it?” the princess asks, with a big smile on her face. “I thought it looked much like the one Audrey Hepburn wore.”

She says this and the four make their way down the street to Les Trois Magots, where Mrs. Goodwin notices the formal table setting as they sit down, and while pointing at it she playfully whispers to Rudi: “Where have you seen this before?”

Rudi giggles at this, before grabbing her mother-in-law’s hand under the table and warmly leaning against her, which makes Mrs. Goodwin happy all over.

“So Rudi,” the princess interjects, “have you ever been to Europe?”

“I’ve actually never been outside the Northeast,” Rudi answers. “To be honest, Washington is the farthest from home I’ve ever been.”

“Then you must visit our chateau in Nice this summer.”

“As in France?” Rudi mumbles in surprise.

“It’s beautiful there,” Vilem murmurs while looking deeply into Rudi’s eyes. “The house is right on the Mediterranean. We even have a boat.”

“Yeah?”

“And of course, Mrs. Goodwin,” the princess goes on, “you are invited as well.”

“I don’t know,” Rudi utters, feeling uncomfortable about the whole thing. She feels so uncomfortable that she tries to come up with an excuse, but the only thing she can think of is “I’m afraid my French isn’t up to par.”

“Not to worry,” the princess tells her, “in a month you will be speaking like Sartre. Or at

least Camus.”

“A month?”

“You did say you had four months off this summer,” says Mrs. Goodwin.

“But . . .” Rudi mutters.

“And after Nice I could show you the rest of Europe. At least the free parts.”

“You couldn’t ask for a better travel companion than your mother-in-law,” the princess says to Rudi. “She knows Europe even better than me.”

“You do?” Rudi gasps.

“There are lots of things you don’t know about me,” the woman insists.

“Apparently.”

“So it is all settled,” the princess cries out.

Rudi is speechless, and so is Mrs. Goodwin, though for an entirely different reason. The woman is recalling when she first met Rudi and how she thought the girl would be a total social embarrassment. But now seeing how well she mixes with the highest levels of society she realizes not even the sky is her limit.

The woman is still thinking about this on the limo ride home.

“What a handsome couple you make,” she utters, with a big smile on her face.

“What are you talking about?” Rudi utters back, while once again noticing a carriage in the park.

“You and Vilem.”

“Not gonna happen,” Rudi growls, with a shake of her head.

“I’m just saying,” her mother-in-law murmurs, while thinking back to how Vilem couldn’t keep his eyes off Rudi.

“Saying what?”

“Princess Rudi — it has a certain sound to it, don’t you think?”

“A gagging sound.”

Rudi says this and wraps her arm around Mrs. Goodwin’s, and while feeling more than a little lightheaded she remarks, “I wish I didn’t have to go back to school tomorrow. This has been the best weekend in a long time.”

“Christmas will be here before you know it,” Mrs. Goodwin remarks back. “And then summer will be right around the corner.”

“Were you serious about going to Europe?”

“I’m gonna start planning our itinerary as soon as we get home.”

Rudi smiles at this, having never expected to go anywhere in life, and she rests her head on her mother-in-law’s shoulder. She also says, “Sometimes, sometimes when I’m with you I get the feeling I’m in a fairy tale. You know, the kind with a godmother who grants every wish.”

“Funny,” Mrs. Goodwin says back, after resting her own head on Rudi’s, “I think much the same about you.”

Chapter 68

Rudi is approaching her dorm room with Tommy's heavy backpack across her shoulders when she hears her phone ring. Quickly, she grabs her keys and even more quickly opens the door, before rushing inside to answer the device.

"Rudi!" comes Jeannine's voice. A voice that sounds frantic. "Thank God — I've been calling for an hour."

"I just got in," Rudi says to her. "What's wrong?"

"A huge cold front's coming in. That's what's wrong. The temperature's gonna be below freezing tonight. Way below. This is one of those emergencies I mentioned once. We need to get people off the streets right now. I know you must be tired . . ."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Chapter 69

It's nearly midnight by the time Rudi has gotten every person she knows out of the cold, which isn't easy with the shelters overflowing. The situation is so bad that Reverend Samson has to line his mission with cots created from table linen, and even then many people can do nothing more than sprawl out on the hard benches of the chapel.

Right then, Rudi is more than exhausted, and she starts for home. Though she doesn't go more than a few blocks before she sees a comatose-looking middle-aged man wearing an army jacket. He's the same man she was once urged to avoid, and he's sitting in the same park where she avoided him.

For many seconds, she thinks about avoiding him again. But instead she marches toward him, knowing that if she doesn't save him it would be as if she hadn't saved anyone that night.

Soon, she's right in front of him, and she can see him shivering in spite of himself.

"You need to get out of this weather," she tells him. "There's a place about ten blocks from here. I'll walk you there."

The man doesn't reply. He just keeps staring into space.

“You don’t understand,” she goes on, “you won’t live through the night.”

Still, he doesn’t move, or react in any way, and Rudi tries telling herself that she can’t do anything more for him. But she can’t quite convince herself of this, so she plops down next to him and growls, “Fine, now I’m your responsibility.”

For a long time, Rudi sits in the blistering frost next to the man, with her whole body shaking with cold. Though this at least keeps her from falling asleep — something that could be fatal.

Eventually, she takes out her Walkman, and she listens to “Moonlight Serenade,” which not only makes her smile, but also gives her comfort and warmth. She even begins humming the tune, over and over.

“Quiet!” the man barks, which are the first words he’s spoken to her.

“You’ll have to go to the shelter for that,” she barks back.

“I’ll kill you!” he hollers, as he raises his fists.

“No, you won’t,” Rudi tells him, moments before he brings his arms down upon her. Which she easily catches.

“Hitting me won’t solve anything,” she murmurs. “It won’t make you warm or less hungry, and it won’t take away any of your pain.”

“I want death,” he utters. “Do you understand? I want it!”

“I understand,” she utters back. “You don’t know how many times I’ve wanted the same thing. Recently, in fact. But somehow, somehow there was always someone to stop me. Well, tonight I’m that someone.”

Rudi afterward releases his arms. She does this so she can put her own arms around him, and she holds him tightly.

He responds to this. He does by trying to resist her. He tries and tries, but after many minutes of this, he holds her, too.

Chapter 70

With lots of hesitation, Rudi climbs the front steps of the Sigma Nu house, and with even more hesitation she steps inside the foyer and the main room, where the smell of eggnog is overwhelming.

There “White Christmas” is playing through the massive speakers, which are a short distance from a well decorated Christmas tree, which itself isn’t far from a mantle where stands a beautiful menorah. Also in the room are lots of people, including Maria and Sandra, who are slow dancing with the biggest of smiles. Which causes Rudi to smile herself, happy not only that her friend is happy, but that she’s in a place where she’s free to be happy.

Rudi also spots Vicki and Jared, who are dancing, too. They’re dancing as if they couldn’t stand without the other. Seeing this and realizing she’ll never again experience what they’re experiencing, a wave of sadness overtakes her, along with that ugly pang, and she backs out of the room. Though she doesn’t back out far, as she backs into someone.

Right away, she spins around, and she sees a grinning Dennis, who’s wearing a blue blazer and a striped tie and holding a piece of mistletoe over both their heads.

“Merry Christmas!” he cries out. “And Happy Chanukah!”

Rudi sneers a bit at this, and she slaps her hands onto her hips, and while nodding at the mistletoe she growls, “How many times have you used that tonight?”

“You’re the first,” he insists.

“I bet.”

“Sigma Nu honor,” he pleads, after raising two fingers.

“Is that supposed to mean something?” she asks.

“I keep telling you — it means everything.”

He says this and lowers the plant, and he tells her, “And not only are you the first person I’ve used it on, you’re the last as well.” He then tosses the mistletoe into a nearby garbage can, and in the same motion he takes Rudi into his arms and kisses her. He kisses her with lots of passion.

This feels good to her, even though she knows that the kiss means nothing to either of them. She’s so lonely that she doesn’t care about meaning. She just wants to be held and be anything but alone. So she kisses him back, and she wraps her arms around him, just as the music changes into “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.”

At once, Dennis breaks their kiss and whispers into her ear: “Let’s dance.” He further leads her into the center of the room, where the two slowly sway.

“You can count on me,” Dennis murmurs, echoing what Bing Crosby has just sang. “I swear you can.”

She wants to believe him. She wants this so much that she clutches him as hard as she can.

“Let’s go outside,” he tells her. “I want to show you something.”

“What?” she asks.

He answers by grabbing her hand and dragging her out onto the front stoop, where he yanks out a small gift-wrapped package from his blazer and hands it to her.

“What’s this?” she demands.

“Your Christmas gift,” he says. “Or Chanukah gift.”

“I haven’t gotten you anything.”

“That’s a good thing.”

“Why’s that?”

“Haven’t you heard: it’s better to give than to receive.”

Rudi sighs.

“Go on,” he goes on, “open it.”

“All right,” she says, before opening the wrapping and exposing a box, which itself contains a pair of spiked bracelets.

Seeing this, Rudi can’t help feel a little something, as she knows he at least put some thought into the gift — something she knows many other guys wouldn’t’ve done.

“Put them on,” he utters.

“Later,” she utters back.

“Put them on!” he chants. “Put them on! Put them on!”

Rudi chuckles at this, in spite of herself, and she puts on the bracelets and shows them to Dennis, who claps his hands while hooting and hollering.

“Happy?” she asks.

“Very,” he answers. “I’m very happy.” He then wraps his arms around her and whispers, “You want to hear that Psychedelic Furs album again?”

“Actually, I want something else,” she tells him, and she kisses him. A kiss even more passionate than the one he gave her.

Chapter 71

With the sounds of “Heaven” bouncing off Dennis’s walls, Dennis sits Rudi on his desk, with her legs wrapped around his backside and both of them not only kissing but mauling each other.

Right then, Rudi wonders if she’s doing exactly what she stopped herself from doing with Owen. But she tells herself that the difference is Dennis doesn’t love her, and that she doesn’t love him. She further tells herself that this is no different than taking a pill, which will provide her a few hours of escape, during which time she’d again be loved and touched and unalone. Though when Dennis unbuttons her jeans and reaches inside them, the reality of what’s about to happen hits her, and it frightens her. It frightens her so much that she grabs his wrists and pulls them away.

“What?” he gasps, with his heart pounding so hard that it’s close to breaking through his chest. “What’s wrong?”

“This,” she mumbles with her eyes averted. “I’ve never done this before.”

“What?” he gasps again.

“I’ve never done this before,” she repeats. This time firmer.

“But . . . but you were married.”

“He was sick,” she tells him, after looking into Dennis’s eyes.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asks, in a tone of voice that suggests he wants to do nothing of the kind.

Carefully, she thinks this over, trying to balance her fear with her irrepressible desire to be loved. She thinks and thinks and thinks, and she releases his wrists. She also tells him: “No. Don’t stop.”

He knows she’s lying. He knows that she really doesn’t want to go through with it. But despite this and despite his so-called “Sigma Nu honor,” he continues anyway. He continues with his kisses and his touches, and he even returns his hands inside her jeans.

There’s actually this wonderful decency in you.

Out of nowhere, Rudi’s words from their first date rattle inside his head — words he’s long tried to pretend he’s forgotten — and they keep rattling, and they only rattle more the more aggressive he becomes with her.

There’s actually this wonderful decency in you.

“No!” he silently screams. “I’m not decent! I’m not! I don’t even want to be! I want to fuck her! I want to fuck her right now! And I’m gonna!”

Exploding with fury, Dennis lifts Rudi up, and he carries her off. Though not to his bed like he intends, but to his doorway. Which is where he drops her to her feet. He also slams open the door, with anger pouring out of him from everywhere.

Rudi, too, is angry, and humiliated, and she mumbles, “What?”

“Your first time is not gonna be in a fraternity house,” are the words he tells her. Words

that are not his own.

“I, I can’t believe this,” she utters, with her anger and humiliation only increasing, and once it boils over she storms off.

“Rudi!” he calls out.

But she doesn’t listen. She just runs down the hallway and down the stairs, with her eyes beginning to tear. She also rips off the bracelets and flings them onto the steps.

“Rudi!” he repeats, as he starts after her. But Rudi just keeps running. She runs past a drunken Rich in the foyer, and she bursts out of the house.

Rich afterward turns to Dennis, who’s rambling down the staircase, and he grins. He also steps in front of him and says, “So do I have to pay up or what?”

“Fuck off!” Dennis howls, before slamming Rich into the wall by the door — slamming him so hard that he almost goes through it. Dennis further runs out of the house, and he sees Rudi racing down the block, and he races after her. But, despite having run track in high school, no matter how hard he runs he can’t shorten the distance between them, and he only catches up with her when she has to fumble for her keys outside Thurston Hall.

“Rudi, please!” Dennis cries out, before stopping right behind her, which is right before he doubles-over out of breath.

“What do you want?” she barks, without looking at him and with her keys clutched in her hand.

“I’m sorry,” he tells her. “I really am.”

“So am I.”

She then places the key in the lock.

“Wait,” he pleads.

“What now?” she howls.

“Just tell me one thing.”

“What?”

“What’s it like?”

“What’s what like?”

“Being in love?”

“Is this another of your stupid jokes?”

“I want to know, just in case it happens to me one day.”

“You’re bullshitting me.”

“I’m not. You were right when you said I can’t count the number of girls I’ve had. I can’t even count the number I’ve had this year. But it’s real easy to count the number of times I’ve been in love. Real easy.”

Rudi responds, by grabbing the door handle.

“Please, Rudi,” he begs. “It can be your Christmas gift to me. I won’t get anything better.”

Rudi doesn’t say anything in reply, but she doesn’t move, either.

“What’s it like?” he once again asks, as softly as he can.

“It’s like,” she begins, after taking a deep breath, “it’s like being swept out onto a wave, from out of nowhere. At first, you’re scared. You’re scared because you have no control over what’s happening or what will happen. Then, then you realize just how beautiful it is up there. It’s more beautiful than anything you ever imagined. And this wave — it just keeps rising and rising, and just when you think it can’t possibly rise anymore it does just that. And you never want to get off!”

Right away, Rudi slams open the door of the building, and she rushes inside, and she doesn't even bother with the elevator. She runs up all nine flights, trying to burn the misery from her body. But it's still there when she gets to her floor. What's more, she knows that it'll always be there. So, as she stumbles toward her room, all she can think about is how she can hasten its demise, and that very night.

Soon, her mind comes up with limitless possibilities, and choosing the quickest and easiest, she unlocks her door and thrusts it open. Which is when shock overwhelms her, because sitting on her bed is Tommy in his wedding tuxedo.

Chapter 72

“What?” Rudi mutters, before slapping her face in an attempt to wake up.

“Go ahead,” Tommy tells her, while pointing to the bathroom.

“Go where?” she asks, with shock still overwhelming her.

“The sleeping pills in the medicine cabinet — that’s where you were headed, weren’t you?”

“I . . . how’d you know?”

Tommy raises his eyebrows at this, and then growls, “Well?”

But Rudi doesn’t move, or say a word.

“If you’re gonna do it, do it!” he barks.

Still, she doesn’t move, so he rises from her bed and marches toward her, and once in front of her he glares, causing her to avert her eyes and mumble, “I don’t want to die.”

“Then live,” he tells her.

“How?”

“I’ll show you,” he says, and he grabs her hand and leads her out the door.

“Where we going?” she utters, while noticing she’s once again in Mrs. Goodwin’s wedding gown.

“You’ll see.”

“I . . .”

“Come on, it’s waiting for us.”

“What is?”

He doesn’t answer. He just drags her into the corridor, which is pitch black apart from the light of hundreds of candles.

“I guess,” Rudi remarks, “I guess I’m just crazy.”

“Yeah,” he says, as they continue down the hallway. “The good kind.”

Tommy soon walks her into the waiting elevator, and once downstairs he leads her outside the dorm, where stands a horse and carriage much like those she saw in New York on Thanksgiving weekend. What’s more, on top of the carriage sits an immense and bloated man in a red suit, who looks just like the princess’ doorman.

“Well?” Tommy whispers.

“Well what?” Rudi whispers back.

“Our suite is waiting.”

“Suite?”

Again, he drags her. He drags her right up to the carriage entrance, and the driver tips his hat to her and says, “Evening, ma’am.”

“Evening,” she says back, just before Tommy lifts her through the door. He further joins her and the carriage takes off, and it makes a left turn at 19th Street, right into Central Park.

“What?” Rudi gasps, while shaking all over — not just at the incongruence of it all but

also at the striking beauty of the park lit up at night.

This is when Tommy takes her into his arms, and he tells her: “You’re not to leave me for a second tonight. I want to remember it and remember it and remember it.” He then kisses her, and she kisses him back, while enjoying once more his touch and scent and breath.

“I don’t even care if this is just a dream,” she cries out.

Quickly, his kisses are all over her, and his hands reach under her gown, setting her on fire and causing her to scream out his name. At the same time, the carriage comes to an abrupt stop, and Rudi looks out and sees that they’re in front of a hotel that looks much like the princess’ building. Only it’s so tall that she can’t see where it ends.

“What is this place?” she asks Tommy.

“Our suite is at the top,” he answers. “All the way at the top.”

It’s then he places his arms underneath her knees, and he lifts her up, and he carries her out of the carriage and into the hotel.

“You’re only supposed to carry me across the threshold,” she jokes.

“Our threshold is everywhere,” he says. “Every place, every second.”

It doesn’t take long before they come to a glass elevator, which opens just for them, and he jumps inside with her and they shoot into the sky. They shoot at such a speed that Rudi can feel gravity pounding her with all its might. But she just smiles at this. She smiles and kisses her husband, who kisses her right back, and he doesn’t stop kissing her until the elevator stops and opens its door.

Tommy afterward carries his blushing bride into the suite, which is so large that it takes up the entire floor, which Rudi glances at in wonder. She also looks through a nearby window and sees that they’re thousands of miles above earth.

“Is this Heaven?” she mumbles.

“It’s going to be,” he tells her, before rushing toward a huge bed in the center of the room, where he tosses her before diving on top of her.

There on the mattress the two roll over each other, with the bed so big that no matter how many times they roll they never reach the end, and never could. Though finally they come to a stop and Tommy says to her: “This is our time, Rudi, and nobody else’s.”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

He answers by tearing off her gown, and she in turn rips his tuxedo. She rips it into shreds right before he picks her up, which he does just so he can lower her upon him.

Right away, she feels him press inside her, and she gasps while muttering, “What are you doing?”

“It’s all right,” he whispers. “I’m not sick anymore. I’ll never be sick again.”

“Tommy!” she hollers, as she inches herself down, feeling so much pain and pleasure that her whole body spasms. Along with this her fists flail about, beating his back again and again.

Suddenly, he stops her. Which just horrifies her.

“What are you doing?” she screams.

“I’m hurting you,” he murmurs. “I told you I would never hurt you.”

“The only hurt I feel is when you’re not around.”

“Don’t you understand, Rudi — I’m always around!”

“Please, don’t stop me. If you love me, don’t stop me.”

Reluctantly, he releases her, and she continues her descent into Heaven, where she cries like a crazed animal, and she won’t stop crying no matter how tightly he holds her. Then, and over and over, she returns to the paradise that’s him. A him that finds every nook of her. She can

feel him everywhere.

“I’m so fucking alive!” she yells, while digging her nails deep into his back. “I can do anything! Fucking anything!”

“I . . .” he mumbles, as he fights for air, “I’ve been telling you this for so long.”

“Together,” she commands. “We’re gonna do it together.”

He nods, and she pounds herself onto him. She pounds herself so hard that the bed keeps hitting the floor.

“Oh, Rudi,” he shrieks, as he begins to break.

“No words!” she shrieks back. “I just wanna feel! I wanna feel!”

Which she does. She feels him succumb and give his entire self to her, and this sends her howling, before once again spasming — doing so much harder than before. She spasms so hard that the bed shakes, and then the room, and the building, too.

Eventually, they calm. They calm and hold each other for what seems like millennia, before Tommy starts to rise.

“Don’t,” she begs, while holding on to him with everything she has.

“I’m sorry,” he tells her, as he removes her arms.

“Shit!” she cries out, while letting her head fall back onto the bed. She further closes her eyes and mutters, “This isn’t gonna happen again, is it?”

“Not for a long time,” he says.

“Damn you! You fucking bastard! Why?”

“You have no more excuses, Rudi. No more excuses not to live. And you better live. You better live big!”

He says this and he’s gone, and when she opens her eyes she finds herself back in her bed

at Thurston Hall.

“Just a dream!” she screams, while striking her fists against the mattress as she rises to her waist. Which is when she sees the state of her sheets.

Chapter 73

Rudi takes her last final exam, and because she still has a week before Vicki and Jared's Christmas wedding she thinks about going home to see Mrs. Goodwin, or at least meeting her somewhere. But she quickly realizes that her time could be better spent, and she instead works full-time for Jeannine.

That week the weather is cold and wet and miserable, and those on the street are even more depressed than normal, knowing that the holiday season will be anything but joyful. So the two women — working mostly in tandem — try to lift people's spirits, by giving out small gifts of fruit and candy, and by inviting everyone they meet to one of the Christmas dinners around town, which include a very special one at the mission. They also try to convince people that things will get better. But this is a nearly impossible task, and by the day before Christmas Eve Jeannine is not only weather-beaten but exhausted, both physically and emotionally. There are times Rudi has to actually hold her up.

"Let's just get some coffee," Jeannine says, after a particularly futile afternoon.

"Sure thing," Rudi tells her, and the two step inside a small decrepit diner in Anacostia.

“It’s so hopeless,” Jeannine mutters as she stops just inside the door, looking as if she’ll collapse right there.

“It’s not,” Rudi insists, while caressing the woman’s back.

“I don’t know if I can do this much longer.”

“If you don’t, who will?”

Deeply, Jeannine inhales and exhales. She does this multiple times until she feels human again, and the two sit at a nearby booth, where they drink large quantities of bad but very hot coffee while Jeannine ponders the magic in front of her.

“You must be a robot,” she says, with a shake of her head.

“What do you mean?” Rudi says back.

“You never get tired or depressed.”

“Not true. Not even close.”

“You don’t show it then.”

“Maybe.”

“Man, I wish I could find the asshole who put up that ad in the Marvin Center.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’d give him a big fucking kiss. Because I didn’t expect to get someone a tenth as good as you.”

“Does that mean I’m getting a raise?” Rudi jokes.

“Nope,” Jeannine utters with a chuckle. “I can’t even afford your salary now.”

“If you want . . .”

“Don’t even think about it. You earn that money.”

“So, what are you doing for Christmas?” Rudi asks, hoping to change the subject to

something more cheerful.

“I’m visiting my family tomorrow,” Jeannine answers.

“In Newark?”

“Yup.”

“You have a big family, don’t you?”

“Huge. And I love them all, even when they piss me off, which is most of the time. What about you?”

“My family is small. But I love them just as much.”

“You going home tomorrow?”

“Right after the wedding.”

“I’m sorry I’m gonna miss it. It sounds wild. Oh, before I forget, I’ve something to give you.”

Jeannine says this and digs into her purse, and she takes out a small gift-wrapped box. At the same time, Rudi pulls out her own present from her seabag, which comes with both a smile and a “Merry Christmas.”

“You too, honey!” Jeannine cries out, before reaching over the table and giving Rudi a big warm hug. The two then exchange gifts, and Jeannine tells her: “Don’t open it until Christmas morning. That’s the rule in our family — no one opens gifts until Christmas morning.”

“I promise,” Rudi says, before putting Jeannine’s gift in her bag.

“So when will you be back at school?” Jeannine asks.

“The second week in January. Will you hold my job that long?”

“Hold it? I should give you mine. And maybe I will.”

“Stop it,” Rudi growls.

“Stop what?” Jeannine growls back.

“Stop giving me praise when I haven’t done anything to deserve it.”

“Haven’t done anything? Remember Stacey — the girl you helped that first day? She’s living with a family down in North Carolina, and she’s not only back at school — she wants to become a nurse. And all because of you.”

“Not because of me.”

“And that family you made me stay up all night helping? I heard the woman just got a good job. They even moved into their own home. All because of you.”

“It wasn’t because of me.”

“What about that guy you almost froze to death to save?”

“What about him?”

“It turns out he was a Medal of Honor winner in Vietnam. People have been looking for him for years, and he’d be dead if it weren’t for you.”

“What about Thelma?” Rudi barks.

“She’s a lost cause!” Jeannine barks back.

“She’s not! And there are lots of people just like her!”

“We’ll save them when you get back!”

“I thought it was hopeless,” Rudi utters, with just a bit of a smile.

“You little . . .” Jeannine utters back, with her own smile. “You’ve been conning me.”

“But I got your spunk back.”

“Sheesh.”

“You know, for all your talk of how wonderful I am, all your stories seem to gloss over

your central role. It was because of *you* they all happened.”

“All I can say is I sure hope to God you don’t become a mathematician. What a waste it would be.”

Chapter 74

With light rain falling from the late afternoon skies, Rudi steps inside the mission on Christmas Eve, with Tommy's backpack across her shoulders.

Right away, she notices water coming through the roof in many places, which is something she's noticed before during storms. But this isn't what she really notices. What she really notices is a nervously excited Jared, who's wearing a dark blue suit and standing by the entrance of the chapel, which is filled with lots of homeless people.

Rudi smiles at this, and she strides up to her friend and grabs his shoulder from behind while uttering, "Hey."

This causes him to shriek and almost shoot through one of the few solid pieces of roof. He then turns to a giggling Rudi, who says, "Sorry about that," and he smiles at her just a little.

"How you doing?" she goes on.

"Not good," he answers, with a shake of his head. "Not good at all."

"I remember what that was like."

"Yeah?"

“Where’s Vicki?”

“In the rectory. She’s even worse than me. In fact, she’s already warned me twice that she might back out of the whole thing.”

“You want me to talk to her?”

“I was kinda hoping.”

He says this and Rudi glances around the chapel, and she asks, “So who’s your best man?”

Jared replies by pulling out a large ring box from his jacket pocket, and he hands it to Rudi while saying, “I was kinda hoping.”

“*Me?*” she gasps. “You want me to be your *best man?*”

“I want you to be my *best friend.*”

“But . . .”

“Rudi, take a look at the guests, and this place. This isn’t exactly gonna be a traditional wedding.”

Chapter 75

Rudi makes her way inside the rectory's small and spartan bedroom, where she sees Vicki, who's wearing a simple white dress and nervously working on her hair in a chair in front of a mirror.

With a big smile, Rudi drops her backpack against the wall and steps up behind her. She also lovingly grasps her shoulders, which causes Vicki to smile, too.

"Hi," Vicki murmurs.

"Hi, yourself," Rudi murmurs back. "You okay?"

"No."

"Well, you're not the only one. But you'll both be fine, trust me."

"I don't know."

"Where are your bridesmaids?"

"I'm looking at her," Vicki says, in a tone of voice that makes it sound more like a question.

"*Me?*"

Vicki shrugs.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Rudi utters. “I would’ve gotten a dress or something.”

“I didn’t want to weird you out,” Vicki utters back. “I mean, it wasn’t that long ago you hated me.”

“I didn’t hate you.”

Vicki responds by giving Rudi an incredulous look.

“All right,” Rudi says with a grin. “Maybe I hated you a little. But that was only because I didn’t know the real you.”

“I didn’t even know her. So will you do it?”

“The thing is I’m already the best man.”

“You’ll also have to give me away.”

“What about your dad?”

“My parents are in Majorca, or somewhere like that. They wouldn’t care anyway. I don’t blame them really. I never gave them much reason to care.”

“In my experience, these things usually work both ways.”

“So how do I look?” Vicki asks, wanting to change the subject.

“Breathtaking,” Rudi tells her.

“Some joke, eh — me in white?”

“Today the slate’s wiped clean.”

Vicki grins at this. She grins all over, and she especially grins at Rudi, who’s the person she most wants to share this day with. Though her smile quickly fades, replaced by her irrepressible doubts.

“What’s wrong?” Rudi asks.

“This is really crazy, isn’t it?” Vicki asks back.

“Well, it’s not the most normal wedding.”

“I mean, getting married when I’m gonna . . .”

“We’re all gonna die, Vicki.”

“But we don’t all know when.”

“Neither do you.”

“I have a good idea.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I’m being selfish.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m gonna get all the happiness for whatever years I have left, and then I’m gonna leave Jared with all the pain.”

“My husband thought a lot like that. It almost kept us apart. But let me tell you — it was worth every ounce of pain, as horrible as it’s been. I’d marry him a million times over. And Jared would do the same for you. You should see him out there. Despite his nerves, he’s so happy he practically has to hold on to something just to keep from rising.”

“Still . . .”

“And you’re not dead yet. Until then anything can happen.”

“Jared says he’s gonna find the cure.”

“I don’t doubt that at all.”

Right then, they’re interrupted, by an organ in the chapel.

“I think that’s our cue,” Rudi says, and Vicki slowly and unsteadily rises.

“So,” Rudi murmurs, “where you guys going on your honeymoon?”

“My family has a house in Rehoboth Beach. Have you ever been there?”

“I’ve never even heard of it.”

“It’s in Delaware, and it’s just beautiful. And this time of the year we’ll practically have the whole town to ourselves. And all the Nic-o-Bolis we can eat.”

“A Nic-o-what?”

“Nic-o-Boli. They’re kinda like calzones, but you really have to try them to understand just how great they are. Hey, I know, why don’t you come with us.”

“On your honeymoon?”

“Sure. You could stay —”

“— *Vicki*.”

“He’s gonna be bored with me in ten minutes.”

“Vicki, has any guy ever been bored with you?”

Vicki chuckles at this, before saying, “But Jared isn’t just any guy.”

“And you’re not just any girl. You’re special. And he loves you.”

“Oh,” Vicki gasps, as she hugs Rudi.

At the same time, Reverend Samson comes to the door in full uniform, and while smiling at them he utters, “Is there gonna be a wedding today or did I get dressed up for nothing?”

He afterward leads the two into a hallway, and while pointing down it he says, “Just turn right at the end and it’ll take you to a door by the back of the chapel.”

“Okay,” Vicki mutters.

“I’ll see you at the altar.”

“Maybe.”

The minister giggles at this, and Rudi leads Vicki down the corridor by the arm, with the

organ music keeping them company.

“So,” Rudi says, “I guess you guys aren’t gonna be staying at the Zoo after this.”

“We just got a place near Dupont Circle. You better come over lots.”

“You got it. Maybe you can even freeze one of those Nic-o-whatevers for me.”

“You got it.”

It’s then the two step out of the rectory, and they see that the rain is coming down hard, especially in the chapel by the minister.

“I guess this isn’t exactly the wedding you dreamed about,” Rudi whispers to her friend, while gazing at both the water and the guests.

“I actually never thought I’d ever have a wedding,” Vicki whispers back. “So this is pretty incredible.”

“You’re pretty incredible,” Rudi says, before taking Vicki’s hand and squeezing it.

“Besides,” Vicki goes on, “Jared really wanted something out-of-the-ordinary — something like your wedding. ‘Something the angels would remember forever,’ is what he said.”

“I think they’ll remember this,” Rudi tells her, just as the music stops.

The minister then turns on a nearby turntable, which plays “You Are So Beautiful.”

Right away, Vicki recalls her first kiss with Jared, and she starts crying. Which is when the minister motions Rudi to come forward, and she again leads Vicki by the arm. This time toward her future husband, who’s crying as much as her. Many of the homeless people in the pews are crying, too. Even Thelma has to rub her eyes a bit.

Eventually, Rudi gets Vicki to the altar, which entails avoiding puddles and finding a place for her and Jared where no water is falling. The couple then joins hands, with Rudi a step behind them.

At the same time, the minister turns off the record player, and he smiles at the pair, and he says to both them and the congregation: "This is my favorite function as a minister. Because it's a time when I get to create a whole new soul. For out of the love these two beautiful people share a new soul will spring forth today. A soul that will live on forever."

Hearing this, it's now Rudi's turn to get emotional, as she knows the words are as true as anything that has ever been spoken.

"Jared and Vicki have decided to recite their own vows," the minister goes on, just before the couple turns to each other, with tears still in their eyes.

"It wasn't long ago that I was the most miserable wretch there was," Jared says. "I only stopped being this when I saw myself in you that night. The night we found each other. You've given me everything, and I pray, I pray that I can give you just a little of it back. This is my promise — my holy vow: I will love you and cherish you, and I will always give you hope."

"I didn't even know what happy was until you," Vicki tells him. "I didn't know anything until you. Until that moment your lips touched mine. Whatever I have to give is yours, and whatever I have to take in the coming years I will gladly take as long as I can take it in your arms. I will love you and cherish you, and I will give you all the hope you've given me."

Now, even the minister is overwhelmed. Though he somehow blurts out to Rudi: "Do you have the rings?"

"Yes," Rudi answers, before taking out the ring box and opening it, exposing two simple gold bands. The first of which Jared takes with his shaking hand, and Samson says to him:

"Place the ring on Vicki's finger and repeat after me: 'With this ring I thee wed.'"

Jared follows the man's command, and after Vicki repeats the process, the minister concludes the ceremony by saying, "By the power vested in me by the District of Columbia, I

now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

At once, the couple complies, and the chapel erupts in cheers, and Rudi is the loudest of them all. But this does nothing to stop that awful pang from returning. It actually hits her harder than ever before.

Chapter 76

With the sounds of “Heat Wave” echoing off the walls of the mission, a smiling Vicki dances with two homeless men. She dances with them as if they’re her best friends in the world, and she doesn’t even care about all the water falling upon her. She’s actually enjoying it.

It’s then she starts singing with the song, and the men back her up in perfect harmony, with her husband watching in glee. Also watching is Rudi, though when she spots Reverend Samson nearby she pries her eyes away and struts up to him, and she says, “You really need to fix that roof.”

“From your lips to God’s ear,” he tells her with a chuckle.

“Is it that expensive?”

“Well, I got some local businesses to donate the materials. They’re in the supply room. Now if I could just find someone to provide the labor.”

“What’s the likelihood of that?”

“Somehow the Lord will provide.”

“It sounds like you’ve been talking to Jeannine.”

“Actually, we talk to the very same guy.”

Rudi grins at this, and she notices Thelma rambling out with her shopping cart, and she tells the minister: “If you’ll excuse me, there’s someone I want to say hello to.”

“Sure. Just don’t forget to say goodbye before you leave.”

“Will do. I actually need to get my backpack out of the rectory.”

Rudi says this and runs up to Thelma, and she gets to her just as she’s leaving the building, and she utters, “Beautiful wedding, eh?”

Reluctantly, Thelma comes to a halt, and she turns to Rudi and says, “If you like this sort of thing.”

“I actually got you something.”

“Got me something?”

Rudi responds by reaching into her inside jacket pocket, and she yanks out a thin gift-wrapped present, which she offers to Thelma while saying, “Merry Christmas. Or Happy Chanukah.”

“I didn’t get you nothing,” Thelma growls, while making no effort to take the gift.

“That’s a good thing,” Rudi insists.

“Why?”

“Haven’t you heard: it’s better to give than to receive.”

Thelma sighs. She sighs much the way Rudi had when Dennis said the same thing to her. Then, much like what Rudi did back then, Thelma takes the gift and unwraps it, revealing a paperback copy of Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives*. Which surprises Thelma.

“Someone told me that she’s one of the best writers there ever was,” Rudi murmurs.

“Yeah?” Thelma murmurs back, with her eyes locked on the cover of the book.

“Yeah.”

At this moment it looks as if Thelma will finally warm to Rudi, and Rudi’s face expresses this hope. But Thelma quickly composes herself, and she barks: “Don’t think this means anything. Old Thelma only cares about herself. And only sometimes.”

The woman afterward spins around, and she rushes off, and Rudi’s heart sinks. It sinks even further than it already was, and as the reception continues both Vicki and Jared can tell Rudi is not right, in spite of the big smile on her face. So they do everything they can to cheer her up: they dance with her, they tell jokes and funny stories in her presence, and they embrace her every chance they get. Still, Rudi only gets worse, and by the time she walks the two toward their car in the fizzling rain, she can’t even fake a smile.

Eventually, the three reach the vehicle, and they notice that the soap written on it has almost washed off, with “Just Married” barely readable on the front passenger door. Which is when Rudi gives the two a small gift-wrapped box while muttering, “Congratulations, and Merry Christmas.”

“We really don’t need any more gifts from you,” Jared mutters back.

“That’s right,” Vicki adds. “You’ve been our gift.”

“Thank you,” Rudi says to them, without looking into their eyes, knowing that if she did she wouldn’t be able to hold it together anymore.

“Have a Happy Chanukah,” Jared whispers, before giving Rudi a kiss on the cheek. “We’ll be sending you something.”

“You don’t have to,” Rudi tells him.

“But we will.”

“You sure you won’t come with us?” utters Vicki, not wanting to leave her friend in such

a downcast state.

“I’m sure,” Rudi answers, after finally looking at Vicki. “Go on, you two — get out of here.”

“Can we drive you somewhere?” Jared asks.

“Go!” Rudi hollers.

“But it’s raining,” Vicki pleads.

“I’m just gonna get my backpack and go right to Union Station.”

“All right,” the couple says in near unison, before jumping inside their car. Though Vicki jumps right out of the vehicle, and she hugs Rudi, and she cries, too.

“Now what?” Rudi growls.

“None of this would’ve happened without you,” Vicki mumbles.

“That’s not true.”

“It is, and you know it!”

“You’re gonna make me cry.”

“Okay, I’m going.”

Quickly, Vicki hurries back into the car, and the couple drives off, with Rudi waving at them until they’re no longer in sight. She then turns around and staggers back to the mission, where standing in the doorway is Reverend Samson, who’s holding her backpack.

Soon, she’s in front of the man, and he notices her pain. “Here you go,” he murmurs, as he hands her the backpack.

“Thanks,” she murmurs back, as she takes it.

“I was just about to say the same thing to you. Thank you, Rudi, for all you’ve done for us. You’re proof God works in mysterious ways.”

“Well, I better get going. Merry Christmas.”

“Happy Holidays.”

Slowly, Rudi backs up.

“Are you okay, Rudi?” Samson asks.

“I’m fine,” she insists.

“If you’d like to talk . . . you can even forget I’m a minister.”

“I’m fine.”

“We all hurt. It’s not a crime, and it’s nothing to be ashamed about.”

“I’ll see you in January.”

“I’m looking forward to it. We all are.”

He says this and Rudi makes her way toward the train station. Though as she approaches it she sees all the Christmas decorations everywhere, and it hits her that this is the first holiday season since Tommy’s passing. Which makes her recall their first Christmas together in the hospital when he gave himself to her for good, and the next one when he was slowly dying in her arms. They were both such special times for her, and they’re now both gone and will never come back.

Funny, she tells herself, here she spent the entire week trying to make strangers feel better about the season when there’s nothing and no one to make her feel better. Though at least she has her Walkman, and she puts on her headphones and listens to her endless “Moonlight Serenade” tape. She also becomes lost in the song. She becomes so lost in it that she doesn’t enter Union Station. She doesn’t even notice it. She just keeps walking and walking, with no direction. There’s only the music, and all the wonderful things it invokes.

For hours, she aimlessly passes through terrible neighborhoods, only coming to a stop

when she reaches a condemned but occupied brownstone. A building that looks vaguely familiar. But this isn't why she's stopped. She's stopped because she notices nearby a short black man in his twenties, whose flashy clothes include every primary color. She notices that he's selling something to a gloomy unkempt woman.

Quickly, the man completes the transaction, and he sees both Rudi and her stare, and he shimmies up to her and murmurs, "Can Dutch get you something, young lady?"

"Who's Dutch?" Rudi says.

"That would be me."

"Why are you called Dutch?"

"Because I'm a treat. Get it? So what can I get for you?"

"Nothing," is Rudi's answer, which sounds anything but sure.

Dutch smiles at this knowingly, and he says to her: "I've got the best crack in town. Even the mayor is a customer."

"Crack?" Rudi utters, having heard the term in passing.

Dutch replies by glancing around, before yanking out a small plastic pouch of off-white nuggets.

"What is it?" Rudi mumbles, with her eyes locked on the bag.

"Crystallized coke," he tells her. "The best high you've ever had. And that's a promise — or your money back."

"How . . ."

"You smoke it."

Dutch says this and reaches into his jacket pocket, and he pulls out a small plastic pipe, and he offers both it and the crack to Rudi while telling her: "Go on, take it — it's all yours."

“How much?” Rudi asks, in a voice not her own.

“The first is free,” the man says, with a big toothy smile. He then points to the brownstone and adds, “You even have free use of my abode.”

Rudi doesn’t react to this. She just stares at the drug, neither making a move for it or a move to get away, even though a big part of her wants to do just that.

“I’m telling you, baby,” Dutch goes on, “it’s paradise.”

“Paradise?” Rudi mutters.

“But don’t take my word for it — try it yourself. What have you got to lose?”

Rudi tries to come up with an answer. She tries and tries.

Chapter 77

Mrs. Goodwin is in a state of frantic.

Hours earlier, she went to Penn Station in Newark to pick Rudi up. But Rudi wasn't on the train. Nor was she on the following one that came from DC, and after the third came without her the woman sped home, and she rechecks the information Rudi gave her. But there's no mistake, so she tries calling Rudi's dorm room, and when there's no answer she calls the dorm itself. But as it's Christmas there's only a security guard there, and he can't tell her anything, and no one else at GW can help her, either.

Next, she tries Maria, and right away Maria recognizes the woman's fear and becomes frightened herself.

"All I know is that she had a wedding to go to," Maria says.

"Yes, I know about that. You don't happen to know anyone who was at it?"

"I know the bride and groom a little. But I don't have any numbers for them. Maybe, maybe Rudi had to work. She's been working there a lot."

"Do you know the number there?"

“I don’t even know the name of the place. I just know that they help homeless people.”

“I hope something didn’t happen to her.”

“Did you try the . . .”

“Try what?” Mrs. Goodwin utters.

“The hospital,” Maria utters back. “There’s a hospital at school.”

“I’ll check that right away — all the hospitals down there.”

“What about her boyfriend?” Maria asks.

“She has a boyfriend?” Mrs. Goodwin asks back, with some surprise.

“Well, I don’t know if he’s exactly her boyfriend. Rudi doesn’t like to talk about things like that. But they, they looked pretty cozy at this Christmas party we were at.”

“What’s his name?”

“Dennis. Dennis Winston. I think he’s still in DC. His dad’s a congressman.”

“Robert Winston?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Thank you. You’ve been a great help.”

Mrs. Goodwin then promises to keep Maria informed and hangs up, and she calls George Washington University Hospital. But Rudi isn’t there, or any anonymous person fitting her description. Though they are able to give the woman the names and numbers of all the other hospitals in the area, and she calls every one, without success.

So the following morning she gets on a plane to Washington, where she visits not only the school but the police, who make her wait another day before filing a missing person report. Even then they’re not too interested, as they have far more pressing concerns with the city being the murder capital of America. Which leads Mrs. Goodwin to check the city’s morgues, where

she happily finds nothing. She further contacts Congressman Winston's office, and she's able to speak directly to the man, who promises to look into the matter personally and quickly.

With nothing left to do, Mrs. Goodwin returns to New Jersey, and she mopes in her living room while waiting for the phone to ring, much as she once did for her son. She also thinks back to this time, and she feels an urge to see photos of her son's wedding, which no one has done, mostly because of the tears they'd likely induce.

As expected, the woman cries while looking at them. But what she didn't expect is how the pictures of Rudi move her just as much as those of her son. Which makes her realize that there's no difference between the two. At the same time, she tells herself that she isn't going to wait around for another child of hers to die. She will do something, no matter what that something is.

Chapter 78

On a dark gray evening Dennis steps inside an apartment building at the Watergate — the same complex that brought down a president a dozen years earlier. He then makes his way to a top-floor unit, where he'd been summoned by his father.

As he opens the front door, he sees the man in the study fixing himself a martini. He sees a man who looks just as towering and intimidating as he did all those years earlier during their ill-fated hunting trip, even if he's now shorter than Dennis, and both balding and overweight.

"Hey," Dennis says to him, without emotion or reverence.

"Can I get you a drink?" his father says back, also without emotion or reverence.

"No, thanks," Dennis utters before walking up to the edge of the room and stopping.

"Have a seat," his father commands, while pointing to a nearby chair.

"No, thanks. What's this all about?"

"Who's Rudi Weiss?"

The question causes Dennis's jaw to unhinge a bit, and a touch of surprise splashes the rest of his face, too, and it takes him many moments before he can mumble, "What?"

“Rudi Weiss,” the congressman repeats. “Do you know her or not?”

“Why?”

“I got a call the other day from her mother-in-law. A woman whose late husband I had some dealings with over the years. A fine ass he was, to be sure, but an important one. And she’s no less important, if not more so.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“The woman was quite distressed. It seems this Rudi is missing.”

“Missing?” Dennis gasps, with his face now covered in shock, which his father both notices and grimaces at.

“So you do know this girl,” his father growls.

“I know her. A little. She goes to school with me.”

“Is that it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Mrs. Goodwin insinuated that you and this girl have . . . how should I put it? A relationship.”

“We’ve dated a few times. Nothing serious. She doesn’t even like me. Actually, she can’t stand me.”

“So you don’t know what happened to her?”

“I haven’t seen her in weeks.”

“Sigma Nu honor?”

“Sigma Nu honor.”

“Fine, I believe you.”

Dennis then starts off, but the congressman calls out, “I’m not finished yet.”

With some exasperation, Dennis stops, and he turns back to his father and crosses his arms while uttering, “Now what?”

“We’re not gonna have any more scandals, are we?” the man utters back.

“No.”

“If you had only kept your nose clean, you’d be going to a real school.”

“GW is a real school.”

“It’s a school for underachieving overprivileged shits like you. You should be going to Stanford, like every man in this family had done for *four* generations — since they opened the damn place!”

“Is there anything else?”

“I had my staff check this Rudi Weiss out. That’s why I waited a few days before talking to you about her.”

“And?”

“And she’s one big scandal.”

“She’s anything but. I only wish I had a relationship with her. I’d be lucky.”

Dennis says this and again turns around, and he again starts to leave.

“I’m not finished yet!” his father howls.

“But I am!” Dennis hows back.

“Stay away from this girl! That’s an order!”

Dennis doesn’t reply. He just opens the front door.

“Don’t forget who’s paying the bills!” the man adds.

Again, Dennis doesn’t reply. He just storms out.

Chapter 79

An aging man in a pinstripe suit gazes at the woman sitting across from him in his office.

“My husband used the services of your firm on more than one occasion,” Mrs. Goodwin says, “and he was always pleased with the results.”

The man smiles at this, and remarks, “Washington is a big city, and a long way away.”

“I don’t care about price,” the woman remarks back, understanding the meaning of the man’s remark.

“You mentioned that she’s had problems with drugs.”

“I only mentioned it to better help you find her.”

“What I’m trying to say is that you might not like what we find.”

“As long as you find her, I will.”

“She could be in trouble.”

“Then you’ll take care of it, won’t you?”

“That’s different than finding her.”

“I’ll pay that price, too.”

Chapter 80

A dark snow falls upon the city. At least that's what it looks like through the dirty windows of a tiny room. A room consisting of nothing more than a stained single mattress on a rotting and exposed underfloor.

On top of this mattress lies a woman vaguely resembling Rudi, who grips a plastic pipe in one hand and a lighter in the other, which she uses to ignite the rock in the pipe. Having barely slept or eaten in weeks, this woman is a horror. She's filthy and gaunt, with blackened lifeless eyes that make her look like a zombie. Her hair, too, is a mess. It's matted down with both dirt and sweat, with its natural color creeping in, making it look more like animal fur.

Just about the only thing recalling Rudi's previous state is her Walkman, which is blasting "Moonlight Serenade" into her skull, much as it has been doing ever since she arrived in this peculiar form of hell. It's actually one of the few things she still possesses, as her backpack, which included her seabag and her clothes, is long gone, along with Tommy's jacket, and even her sneakers.

Deeply, Rudi takes a hit of the crack, and while it doesn't give her anywhere near the

high it gave her the first time she tried it, it's more than sufficient. It's sufficient to send her back to her dream. A dream in which she's lying in a hospital bed, with Tommy by her side and a newborn baby girl in her arms.

"She's so beautiful," Rudi murmurs, while counting the child's fingers and toes.

"She looks just like you," Tommy whispers, while kissing Rudi's neck.

"You mean she looks just like you."

"She looks like both of us."

"I'm so happy, Tommy. You've made me so happy."

"The three of us are gonna be happy forever."

"Tell me you're never gonna leave me again."

"Never."

"It's not real," comes another voice, which brings Rudi out of her dream. She then sees Tommy standing nearby in his tux, with tears rolling down his face.

"You're the one who's not real," Rudi insists.

"No."

"If you can't be with me, I want him."

"He doesn't exist!"

"Neither do you!"

"Rudi, please — you've got to stop this."

"Don't tell me what to do! This is all your fault! You did this to me!"

"What?"

"How, how could you leave me so alone?" Rudi cries out, with tears rolling down her face, too. "How could you?"

“I —”

“— Shut up! I don’t want to hear it! I’m going back to him.”

“No!”

But Rudi doesn’t listen. She just pushes away some dead batteries and takes another deep hit — this one even deeper — and she’s again dreaming. This time watching her daughter’s first steps in Tommy’s lap.

“You can do it, baby!” she calls out to the girl. “Come to Mommy.”

Slowly, the child inches toward her, with each step seemingly taking an infinite amount of time. Not that Rudi minds. She enjoys every second of it.

Eventually, the girl reaches Rudi and hugs her, and Rudi can feel her fingers desperately clutching her, making her feel joy all over. Which only increases when the dream Tommy wraps his arms around her, too.

“Don’t leave us again, Rudi,” this Tommy tells her.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she tells him back. “Not ever.”

Chapter 81

With darkness everywhere, Rudi's door creaks open, and a tall lean man steps inside the room with a flashlight.

Right away, he waves his free hand across his nose, despite being well accustomed to smells like these. He further glances around the room with the aid of the light, and he spots Rudi passed out on the mattress, and he quietly makes his way to her and starts searching for something.

Soon, he finds what he's seeking, and he begins removing Rudi's wedding ring. Which causes Rudi to groggily wake, and she mumbles, "What are you doing?"

The man doesn't answer. He just continues with the ring.

"What are you doing?" Rudi repeats, and she finally understands what's happening, and she grabs the ring and pushes it down over her finger.

"You have to pay, bitch!" the man howls. "I'd take the necklace, too," he adds while pointing his flashlight at her Chai pendant, "but it ain't worth shit!"

"Fuck you!" she hollers.

“Fucking is exactly what you’re gonna do next for your rock, just like the rest of the crack whores.”

He says this and yanks off her ring.

“Give that back!” she screams as she rises to her waist, with a face full of fury.

“Look,” he tells her, “I don’t want to hurt you, but I will if I have to.”

He then starts to leave.

“Give it back!” she yells, before jumping to her feet and rushing at the man. Which is just before she smashes her heel into one of his calves, sending him crashing to the floor screeching in pain.

“You’re fucking dead!” he bellows, right before he climbs to his knees and flings his fist at her face. Which she blocks. She blocks it and flings her own fist into his mouth, causing his head to fly backward onto the floor, along with lots of his teeth.

But she doesn’t stop there. She further kicks the man. She kicks his head and his face, and she stomps his chest, releasing all her drug-infused rage, and she continues doing this long after he’s lost consciousness. She only stops when she remembers the ring, and she leans down and rips it from his lifeless hand and quickly returns it to her finger. Which is when Dutch bursts into the room, with both a flashlight and a handgun.

“What the fuck is going on here?” he hollers in fright, before pointing his light at both Rudi and the unconscious man on the floor.

“Holy shit!” he screams. “Who did that?”

“Me!” Rudi barks, as she marches toward him. “So you better not fuck with me!”

“*You?*” he gasps, and he lifts the gun toward her.

But Rudi grabs his wrist, and she turns it so the gun is pointing at his head. She also

presses down on his trigger finger.

“Don’t kill me!” he cries out. “Please!”

“Let go of it!” she cries back.

He complies, and the weapon hits the floor, and she grabs it and says to him: “Don’t fuck with me again. Ever!”

“You owe me,” he mutters.

“I know!”

“You, you can take Tim’s job.”

“Job?”

“You know, collecting money, and keeping the peace around here.”

Carefully, Rudi thinks it over, as best she can.

“And,” the frightened man continues, “and in return I’ll give you all the crack you want. I’ll even get you new batteries for that fucking Walkman.”

Rudi doesn’t exactly reply. She just points the gun at Tim’s body and says, “Get him out of my sight.”

Chapter 82

The weeks go by, with Rudi continuing her descent into nowhere. Not that she cares. Her life is centered around the drug and the music and the dreams, only interrupted by the menial tasks she has to perform to keep them all continuing in motion.

One night, after finishing her work, she steps outside to unwind, and she lights a cigarette one of the inmates of the house gave her to get on her good side, having quickly learned the horrors of her bad. Then, as she watches Dutch ply his trade to two lost souls on the sidewalk, she leans against the building and gazes into the nothingness while sucking in the stale tobacco.

“Gertrude?” utters a familiar voice from nearby. “Is that you?”

Reluctantly, Rudi turns her head, and she sees Thelma staring at her and her appearance in shock.

“What are you doing here?” Thelma growls.

“What do you care?” Rudi growls back. “You’re not my mother!”

“Move along, grandma,” Dutch says to the woman, as he strides up to her while shooing her away.

“Go fuck yourself,” she says back.

He responds to this by grabbing her, and she responds back by taking out the stick from her shopping cart, which she uses to beat the man. She beats him so hard that he collapses onto the sidewalk with his hands covering his face.

Thelma afterward spins to Rudi and barks, “I thought you were better than this.”

“You thought wrong!” Rudi barks back.

“Obviously!”

With lots of anger, the woman chucks her stick back into the cart and rambles off, and Dutch climbs to his feet and says to Rudi: “Why didn’t you stop her?”

“My job’s inside the house,” she hollers.

“Then get back in there!”

Rudi doesn’t exactly reply. She just flicks the remains of her cigarette at Dutch, and she returns to the inferno.

Chapter 83

Hector and his two goons come upon a nondescript building in Arlington, Virginia. They further march inside it and into an equally nondescript office, where waiting are two men with olive complexions.

After a bit of small talk, one of the two men says to Hector with a thick foreign accent: “Who is your favorite poet?”

“Rumi, of course,” Hector says back, with a knowing smile.

The man nods at this, and a third man steps inside the room from an adjacent one. This man is carrying a printed document and carrying it as if it were something valuable. He carries it over to Hector, who opens his overcoat.

“Does this mean no more selling?” the larger of the two goons whispers to Hector.

“How much do we have left?” Hector whispers back.

“Just what’s in the trunk.”

Chapter 84

In one of the downstairs rooms of the brownstone Hector watches his goons count stacks of small bills.

At the same time, Dutch, who's sitting on a couch nearby, sticks a small knife into one of the packages in front of him on the coffee table, watched by a pair of men standing behind him. He further pulls out the knife, along with some white powder, which he lets settle on his tongue as if he were tasting fine wine.

"Good?" Hector asks.

Dutch responds with one of his toothy smiles and says, "Much better than good."

"It's almost criminal what you do to our coke," Hector goes on, while pointing to a big box of baking soda on the table, which stands next to a box of many little packages of crack.

"To each his own," Dutch utters. "To each his own."

Hector then turns to the goons, who are now stacking the money into attaché cases, and the larger of the two nods at him.

"A pleasure as always, Mr. Dutch," Hector says, and the three men start to leave.

“The pleasure is all mine, boss,” Dutch says back. “And please give my regards to President Ortega.”

This causes Hector to come to a sharp stop, and he spins toward Dutch before growling, “That was not very funny. A joke like that can get you killed where I’m from.”

“Sorry,” Dutch mutters, with his hand in front of him defensively. “No offense. Hell, I even voted for Reagan.”

Hector doesn’t respond to this. He just turns around and again starts to leave. Though he once again stops when he sees Rudi stumble into the room and toward Dutch.

“Do I remember you?” he whispers to her, with his head tilted slightly.

But Rudi ignores him, and she continues to Dutch, and she drops a bunch of crumpled cash onto the table while saying, “Everyone’s paid up.”

“Fine,” he says back, without looking at her. Which is when she sticks out her hand in his face, and while sighing a bit he drops a package of crack onto her palm.

“More,” she demands.

He glares at her, but he gives her another pouch, and she stumbles away. Though, as she passes Hector, he grabs her chin, and he murmurs, “Yes, I remember you. You’ve changed some, but I remember you, and I told you I’d know you better.”

She responds to this, by slapping away his hand, and she struts toward the stairs.

“You fucking witch!” he howls, before following her as she climbs up the steps.

“Hector,” the shorter of the goons pleads.

“I wouldn’t do that, boss,” Dutch hollers, as Hector comes to the foot of the steps.

“I’m gonna show that witch something!” he hollers back. “I’m gonna show her hard!”

“That ‘witch’ put my boy Tim in the hospital. She broke every fucking rib he’s got, and

his jaw, too. And the dude's got a black belt."

"Get out of here — that little thing?"

"Don't fuck with her. I'm warning you. I'm warning you not because I like you, but because I like your coke."

Hector thinks it over, and he waves Dutch off, and he again starts up the stairs.

"Wait a second!" Dutch yells, and he reaches into a leather bag lying next to him on the couch. He does this while Hector spins toward him with great aggravation. Which is when Dutch adds, "I was going to do this myself — or more likely have someone else do it."

"Do what?" Hector barks, and Dutch pulls out a loaded hypodermic needle and a rubber hose, and he walks them over to Hector.

"What is this?" Hector asks.

"The solution to both our problems," Dutch answers, with another of his smiles.

"What is this?" Hector repeats, after taking the needle.

"Enough speedball to kill 10 John Belushis," Dutch tells him. "You see, I need to get rid of this 'witch.' Tim's getting out of the hospital soon, and he's threatening to shoot 'this whole fucking place up' if he has to. And that would kinda be bad for business."

"I don't need drugs to get what I want!"

"Sure thing, boss. Just let me know where to send your body."

This remark leads Hector to glance at the needle. He glances at it carefully.

"Please, Hector," the larger goon pleads. "Your cousin —"

"— How many times do I have to tell you this: fuck-my-cousin!"

Hector afterward starts up the stairs.

"Just wait a while," Dutch insists, causing him to once again come to a stop. "Wait till

she's nice and toasted like. In the meantime, drinks are on the house."

Chapter 85

Late at night Hector stops outside Rudi's room, followed by the two goons, who are both holding flashlights, and he tells them: "Wait here."

"We're not supposed to leave you," the shorter goon insists. "You know this!"

"Wait here!" Hector quietly hollers.

"Please, Hector," the larger man pleads, "let's just go."

"No!"

"When we get back home I will get you the finest girl in Miskitia. But —"

"— *Wait here.*"

Angrily, Hector grabs the man's flashlight, and he steps inside Rudi's room, and he closes the door behind himself while trying hard not to breathe in the stench. He further makes his way toward Rudi, who's passed out on the mattress not far away. Then, from right beside her, he smiles. He also whispers, "You're not gonna hurt me, are you, little girl? No, that nasty man downstairs was only playing a joke on me."

He afterward sits next to her, and he thinks about removing his overcoat. But he decides

against this, and instead he reaches inside it and yanks out the rubber hose, which he ties around Rudi's arm while murmuring, "Better to be safe."

"Tommy?" Rudi murmurs back, while beginning to stir.

"Yes, Tommy is right here," Hector insists. "Tommy is going to make everything all better."

This is when he takes out the hypodermic needle and brings it to Rudi's arm.

Chapter 86

Rudi wakes before the sun has fully risen, with her head and just about everything else throbbing with pain. At first she doesn't even know why she's awake, but then she hears a man's voice calling out for Hector from just outside her room.

This is when she notices the rubber hose tied to her arm, and it's not the only thing she notices. She also notices Hector lying on the floor next to her, with his lifeless eyes gazing upward and an empty hypodermic needle stuck in his arm just below his rolled-up sleeve.

"What?" she gasps, while trying to figure out what happened. All she knows for sure is that she doesn't know the man, even if he does seem a little familiar. So her mind tries to make sense of everything, or at least something.

Again, a voice calls out for Hector. This one different and louder, and it's accompanied by a knock on the door.

Right away, Rudi rips the hose from her arm, and she searches through the dead man's pants pockets, hoping to find something meaningful. Soon, she finds his wallet, but there are no IDs inside it. Just lots of hundred-dollar bills. So next she checks the jacket pocket of his suit,

and there she finds a diplomatic passport for a Hector Guzman, issued by the Republic of Miskitia.

“Miskitia?” she quietly mumbles to herself. “What the hell is a Miskitia?”

The only answer is a set of loud knocks and even louder voices — a pair of them, and Rudi has a strong feeling that they aren’t going to wait outside for long. So she drops the passport, and knowing that she’ll have to leave both the house and the neighborhood she yanks off Hector’s overcoat and puts it on herself. She also stuffs her Walkman into one of the pockets and grabs Dutch’s gun from the side of the mattress, and she silently scurries to the side of the door, where she waits. She waits with such fright that she doesn’t dare breathe.

Fortunately, she doesn’t have to wait long, as the door creaks open. With this comes the sound of the larger goon crying out in horror. He then hurries toward Hector’s body, and Rudi slips out the door, only to face the smaller goon, who looks at her in surprise before reaching for something inside his jacket.

But Rudi points her gun at him first, and he lifts his hands in surrender. “Sshhh,” she also whispers, with a finger to her lips. A finger that’s shaking.

An instant later, she’s running toward the staircase while listening to the two goons call out to each other. This short journey takes forever, but she eventually reaches the stairs, just as the larger goon shouts, “Stop!” Which is followed by the whizzing of a bullet by her ear, which causes her to scream and jump down the stairs.

Quickly, she reaches the ground floor, getting there as a couple of bullets hit nearby, barely missing her. Which causes her to once again scream, and she sprints toward the front door of the house, which Dutch is holding open for her.

“Don’t come back,” he whispers as she flies past him. The man then closes the door and

waits. He waits until he sees the goons reach the bottom of the steps. Which is when he reopens the door and shouts, “She went this way!”

Hurriedly, the two men ramble to the entrance, and the larger one knocks Dutch onto the floor before they run down the stoop.

“Fucking assholes!” Dutch hollers from his knees, before slamming the door closed.

Ignoring this, the men glance down the street in both directions and see Rudi in neither.

“You go this way,” the larger goon orders the smaller one while pointing to his left.

Which is just before he takes off to his right.

Meanwhile, a shoeless Rudi runs down the wet and cold sidewalk, with her arms flailing about and her eyes as wide as possible. She isn’t even sure where she’s going. All she knows for certain is that she’s finally woken, for the first time since entering the crack house. But this only makes her horror worse. A horror she knows she might not escape. She’s so lost in this thought that she doesn’t even realize she still has a gun in her hand. Though when she notices a man staring at the weapon as she passes she tosses it into a nearby garbage can before continuing on.

Right then, she approaches an intersection, where sits a homeless man, who smiles at her while remembering all the kindness she showed him in the past months, and he sweetly calls out her name.

But Rudi doesn’t react to this, and the man learns why when he sees the larger goon rambling toward her.

“Stop right there!” the goon screams, as he comes to a stop at the edge of the sidewalk.

Rudi doesn’t respond, so he aims his weapon at her and steadies it, wanting to make sure that he doesn’t miss this time. Though, just as he pulls the trigger, someone pushes him onto the street.

Cursing loudly, he jumps to his feet, and he sees that Rudi is gone, along with whoever pushed him.

Chapter 87

Maria is watching TV by herself in her dorm room when she hears loud knocking on her door.

“Who is it?” she utters, with a bit of fear.

“Open up!” Rudi screams, while continuing to pound her fists against the door. “Fucking open up!”

Stunned, Maria jumps up and sprints to the door, and she starts opening it when Rudi burst inside, knocking her onto the floor.

“Rudi?” Maria mutters, not quite recognizing her. “Is that you?”

Rudi doesn’t reply. She just flings open a bureau drawer and yanks out the few clothes she hadn’t packed for Christmas vacation. She further tosses her mattress onto the floor, exposing the small amount of cash she keeps there for an emergency. Which she grabs.

“Where have you been?” Maria calls out, still not acclimated to Rudi’s appearance, and when she gets a whiff of her she grimaces and adds, “What have you done to yourself?”

“Bag!” Rudi screams, while turning to Maria.

“What?” Maria utters, as she rises to her feet.

“I need a fucking bag!”

Maria responds by grabbing Rudi, who just pushes her away and howls, “Leave me alone!”

“I won’t!” Maria howls back, before grabbing her friend again. She also yells, “Mrs. Goodwin is out of her mind with worry! She’s been calling me every day, and she’s been here at least three times already! Your stepdad came, too. And Jared and Vicki — they’ve been on the streets looking for you, along with your boss — sometimes half the night. Even Dennis is worried!”

All this moves Rudi. But she shakes her head and pushes Maria away again while saying, “I gotta get out of here!”

“Why?” Maria hollers.

“I’m in big shit!”

“Let me help you!”

“You need to stay away from me!”

“Rudi, we all love you! Do you have any idea how much? Do you even care?”

“That’s why I have to get out of here!”

“No!”

Once more, Maria grabs Rudi, and she starts dragging her toward the bathroom by the lapels of Hector’s overcoat.

“What are you doing?” Rudi screams.

“It’s called an intervention,” Maria tells her.

“I can kill you, Maria!”

“Go right ahead. Because the last time you needed me I wasn’t there, and that’s never happening again!”

Quickly, Rudi pulls away from Maria, leaving her holding the coat, which she drops before grasping the back of Rudi’s T-shirt and continuing her dragging.

At the same time, Rudi continues to resist, but she doesn’t resist all that much, mostly because she’s exhausted. She’s exhausted in every possible way a person can be exhausted.

Eventually, Maria gets Rudi into the bathroom, and she pushes her into the tub, before showering cold water upon her, much as Rudi did to her months earlier.

“Do you know it’s February?” Maria asks.

Rudi doesn’t exactly respond to this. Not to Maria or to the freezing water. She just rolls into a fetal position and starts breaking.

“All the time you’re helping others,” Maria goes on. “All the fucking time. You help strangers and homeless people. You even help people who hate your guts! You’ve helped me so many times I can’t even count them. But now it’s your turn, whether you like it or not.”

“I fucked up,” Rudi mumbles, with a couple of shakes of her tucked-in head. “I fucked up.”

“We all do,” Maria insists.

“Not like this. I fucked up badly.”

“Why, Rudi? Why?”

Rudi doesn’t answer. She just keeps shaking her drenched head. She also starts to cry.

“Tell me why!” Maria shouts.

“I miss him!” Rudi shouts back, after raising her teary face. “I miss him so much! I literally can’t live without him.”

Maria responds to this by falling to her knees, and she hugs Rudi, and she tells her: “I know.”

“No, you don’t,” Rudi tells her back, as she continues her crying on Maria’s shoulder.

“No one knows. Tommy made me ten-feet-tall, and now, now I can’t even reach the floor.

Fucking hell, love is the worst drug there is.”

“I’m gonna make you better, Rudi.”

“No one can.”

“And not just me. We’re all gonna help. Because, because it’s we who can’t live without you.”

Maria afterward bathes and cleans Rudi, which isn’t so easy with Rudi falling asleep all the time. She also helps her friend cut and dye her hair, and she even gives Rudi some of her makeup, which reminds her of when Rudi did the same for her in the high school bathroom. Then, as Maria watches Rudi slowly dress, she sees her approaching human again, and Rudi explains why she’s in trouble.

“Are you sure you killed him?” Maria gasps in shock.

“I’m not sure of anything,” Rudi says. “But they obviously think I killed him. They must be related somehow, because I don’t know why else they would’ve chased me for so long and risked firing a gun in the middle of the day with everyone around. Drug dealers usually only care about one thing: themselves.”

“Maybe we should go to the police.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“If this guy was a member of some big drug family, I’m fucking dead in jail.”

“But the police —”

“— They’ll throw me in jail, Maria, if not for killing this guy, then for all the coke in my system. There’s probably enough to charge me with intent to distribute.”

“So what are you gonna do?”

“I have to get out of here, and fast!”

“Why?”

“I don’t know where any of my IDs are! They could be coming here right now. I need to hide somewhere.”

“Hide?”

“Yes!”

“I, I think I might know a place.”

“Where?”

“The last place anyone would ever look for you.”

Chapter 88

Sitting in an upscale Georgetown apartment is a well dressed man in his late twenties, who has a passing resemblance to Hector and who is reading the English edition of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* when the phone starts ringing.

He doesn't answer it, because he wants to finish the page he's reading. But the phone won't stop ringing. So he sighs and lays the book onto a nearby end table, and he answers the device.

"It's me," comes the voice of the larger goon.

"Where are you?" the well dressed man growls, while reflexively rubbing his aching head, which is something he often does whenever he has to listen to the man's voice. "Has that boy been whoring it up again?"

"Actually, I have some bad news."

"I don't like bad news."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't want to hear your apologies. Just tell me the bad news."

“Your cousin is dead.”

The well dressed man doesn't react to this. He simply says, “What is the bad news?”

“I . . .” mumbles the goon.

“What happened?”

“Some crack whore killed him. She had help, from that Dutch guy. I saw —”

“— I could curse my father for making me use that useless idiot. Well, if that is all you have to say to me . . .”

“No. The girl, she disappeared.”

“So?”

“She disappeared with the coat.”

“What coat? What are you talking about?”

“Hector had this clever idea to hide the bill of lading in the coat.”

“That was indeed clever of him. He probably saw it in a movie.”

“I think so. Anyway, he thought it would be safe there.”

It's then a rage starts burning within this well dressed man, and his eyes light up as he howls, “How could she get this coat with you two by his side at all times?”

“We, we weren't by his side,” utters the goon.

“You fool! I gave you one stupid thing to do, and you can't even do that!”

“I'm sorry.”

“What did you just say?”

“Nothing.”

“I will shoot you myself!”

“It's not our fault. He forced us to wait outside.”

“It is your fault! Do you have any clue what you’ve done?”

“We’ll find her, Eduardo. I promise.”

“How?”

“I heard some bum call out her name. And we’ve seen her before, with some bag lady.

That’s how this all started. You see, Hector made a pass at —”

“— I don’t want to hear anything more about Hector! You get me that bill of lading or you’re as dead as him — both of you!”

Eduardo says this and slams the phone down. Though he calms himself again, and he picks up the receiver and dials a number.

“Hello?” comes a voice.

“Yes, this is Eduardo Guzman. I need to speak with the National Security Advisor, and I need to speak with him right now.”

Chapter 89

Rudi stops outside the Sigma Nu house with Maria, and she shakes her head over and over. “This is the dumbest idea in the history of dumb ideas,” she mutters, while again wearing Hector’s coat and holding a paper shopping bag of her things.

“It’s the perfect idea,” Maria insists. “The perfect place to hide.”

“Me living in a frat house?”

“*Fraternity.*”

“What?”

“They don’t like it when you say ‘frat.’”

“Ugghh. This is dumb, Maria.”

“You have a better idea?”

“Yes! I can run as far from here as possible.”

“Now that’s dumb.”

“Why?”

“You’ll have no money, no friends, and lots of people will see you. And let’s be honest

here: you're not exactly the type of person who goes unnoticed."

Rudi sighs, just before Maria drags her inside the house by the hand, and she continues dragging her into the main room, where a handful of guys are watching TV.

"Is Patrick around?" Maria asks.

"I think he's in the back room," one of them says, and the two women make their way down the corridor and step inside the small room where Rudi first met Dennis.

"Hey, Patrick," Maria utters to a redheaded man, who's playing darts with a few other people.

With a big smile, Patrick turns to her and says, "What's up?"

"I don't know if you know Rudi," Maria says back, while pointing to her friend.

Patrick responds by offering Rudi his hand while trying to ignore how awful she looks, and he tells her: "I've seen you around."

"Me, too," Rudi tells him back, before shaking his hand.

"Patrick is the chapter commander," Maria goes on.

"What's going on?" Patrick asks.

"I heard you're looking for a new boarder."

"Yeah. The last guy split a few weeks ago. No notice, no nothing. It's really put us in a bind. Do you know someone?"

"Rudi," Maria answers, with a nervous little smile.

"*Rudi?* You're joking, right?"

"She needs a place to stay."

"A girl living in a fraternity house?"

"She's not your typical girl."

“Still . . .”

“Can we at least see it?”

Reluctantly, Patrick complies, and he leads Rudi and Maria to the second floor, where he stops and points to an open door a short distance away while saying, “That’s the only full bathroom in the house. It’s got two showers, but that’s for nearly twenty guys. And there’s no bathtub.”

Maria reacts to this by turning to Rudi questioningly. But Rudi just shrugs, knowing that it’s still a lot better than where she didn’t bathe for six weeks.

The three afterward continue to the third floor, and they soon reach a wooden ladder. “It’s up there,” Patrick tells the two, while pointing the way. He also starts upward, followed by the women. “As you can see,” he goes on, “there’s no door or any real privacy.”

Soon, they get to the attic and Rudi glances around the place, which is about the size of her dorm room in spite of the low ceiling, with a basic single bed, a small refrigerator, and a broken-down couch.

“It’s pretty shitty,” Patrick remarks.

“It’s all right,” Rudi mumbles, knowing that it’s a lot better than where she unlied the past six weeks.

“How much is the rent?” asks Maria.

“Three hundred a month,” Patrick says.

Once again, Maria turns to Rudi questioningly, and once again Rudi shrugs.

Patrick afterward leads Maria and Rudi down the stairs, and as they get close to the bottom he shakes his head while uttering, “I’m not gonna lie to you guys — I don’t think this’ll work out. I see all sorts of potential problems.”

“Maybe he’s right,” Rudi says to Maria.

“Rudi really needs this place,” Maria pleads with Patrick. “Please.”

It’s then the three reach the ground floor, and Patrick sighs. He also says to them: “Okay, we’ll give it a try. But she has to be out of here by Pledge Weekend. That’s right after finals.”

“No problem,” Maria cries out, unable to hide her excitement.

But Rudi isn’t so excited. Actually, she isn’t excited at all. But when Patrick again offers her his hand, she shakes it.

“Welcome,” he murmurs.

“Thanks,” she murmurs back.

At the same time, Maria whips out a checkbook from her purse, and while Rudi watches her write out a check she says, “I’ll pay you back soon. I promise.”

“You’ve already paid me back,” Maria tells her with a smile. “You’ve paid me back many times over.” She then hands Patrick the check, just as Dennis steps inside the house.

With both surprise and shock, Dennis looks at Rudi, with the shock deriving mostly from how bad she looks. Though this shock quickly fades, replaced by concern.

“You all right?” he whispers.

“Yeah,” she answers, while avoiding his eyes.

“Rudi’s our new boarder,” Patrick says to Dennis, with a bit of a grin.

“A girl living in a fraternity house?” Dennis gasps.

“She’s not your typical girl,” Maria interjects.

“That’s for sure,” Dennis utters with a smile. A smile Rudi can’t help notice.

Chapter 90

Rudi and Maria are sitting together on the broken-down couch in the attic, eating a pizza Maria bought from the Rathskeller.

“Not the greatest pizza ever,” Maria utters, as she drops her slice. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Rudi says, and she means it, as while the pizza tasted awful the first time she tried it with Dennis, this time it’s the best food she’s ever eaten, and she enjoys every bite.

“I’ll buy you some clothes tomorrow,” Maria goes on.

“You don’t have to,” Rudi insists.

“I have to,” Maria insists back. “You barely have enough for a few days. There are lots of other things I need to buy you as well.”

“Thank you. I’m beginning to sound like a broken record.”

“I actually have to admit something,” Maria mutters. “I really like helping you like this.”

“What do you mean?” Rudi asks.

“For a long time now I’ve thought our relationship was way too one-sided. Now, we’re at least approaching even.”

“We’re way past even.”

“Are you gonna call Mrs. Goodwin?”

“After dinner.”

“You can use my calling card.”

“*Maria.*”

“What?” Maria says, before taking the card from her wallet, along with some twenties.

Both of which she offers to Rudi.

“I can’t take that,” Rudi utters, with a shake of her head.

“You can, and you will. That’s an order. And you better follow it if you don’t want to go back into the tub.”

“There’s no tub,” Rudi says, with a little grin.

“Take it,” Maria murmurs, while holding the cash and the phone card in front of Rudi, who reluctantly grabs it.

“Are you gonna tell Mrs. Goodwin you’re here?” continues Maria.

“No,” Rudi answers. “And neither are you.”

“But —”

“— Please, Maria.”

“All right. But I’m gonna tell Jared and Vicki you’re here.”

“Leave them out of this. They’ve got enough to worry about.”

“You should’ve thought about that before you befriended them.”

Rudi chuckles at this.

“You’re almost back to your old self,” Maria says.

“You need glasses,” Rudi growls.

“Some sleep, some decent food, and you’ll be all brand new. Then what?”

“I have to find out who that guy was and how much trouble I’m in.”

“How?”

“I guess I’ll check the newspapers tomorrow. There was also the dead guy’s passport.”

“What about it?”

“He had a passport from a place called the Republic of Miskitia.”

“Never heard of it, and I got A’s in Geography.”

“I’ve never heard of it, either. All I know is that the men were Hispanic.”

“Maybe it’s somewhere in South America. You always hear about these new countries forming.”

“Maybe.”

“I actually have an uncle who was in the Merchant Marines. He’s been like everywhere. I can ask him about it.”

“All right.”

“The only thing is that he’s kind of difficult to get a hold of.”

“In the meantime,” Rudi says, “you and Sandra should find a new place.”

“Why?” Maria asks.

“If they find out where I lived . . .”

“We’ll be fine.”

“Fine. But if anyone asks either of you about me, just say you haven’t seen me since Christmas.”

Rudi says this and the two finish dinner, and afterward Rudi and Maria slowly climb down the stairs together hand-in-hand, with Rudi feeling tired, but better.

Eventually, they get to the foyer and peek their heads inside the main room, where many men and women are watching a pornographic video, with every eye there locked on the screen.

This causes Rudi to grimace, and seeing this Maria shrugs, and she murmurs, “This is a frat.”

“*Fraternity*,” Rudi retorts. “Do they watch this shit every night?”

“Not every night. But lots. Tonight’s actually ‘Porn Till Dawn Night.’ The little sisters organize it every semester.”

“I can’t believe you’re part of this,” Rudi says, while pointing at the TV and shaking her head. “It’s so sick.”

“I don’t know,” Maria says back, “some of it’s okay.”

“*Maria.*”

“Don’t you have a phone call to make?”

“Ugghh. I’ll see you later.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Maria then kisses Rudi on the cheek, and Rudi makes her way down the hallway to the pay phone, doing so with her head down.

Chapter 91

Mrs. Goodwin answers the phone. She answers it herself, which she's done a lot of in the past weeks, always hoping the call will bring her relief.

Right away, Rudi — who's sitting on the floor underneath the pay phone — hears the hope in the woman's voice, but she's so embarrassed that she can't say a thing. She's actually been dreading this moment ever since Maria brought it up, feeling that she's let her mother-in-law down and in a big way had abandoned her.

"Is someone there?" Mrs. Goodwin utters.

"It's me," mumbles Rudi.

"Rudi?" the woman gasps, sounding as if she's about to pass out.

"I'm so sorry, Mom."

"Are you all right?"

"Maybe."

"What does that mean?" Mrs. Goodwin screeches.

"It's a long story," Rudi tells her, with her voice breaking a bit. "A long terrible story."

“What happened?” Mrs. Goodwin pleads, with her voice breaking, too.

“The memories, they caught up with me.”

“I’m sorry, Rudi.”

“You have no reason to be sorry.”

“I should’ve never sent you away.”

“It’s not your fault. The memories would’ve found me wherever I was.”

“Please come home.”

“I can’t.”

“I promise I won’t make you go anywhere again. You can stay in that room of yours all day long if you want, just as long as you’re home.”

“I can’t, Mom.”

“Then I’m gonna take the next plane down there, or to wherever you are!”

“You can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’m in a lot of trouble.”

“I’ll help. I’ll get the best lawyers.”

“It’s not that kind of trouble. At least not yet. You have to stay away from me.”

“I won’t!”

“There are dangerous people after me.”

“I’ll hire someone. I’ll hire a whole fucking army!”

“Mom, if anything ever happened to you, that would be it for me. Do you understand what I’m saying? I couldn’t take it. If you care about me, you’ll stay away until I can figure this out.”

“Surely I can help.”

“You’re helping right now. I love you so much.”

These words, all by themselves, cause Mrs. Goodwin to break down in tears, especially as Rudi has never said them to her before.

“What’s wrong?” Rudi asks, as she begins to cry, too.

“I love you, too!” the woman utters.

“I promise,” Rudi continues, “I promise that as soon as I get myself out of this mess nothing will keep me from you.”

Mrs. Goodwin doesn’t reply. She just keeps weeping.

“We’re still going to Europe this summer, aren’t we?” Rudi asks, trying to pick up the woman’s spirit.

“Of course,” the woman answers. “I have it all planned out.”

“I can’t wait. I’m never gonna leave your side the whole time. You can even pick out the restaurants. And maybe, maybe I’ll even wear a dress now and then.”

“But, Rudi —”

“— I got you a really nice Chanukah gift,” Rudi interrupts.

“The only gift I want is you,” Mrs. Goodwin insists.

“I lost it, the gift. I lost almost everything, including my life. But I want you to know, I want you to know that I still have your ring and pendant. I may have hit below bottom but I never lost them, and I never will.”

“I don’t care about them!”

“I do!”

“They’re just things. Lousy things.”

“It’s what they represent that matters.”

“Oh, Rudi, you, you must need some money.”

“I’m fine.”

“Don’t shut me out! Please don’t shut me out!”

“Maria lent me some.”

“I’ll send her a check.”

“All right. Just as long as you let me pay you back.”

“Rudi, have you not figured it out yet — money means nothing to me! You mean everything!”

“You mean everything to me, too, Mom. I swear you do.”

“Where are you staying?”

“I’m not gonna tell you and neither will Maria, and you’d never find out yourself. So just stay home.”

“I’ll go through every fucking building in the city if I have to!”

“Please, Mom, I’ll call you every day. I promise. But please stay home.”

“Every day?” the woman mutters.

“Every single day,” Rudi insists.

It’s then Dennis steps inside the house, and he sees Rudi, and her crying shakes him. It shakes him even more than seeing her earlier had shook him. It also makes him want to cry, too, and he further has a near irrepressible urge to rush over to her and to take her into his arms, and do anything to make her tears go away.

This urge frightens him, as he’s never felt such an urge before. It frightens him so much that he hurries up the stairs to his room.

Meanwhile, Rudi finishes her call with Mrs. Goodwin and hangs up. Though she continues to sit on the floor by the pay phone. She sits there and tries to compose herself. Then, even after she's done this, she still sits there. She sits there until her face is completely dry. Which is when she rises to her feet and peeks inside the main room, through the back entrance.

Lots of people are still there, and they are still watching porn, but not seeing Maria she decides to go to bed. She also happens to glance at the actors on the screen, and glances at them perhaps a few seconds longer than necessary.

"How disgusting," she mutters, while trying to convince herself that she isn't titillated by them even a little.

"You got a problem?" bellows a deep voice from nearby.

Slowly, Rudi turns her head, and she sees J. D., who's a huge heavyset guy with short black hair, who's sitting in a big white easy chair a few steps away. He's also sneering at her.

With her own sneer, she tells him: "What if I do?"

"Fuck off," he barks.

"I bet that's what you'll be doing right after watching this," she barks back, and without waiting for a reply she starts down the corridor.

"I can't believe we're letting a chick stay here!" he shouts.

"I'm not a 'chick'!" she shouts back.

"A psycho chick!"

Rudi ignores this, and she marches up the stairs, and she soon reaches Dennis's room on the third floor, from which she hears "How Soon is Now?" playing from inside the closed door.

This surprises her. It surprises her that he isn't downstairs watching porn, and it further surprises her that he's listening to the song by himself, and not as a means of seduction.

Though she wonders if there really is someone in there with him, and she leans her ear up to his door. But all she hears is the voice of the singer. The one who sings like he really means it.

Before long, the song ends, and it starts again, and Rudi raises her hand to knock on Dennis's door. She does this because she, too, wants to hear the song. She wants to hear it all night long. But she stops herself, and she makes her way to her new home, feeling more and more fatigued with each step.

Chapter 92

Rudi sleeps for more than a day, and when she finally wakes with the rising sun she feels almost good, and she feels even better when she sees the stacks of new clothes in front of her bed, along with makeup, toiletries, and accessories, and all kinds of food. She also sees a big bouquet of flowers, which Jared and Vicki left the day before, and a get well card that mentions that the two will be visiting her again that evening.

Rudi smiles at all of this, grateful not only for the wonderful friends and family she has, but also for being alive so she can enjoy them. Though she quickly realizes something. She realizes that she needs to shower before the horde of testosterone rises from its sleep. So she grabs a towel, soap, and shampoo, and she hurries down the ladder.

Later, as she finishes showering, a robe-clad Patrick stops behind an angry-looking J. D., who's waiting with four other angry-looking guys.

Slowly, J. D. turns to Patrick and growls, "What's the point of having two fucking showers if we have one fucking chick living here?"

Patrick shrugs, just as the shower comes to a stop, and a towel-clad Rudi then exits the

bathroom with her things.

Right away, she and J. D. glare at each other. He also barks, “You better have left some hot water in there.”

“There’s not enough hot water in the whole world to cover your body,” she barks back.

This causes him to start toward her, and he’s only stopped by Patrick, and only barely.

Chapter 93

Rudi steps inside the Gelman Library wearing, in addition to Hector's overcoat, many of the things Maria bought her: a wool cap and sunglasses, and a GW backpack.

She then takes off the sunglasses and approaches the security desk, manned by a small young man with big bushy brown hair and a scruffy face, who looks a little familiar to her, and he recognizes her a little, too.

"Can I see some ID?" he asks.

"I don't have any. I lost it."

"I'm sorry, but you can't come in without ID. You can get a replacement at the registrar."

This angers Rudi a bit, and she thinks about arguing, but she quickly realizes that the last thing she wants to do is draw attention to herself. So she just mutters, "All right," and she slithers toward the door.

"Did you go to Columbia High School?" the man calls out.

Rudi responds by turning to him, and she says, "Yeah. For a while."

"I thought I knew you. I've seen you at Vintage Vinyl, too."

“I think I remember you also.”

“My name’s Colin.”

“I’m —”

“— Rudi. You’re the girl who beat up Owen Connors.”

“That was a long time ago. We’re actually good friends now.”

“I kinda remember that, too. And your boyfriend was . . .”

“Well, I better go get a new ID.”

“It’s okay, go ahead.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

He says this and Rudi hurries through the turnstiles and hurries even more toward a door leading to the Reference section downstairs.

“Hey!” Colin shouts.

Right away, she stops and spins toward him, and he says to her: “Sorry.”

“About what?”

“Your boyfriend.”

Rudi nods. She does this before rushing off in the direction of the door, and she keeps rushing until she reaches the newspapers section in the basement. Which is where she reads through the last editions of both the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times*.

But there’s no mention of Hector’s death anywhere, and she tries to determine if this means something, good or bad. Though all she can conclude is that the police haven’t found the body and therefore weren’t likely looking for her. But she knows other people likely were. Other people who probably don’t want it known that Hector is dead. Other people who are likely far

worse than the police.

With this in mind, she goes upstairs and finds several books about the Latin-American drug trade. But she can't find anything about any Guzmans. So she returns to the basement and goes through every map and encyclopedia she can find, looking for some mention of Miskitia. But she can't find anything, and thinking Maria might've been right about it being a new country, she asks a balding librarian about it.

"There's no such country," he tells her.

"You sure?"

"Absolutely positive."

"Not even a new one?"

"I follow world events very closely, young lady. You certain you're not pronouncing it wrong?"

She then spells it for him, and his answer is: "You certain you're not spelling it wrong?"

"Pretty certain," Rudi tells him.

"Sorry, I can't help you."

Chapter 94

Rudi returns to the Sigma Nu house, and she peeks her head into the main room while wondering what kind of debauchery they're up to now.

Like the night before, the room is packed with people watching TV, only unlike then it's all men, and instead of watching pornography they're watching *General Hospital*. They're further much more enthralled by it than they had been of the porn. Some of the guys are actually sitting on the edge of their seats.

"You guys watch soap operas?" Rudi utters, with even more disgust than what she displayed the night before.

"Sshhh," Johnny pleads. "Frisco is just about to propose."

"I can't believe you!"

"Shut up!" J. D. hollers, from his white perch in the back.

"Who's gonna make me?" Rudi hollers back.

"You're not gonna like it if I have to stand up."

"I don't like it even when you're sitting."

Angrily, J. D. starts rising, and a sneering Rudi makes her way down the corridor to call Mrs. Goodwin. Though she quickly realizes that it's probably not a good idea to call the woman from the same phone, especially this particular one. But while she's there she calls someone else.

"Hello?" Jeannine says.

"Hi," Rudi mumbles.

"Rudi?"

"Yeah."

"Where have you been? Do you know everyone's looking for you?"

"I know. I'm sorry."

"What happened?"

"I, I had a relapse."

"Oh, baby."

"See, I'm not as strong as you thought."

"No one is. So when are you coming in?"

"I can't right now. People are looking for me."

"The police?"

"Worse."

"Worse? What did you get yourself into, girl?"

"I don't know, but I can tell you that I'm scared."

"Me, too. Is there something I can do?"

"Has anyone been looking for me?"

"We all have. Even some of the homeless people. You don't know how much people care about you. I care about you."

“I know. Thank you.”

“So who do you think are looking for you?”

“Drug dealers. The guys who were chasing me were two huge gorillas in expensive suits.”

“I haven’t seen anyone like that.”

“If you do . . .”

“Where are you?”

“Just leave a message with my roommates. They’ll get it to me.”

“Anything else I can do?”

“Pray maybe?”

“What do you think I’ve been doing?”

Chapter 95

Under the dim light of a flickering lamppost, Thelma and her shopping cart stop beside a set of large garbage cans, and she starts sifting through them.

At the same time, a white van parks in front of her, so when a big blue Mercedes sedan reaches a stop sign at a nearby intersection a short time later, the two goons inside can only see the van.

“How long do we have to keep looking for this woman?” the shorter goon asks while trying to keep his tired eyes open as he drives.

“How long do you want to live?” the larger one answers. He further takes one last look around and motions his colleague forward, and the car speeds off with its tires screeching, only a handful of seconds before Thelma pushes her cart past the van.

Chapter 96

Jared and Vicki climb the attic steps and reach the top, and Rudi runs up to them and hugs them, and she thanks them not only for the flowers but also for all they did in trying to find her.

Vicki responds by glancing around the room, and she shakes her head while saying to Rudi: "You're not living here."

"It's all right," Rudi insists. "It's much better than where I was before. It's not even close."

"You can't live in a frat!"

"Fraternity."

"Whatever. You're coming to live with us, and that's it."

"It's way too dangerous, Vicki. People are after me. You shouldn't even be coming to see me."

Vicki sighs, and she follows Rudi to the couch along with Jared, and the three sit down, with Rudi in the middle.

“What happened?” Vicki whispers, after gently placing her hand on top of Rudi’s, much as she did on the day they became friends. “Was it because of the wedding?”

“No,” Rudi whispers back. “Don’t think that for a second. Your wedding was so beautiful, and I loved being part of it.”

“Then what was it?”

“Despair and addiction just don’t mix very well.”

Understanding this, Jared grips Rudi’s other hand, and he tells her: “We’re here for you. Always remember that.”

“Oh,” Vicki utters, “before I forget — we brought you something.” She then takes out a paper lunch bag from her handbag and hands it to Rudi while adding, “Here’s the Nic-O-Boli I promised you.”

With a bit of a grin, Rudi takes the bag, and she pulls out a large and warm calzone.

“It’s been frozen awhile,” Vicki tells her. “But I heated it up before we came. Go on, give it a try.”

Rudi, though, is hesitant.

“No meat,” Jared insists. “Just cheese.”

Rudi grins again, and she takes a bite of the calzone, and she hangs her head.

“Not good?” Vicki asks.

“It’s wonderful,” Rudi mutters. “You’re wonderful. I don’t deserve friends like you.”

“Stop that,” Vicki growls. “You’re sick, just like me.”

“Not like you.”

“It’s the same thing. And just like me you’re gonna get better. If I can have hope, so can you.”

These words cause Rudi to raise her head. They also cause her to smile at her friend, and she really can't believe Vicki is the same person she once despised. "So how was the honeymoon?" she asks.

"Terrific," Vicki answers.

"Not boring?"

"Not boring,"

Vicki says this and blushes a bit, before turning to her husband, who blushes, too, though not just a bit.

"And married life?" Rudi asks.

"No complaints," Vicki says, looking as if the happiness is about to explode out of her.

"In fact . . ." Jared begins to say before interrupted by Vicki, who shakes her head at him.

"What?" Rudi utters.

"This isn't the time," Vicki utters back.

"What?" Rudi repeats, with a lot more firmness.

Still, Vicki and Jared won't say anything. But Rudi continues prodding, and in near unison the two cry out, "We're pregnant!"

"Both of you?" Rudi says, with a big smile on her face.

"It feels like it sometimes," Vicki tells her. "He gets worse morning sickness than me."

Vicki then clutches her husband's thigh and adds, "And worse cravings, too."

Rudi laughs at this, and she especially laughs at how much Jared is blushing. Though the laughter fades when she thinks of something.

"What's wrong?" Vicki asks.

"What about your medication?" Rudi asks back. "Can you take it while you're

pregnant?”

“I have to go without it.”

“Is that smart?”

“There’s some risk and complications, but the cancer isn’t at an advanced stage. The doctor even said that if I’m gonna have a baby, now’s the time. So in a way it’s a miracle child.”

“I’m so happy for you.”

“That doesn’t mean that I haven’t had my doubts.”

“What doubts?”

“Do you think it’s right to bring a child into the world when I might not be there when she needs me the most?”

“I was without a mother growing up, and I won’t lie — it was rough. But the alternative would’ve been worse.”

“Actually we . . .” Jared begins to say, before Vicki again cuts him off.

“What?” Rudi demands.

“You have enough to worry about,” Vicki insists.

“Just tell me.”

Briefly, the couple glance at each other, before turning back to Rudi. Which is when Vicki mutters, “We were kinda hoping . . .”

“That you’d be the baby’s godmother,” Jared adds.

“Really?” Rudi utters in shock. “You’d really want me to be your baby’s godmother after all that’s happened to me?”

“Really,” Vicki murmurs with a smile. “You don’t have to give us an answer —”

“— Yes!” Rudi interrupts. “Of course, I’ll do it!”

“You should really think about it, because — considering the circumstances — it’s likely not to be such a ceremonial role.”

“It’s still yes!” Rudi cries out. “A hundred times yes!”

Vicki reacts to this by hugging her friend, who hugs her right back.

“We’re even naming the baby ‘Rudi,’” Jared says.

Now, Rudi is way more than shocked, and she breaks Vicki’s embrace and hollers, “Get out of here!”

“The only question is,” Jared goes on, “whether it will be with an ‘i’ or a ‘y.’”

“It’s gonna be an ‘i,’” Vicki says, “I just know it.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Rudi tells the two while shaking her head.

“Now you have a reason to get better and stay that way,” Vicki tells her back, and while pointing her finger she adds, “A big one!”

Again, Rudi hugs Vicki. She does this as Dennis climbs the stairs and approaches his bedroom door.

Hearing voices coming from the attic, he finds himself drifting toward the ladder, and though he knows it isn’t right or “honorable” to listen, he does just that.

“Who are these people?” Jared asks Rudi.

“I don’t know,” Rudi tells him. “But until I find out I can’t leave here.”

“They’re that dangerous?” utters Vicki.

“They were shooting at me,” Rudi answered.

“Oh, my God.”

“I’m gonna ask Reverend Samson about these guys,” Jared utters. “He knows about everything that goes on down there, including this new shit on the streets.”

“Don’t get him involved,” Rudi insists.

“Why do you think he ministers there if it’s not to get involved?”

Right then, someone touches Dennis’s back, and he jumps and spins toward Maria, who whispers, “Hey”

“Hey,” he whispers back, with lots of embarrassment, before scurrying toward his room.

Knowingly, Maria smiles at this, and she climbs to the attic, where Jared and Vicki are saying goodbye to Rudi.

“Hi,” Maria mumbles to everyone, still not accustomed to the three being friends, much less good ones.

Everyone says hello back, and Maria points downstairs and murmurs, “Dennis was listening.”

“Just great,” Rudi utters with lots of exasperation. “Now he knows, too.”

“He cares about you, Rudi. He cares about you a lot.”

“That’s the problem.”

Chapter 97

It's late at night when the blue Mercedes comes to a stop at a red light, now driven by the larger goon.

At this moment, he thinks about running the light, as there's no one around. But because of his bad luck of late, he decides against it. Which is when he hears snoring, and he turns his head and sees the smaller goon sleeping against the passenger door, and he punches his arm, causing him to wake.

"What?" he mumbles.

"If I have to be up," the larger goon says, "so do you." He afterward returns his attention to the light, which is still bright red, and he screams, "How much fucking longer?"

Seemingly in reply, the light turns green, and he's just about to step on the gas when he notices something in his rearview mirror. He notices Thelma a couple of blocks back, rambling across the road with her shopping cart.

This sends a smile across his face, and he shifts the car into reverse and speeds backward.

"What are you doing?" yells the smaller goon.

“Saving our lives!” the larger one answers.

Seeing the car speeding toward her, Thelma hurries across the street with her cart, and she scurries onto the grounds of an abandoned junkyard through a hole in a fence.

At the same time, the Mercedes comes to a sharp stop nearby, and the smaller goon jumps out and runs after her while the car speeds off. It does this until it reaches the next block, where it turns left and smashes through the remains of the junkyard’s front gate.

Meanwhile, Thelma runs as fast as she can while pushing her heavy shopping cart, which isn’t very. In spite of this, she doesn’t even think about ditching it, and it’s not long before the smaller goon is only a short distance from her, despite being far from the fleetest man. Which leads Thelma to reach into the cart for her stick, and she whips it out just as the Mercedes screeches to a halt in front of her.

Though Thelma doesn’t stop. Instead she slams her cart into the driver’s side of the car, smashing the door in. Which is when the goon climbs through the passenger door and screams, “You fucking bitch!”

“I’ll fucking kill you!” Thelma screams back, while waving her stick. Then, noticing the smaller goon coming to a stop behind her, she adds, “I’ll kill both of you!”

“Don’t be like that,” the smaller goon murmurs, with a little smile. “We just want to ask you some questions about that crazy-looking girl we saw you hanging around with.”

“I don’t know shit,” Thelma tells him.

“We’ll see,” he says as he clutches her shoulder, which is just before she cracks her stick over his head, causing it to split apart, and causing the man to tumble to the ground unconscious.

But Thelma, too, finds herself on the ground. The result of the larger goon pushing her there.

Quickly, she turns herself around and sees the man standing over her. She also sees him placing a pair of brass knuckles over his fingers.

“One way or another you are going to answer,” he tells her.

Chapter 98

Eduardo tries to remain calm as he holds the receiver to his ear while rubbing his aching head.

“So,” he says, right after the larger goon tells him the bad news, “when shall I shoot you two? Is Tuesday good for you?”

“We have a plan, Eduardo,” the man insists.

“You can hear the excitement in my voice.”

“You know junkies — they’d sell out Christ for a fix.”

“Is this going somewhere?”

“Somebody must know where this junkie girl is. Another junkie must know. So we’re gonna splash cash all over town until we find her — our own cash. We just need some time.”

“You don’t have any.”

“Please, Eduardo, what are you going to lose by giving us another month or two?”

Reluctantly, Eduardo thinks this over. He thinks about it for a long time while desperately trying to come up with something.

Chapter 99

Rudi is lying on her bed in the attic doing nothing when someone downstairs calls out,
“Rudi, you have a phone call!”

Right away, she jumps off the bed, and she flies down the stairs and grabs the receiver.

“It’s me,” Maria utters, with a bit of gloom in her voice.

“What happened?” Rudi utters back, quickly recognizing her friend’s tone.

“Your boss just called.”

“Yeah?”

“She wanted you to know about this woman.”

“Who?”

“Her name’s Thelma.”

Chapter 100

Wearing her wool cap and sunglasses, Rudi hurries inside George Washington University Hospital, through the very same entrance President Reagan went through after he was shot a few years earlier.

She then gets the number of Thelma's room and at the threshold of it she stops in shock while looking at Thelma lying not far away, unconscious and badly beaten.

For a long time, Rudi doesn't move. Though she eventually steps inside the room and pulls a chair up to the bed. She also takes off her sunglasses and cap before grasping the woman's heavily callused hand.

This causes Thelma to stir and open her eyes, but she can't quite comprehend who's holding her hand.

"It's me," Rudi murmurs, "Gertrude."

"Gertrude?" Thelma murmurs back, as her eyes gain focus. "You, you look better."

"I don't feel better."

"But your hair's still fucked up. And your makeup, too."

“You okay?”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t tell those assholes anything about you.”

“So,” Rudi utters, while starting to fall apart, “they, they did this because of me.”

“Who cares why they did it?” Thelma growls. “It makes no difference.”

“It does!”

“It was my choice not to talk. *Mine.*”

“I thought you didn’t care about anyone but yourself.”

“Only sometimes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m not. I’m never sorry, and neither should you.”

“Can, can I ask you something?” Rudi mumbles.

“Maybe,” Thelma mumbles back.

“Are you, are you my mother — my real mother?”

Thelma reacts to this question by looking deeply into Rudi’s eyes, and without any hesitation she says, “I’m not your mother, real or otherwise. But I wish I were. Because there’s nobody like you. There’s nobody like you anywhere.”

These words make Rudi lose what little control she has, and she hugs Thelma. She hugs her long and hard, and when she finally releases her, the woman is again unconscious. Still, Rudi grabs her hand again, and she holds onto it, wanting Thelma to know that she isn’t alone, and that she’ll never be alone again.

Then, late into the night, Rudi continues holding her hand. She does this right up until the moment Thelma passes, and afterward she cries and cries, in spite of what the woman told her.

Chapter 101

Rudi is inconsolable after Thelma's death, and nothing anyone says to her can change this.

For many days, she does nothing more than sulk and listen to her music, and she barely leaves her room. Then one evening she hears a small party going on downstairs, which keeps disturbing her disquiet. So she climbs off her bed and slithers downstairs, and as she approaches the foyer she sees Colin standing by himself against the staircase, holding an empty beer cup in his hand.

"Hey," she utters.

Startled, he jumps a bit before turning toward her and responding in kind, relieved to see someone familiar.

"What's up?" she asks.

"Not much," he answers. "My roommate's thinking about rushing here, and he dragged me along."

"What about you?"

“Me?”

“Are you gonna join?”

“Are you kidding — look at me. I’m not exactly the fraternity type.”

“Neither are they.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. Why don’t you give them a chance.”

Colin shrugs. Though he also lifts up his cup and says, “I think I’ll get another beer.”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

Rudi says this and watches Colin steps inside the main room, and she notices Dennis smiling at her nearby.

“What are you grinning about?” she growls.

“I heard what you just said to him,” he tells her.

“Listening to other people’s conversations is a bad habit.”

“You know, maybe we should make you rush coordinator.”

Rudi sneers at this and scurries off down the corridor, with Dennis smiling at her without control. What’s more, he doesn’t even want control.

“Dennis!” comes a familiar voice from behind him, and Dennis spins around, and with lots of surprise he sees his father walking up the front stoop.

“What are you doing here?” he mutters, as the man stops in front of him.

“Well,” the man answers with a bit of a smirk, “back in my day Sigma Nu alumni were invited to all events, regardless of what chapter they attended.”

“It’s still true, but . . .”

“Why don’t you introduce me to everyone.”

Dennis does this, and at the same time Rudi pours herself a glass of soda from a bottle at the bar in the back of the main room, and she sits in J. D.'s big white easy chair. She also watches everyone mingle.

It's then J. D. swaggers inside the room with two guys very familiar to Rudi: Brad and Pete, and she can't help notice how Brad's nose still looks a bit broken and how Pete's right arm doesn't seem to move quite right.

"I'm telling you," J. D. says to the two, "this is the best house on campus."

Right away, Brad and Pete see Rudi, and they stop in both shock and fear.

"What's wrong?" J. D. asks.

"Wha . . . what is she doing here?" Brad mumbles, with his hand shaking slightly as he points at Rudi.

"She's just a boarder," J. D. tells him, while glaring at Rudi. A glare she happily returns. Which is when he adds, "A very temporary one."

"You know," Pete says to Brad, "I, I think Sigma Chi is having a party."

Brad nods, and the two hurry out of both the room and the house as fast as they can, almost tripping over their feet. Which causes J. D. to fume, and he turns to Rudi and growls, "Why are they so afraid of you?"

"Maybe you should be asking yourself why are you *not* afraid of me," Rudi growls back.

"I'm shaking."

"If you were, there'd be an earthquake."

These words cause J. D.'s face to turn red, and he points upstairs while howling, "this is a private fraternity event."

"There are girls here," Rudi retorts, while nodding at a few in the room.

“They’re little sisters. Or will become one.”

“Well,” Rudi utters, after putting her feet on top of a nearby coffee table, “Maybe I’ll become a *little sister*, too.”

“You’re sitting in my chair. Get out.”

“Fine,” she tells him with great exasperation, before rising to her feet and storming off.

“You’re not long for here, Weiss,” J. D. yells.

“None of us are,” she tells him, as she approaches the front of the room, where Dennis’s father is talking to his son with his back to Rudi.

“You promised me you wouldn’t see her anymore,” the man quietly hollers.

“I didn’t promise you anything,” Dennis insists.

“Tell me, how’d you like to join all the other losers sleeping on the streets?”

It’s then Dennis sees Rudi a short distance away, along with her frown, and he coughs into his fist, causing his father to turn toward Rudi and force the kind of phony smile natural to politicians everywhere.

“This is my dad,” Dennis mutters.

“Hi,” she says to the man, as coolly as possible.

“And this is Rudi,” Dennis adds.

“I’m glad to see you’ve been found,” the congressman remarks.

“Me, too,” Rudi remarks back.

“You put quite a scare into your mother-in-law.”

“I know.”

“I actually know her, and I knew your father-in-law, too.”

“I didn’t.”

Rudi says this and she brushes past the man, and she marches up the stairs with Dennis's eyes locked on her. Which is something his father notices with lots of exasperation.

Chapter 102

Rudi is glumly listening to “Moonlight Serenade” on her bed when she hears a knocking sound.

At once, she yanks off her headphones and utters, “Come in,” and Patrick climbs up the ladder to the attic, and while looking a bit embarrassed he says to her: “Hi.”

“Hi,” she says back, confused as to where the conversation is heading.

“I have to tell you something. Personally, I have no problem with you. But you’ve rubbed some of the guys the wrong way. At the meeting tonight there’s going to be a motion to throw you out, and if it passes, there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“I understand,” she says matter-of-factly, as if she’s been expecting this, even if this is anything but true.

Patrick then leaves and Rudi starts packing, knowing exactly what the outcome of the vote will be, and she is able to stuff almost everything Maria bought her into the backpack. Then, as soon as night falls, she decides to not even wait for the election results. Instead she throws on Hector’s coat, as well as the wool cap and the sunglasses, and she tosses the backpack over her

shoulders and marches down the ladder. She does this even though she has no idea where she's going.

Though, as she reaches the landing above the foyer, she hears the meeting going on in the main room, and she sits and listens. Just for laughs, she tells herself.

Soon, they broach the subject of her, and her removal.

"She's a complete psycho," J. D. tells the room full of men. "Forgetting the pledges she scared away, she's disrupted this whole house. I know, I know we need the money. So I'll pay for the attic myself until we find another boarder."

"Well," Patrick utters, with a bit of a sigh, "there's a motion on the floor. All —"

"— Can I speak?" interrupted Dennis, while raising his hand.

"The floor's yours," Patrick tells him, and Rudi leans forward inquisitively.

Dennis at the same time rises off the couch, and he tells everyone: "There's no denying Rudi can be obnoxious. But that's true about most of us. All of us, actually. I mean, take a look around this room — we're the jerks no one else can stand. Think about it, what other fraternity would take any of us? Hell, you even gave a bid to a total asshole like me."

"You were a legacy," Johnny blurts out.

"Okay, so you had to give me a bid," Dennis goes on. "But you didn't have to become my friends. The first real ones I've ever had. Rudi, she's a lot like us . . . well, apart from her you-know-what. Yeah, she's a little too loud, and she doesn't quite fit in, and she can piss you off to no end. But there's this wonderful decency in her. Kinda like the decency that's in all of us."

"She's gotta go!" J. D. barks.

"She's got nowhere to go!" Dennis barks back. "Did you ever wonder why she's here in

the first place? Do you really think she wants to be living among a bunch of filthy frat rats? She needs us. She does. So let her stay. Please. If not for her, then do it for me. Because she means a lot to me. An awful lot.”

Dennis then sits down, and Patrick said to everyone: “Well, we have a motion on the floor: all those in favor of kicking Rudi out raise your hands.” He further looks around the room, and he utters, “All right, it’s unanimous: Rudi stays.”

They afterward continue the meeting, but Rudi doesn’t move. She doesn’t because she can’t believe what she just heard. She can’t believe that Dennis stood up for her, and she can’t believe that they’re actually letting her stay.

Eventually, though, she rises to her feet, and she marches back upstairs. She does this while wondering when she’ll finally stop thinking the worst of everyone when they almost always disappoint her.

She further thinks about Dennis, and all the wonderful things he said. She thinks about this so much that she can’t sleep. She can remember every word of his speech, and every intonation of his voice. She can even imagine how he looked when he said it. She also can’t stop feelings from rising inside her. Feelings she thought were long dead.

Sure, she tells herself, maybe she’ll never really love Dennis, especially not the way she loved Tommy, but she likes him. She likes him a lot. She likes him so much that she finds herself rising off her bed, and she finds herself making her way down the wooden ladder, and she finds herself in front of Dennis’s room, where she hears “How Soon is Now?” playing behind the closed door.

Like during her first night living in the house, she raises her hand to knock on his door. Only this time she softly does, and the door soon creaks open, and there is Dennis, wearing

nothing but boxers.

“Hi,” he whispers.

“Hi,” she whispers back, while trying to avoid looking at all the muscle on his arms and chest and abdomen.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, after she doesn’t add to her hello.

“Thank you,” she says.

“For what?”

“You,” she says to him with a bit of a smile, “you really should’ve said ‘*fraternity* rats.’”

At first he can’t understand what she’s talking about, but then it hits him, and he smiles, too. Though not just a bit, and he says to her back: “Listening to other people’s conversations is a bad habit.”

Rudi responds to this. She does by standing on her toes and giving him a gentle kiss on the lips, doing so while caressing his cheeks with her hands. It’s then she feels these cheeks tremble as the first wave in Dennis’s life overtakes him, doing so just as she once described. Only he isn’t scared at all, and he knows that he’ll never be scared again as long as she is with him.

The kiss moves Rudi, too. Which she didn’t anticipate, as their previous kisses had meant nothing to her, in spite of all the heat they generated. This kiss makes her sing, and before she knows it she’s trembling just like him, and she only wants to continue trembling. Though her toes soon ache, and she reluctantly breaks their kiss. Which is just before she mumbles, “I, I better go back to bed.”

“You want to hear the rest of the song?” he asks, while pointing inside his room with his thumb.

“Actually,” she says, “I’d like to hear all of it.”

Chapter 103

Rudi and Dennis only get closer in the coming days, even if they don't reenact their kiss or anything like it.

Every day he brings her dinner and sometimes lunch, and they talk away their evenings while listening to Dennis's record collection. A collection that doesn't contain a single record she doesn't like, and one he lets her to listen to whenever he isn't around.

Steadily, the two discover just how much they love being with the other. They enjoy not only each other's presence and touch, but also the sound of each other's voice. They also have an ever-increasing difficulty saying goodnight, and afterward they smile themselves to sleep.

After one such night, Rudi wakes and goes to Dennis's room, as it's a Saturday morning and she wonders if he wants to do something. But he isn't there. So she rushes downstairs and sees a dozen guys painting the main room. Though this doesn't include Dennis.

"Anyone seen Dennis?" she asks, as she steps inside.

"He had some family emergency," Rich tells her.

"Yeah," Johnny adds, "and the fact that it occurred just when he was supposed to be

painting was just a coincidence.”

Not knowing what else to do, Rudi turns and heads upstairs. But something stops her, and this same something leads her back into the room and up to Patrick, who’s painting a corner with J. D.

“Hey,” she utters.

With a bit of a grin, Patrick turns his paint-splattered face toward her and utters back in kind.

“Would you like some help?” she asks.

“Sure,” he answers, before pointing across the room at some supplies. “Grab a roller.”

Rudi does this, with Patrick’s grin much bigger and directed at J. D., who just shakes his head.

She then starts painting, and she actually enjoys it, as it helps her forget all her worries.

“Calculus is just killing me,” comes the voice of the guy next to her, and she looks at him and sees that it’s the same goofy guy who hit on her the first night of school.

“There’s no way I’m gonna pass,” he says to Chuck while shaking his head. “No fucking way.”

“What’s killing you?” Rudi asks.

He responds by turning to her in surprise, and he says, “What?”

“What in calculus is killing you?” she reiterates.

“Everything.”

“Give me a for instance.”

“Partial fractions, for instance.”

“Yeah, they’re a bitch.”

“Tell me about it.”

“But there really are only three variations of problems. So you can train yourself to solve them, even if you don’t understand them.”

“Yeah?”

“I could show you later if you want.”

“Really?”

“Sure.”

He smiles at this, and at her. Though not far away J. D. is doing anything but smiling. He still doesn’t like Rudi, and it angers him that he’s the only one who doesn’t like her.

He’s even angrier when, early that evening, he and Rudi are the only ones still painting. He’s angry because he’s only still painting because he doesn’t want to stop before she does.

Suddenly, the two turn to each other, and they glare. Though their glares aren’t as strong as before, no matter how hard they try to make it so. Then, just as suddenly, Dennis steps inside both the house and the room wearing a white dress shirt and a red-and-blue tie, and he smiles at both of them.

“Nice of you to show up, *brother*,” J. D. remarks, with a sneer.

“Family before pleasure,” Dennis remarks back, with a smirk. Which J. D. doesn’t appreciate, and he chucks his roller into a nearby tray before storming out of the room.

“What’s his problem?” Rudi whispers.

“He just needs to get laid,” Dennis whispers back. “Never mind his growl. He’s actually the nicest guy in the house.”

“Get out of here.”

“It’s the truth. I’m telling you I’d throw myself in front of a speeding car for him. Or at

least a small tricycle.”

Rudi chuckles at this, and Dennis kisses her cheek.

“You’re gonna get paint all over yourself,” she tells him, before picking up a small towel and using it to wipe his lips. Which is just before she adds, “So what was the family emergency?”

“To my father,” Dennis utters, “everything is a family emergency. Of course, if everything is an emergency, nothing is.”

“But what was it about?”

“This,” Dennis says, while rubbing his fingers. “That’s what it’s always about. He needed my mother and me for a photo op so he could get money from some people, or to funnel money back into our district. Or both. It’s a never-ending cycle.”

“Sounds like I had more fun painting,” Rudi says.

“How long have you been painting?” Dennis asks.

“Awhile.”

“And *why* are you painting?”

“I don’t need a reason.”

Chapter 104

With a party for the new pledges roaring in the freshly painted main room, Rudi steps inside and sees Chuck standing by himself while staring at a woman across the way. A woman who's speaking to a friend.

"Well?" Rudi says to him, as she stops beside him.

"Well what?" he says back.

"Talk to her."

"What if she's not interested?"

"What if she is?"

"I . . ."

"Go on," she tells him, before giving him a gentle push, which almost knocks him off his feet.

Quickly, he regains his balance, and he looks at Rudi with great fear. Which she reacts to by waving him forward with both hands, and she continues doing this until he complies. She then turns around and sees Colin standing next to her, with a pledge pin on the jacket of his suit,

which she grins at while telling him: “So you did it.”

“I just hope I won’t regret it,” he tells her back, with lots of doubt on his face.

“You won’t. I’ve been told by very reliable sources that they don’t haze at all. Quite the contrary.”

“I see a pledge without a beer!” Patrick calls out, from not far away.

“I think they’re calling your name,” Rudi murmurs.

“All right,” he murmurs back, before stepping toward Patrick and his ever-welcoming smile. Which is when Dennis grabs Rudi by the arm and leads her onto the dance floor, where they dance to Chaka Khan’s “Through the Fire.” They even sing along with the song. A song that seems to have been written about them and for them. Then, even when the next song comes on — one much faster — the two continue slow-dancing, and they continue listening to the woman’s velvety voice.

Chapter 105

Late at night a sound wakes Rudi.

At first she doesn't know what it was or where it came from, but she quickly realizes that it's the sound of people arguing.

Wearing only an oversized jersey, she climbs out of bed and hurries over to the window. Which is where she sees two guys from a neighboring fraternity pushing Colin around a short distance from the house, and when they push him to the ground she runs down the stairs, acting only on instinct.

With this same instinct, she sprints out of the house and hollers, "Leave him alone!"

The two men don't react to this, but when Rudi starts marching toward them with her fists clenched, one of them says to the other: "That's that psycho chick."

Ever since the incident with Brad and Pete, Rudi's reputation has grown, to the point that many believe that she killed two guys with her bare hands. Believing it themselves, these two run away as fast as they can, with Rudi shouting, "You fuck with Sigma Nu, you fuck with me!"

Soon, she reaches Colin, who's a bit bruised and very drunk, and she brings him to his

feet. She also walks him back toward the house, and as they approach the front stoop a handful of guys come running out and help the boy inside. Which is just before J. D. rushes outside, with a big aluminum baseball bat in his hands.

Once again, he and Rudi glare at each other. But J. D.'s glare slowly turns into a grudging smile, and a nod of his head, and though Rudi tries hard not to return his smile, she does so anyway.

Chapter 106

For many days after the incident in front of the house Rudi is greeted by smiles and affection by every brother she encounters, including J. D.

At first this discomforts her, but as it continues in the weeks that follow she comes to enjoy it. She even enjoys them, and she becomes something of a den mother, always there to help anyone out, whether it's with girls, homework, or just the complexities of life. She also comes to love every boy there, including J. D., who no longer minds when she sits in his big white chair.

One night, while the brothers are having their weekly meeting, Rudi is lying on her bed listening to a tape Dennis made for her when someone knocks at the entrance to the attic.

"Come in," she says, and as she removes her headphones Dennis struts up the ladder with a strange smile.

"What's up?" she asks, a bit suspiciously.

"Can you come downstairs for a minute?" he asks back.

"The meeting's over already?"

“No. That’s why we need you to come downstairs.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Come on down, Rudi Weiss,” he calls out, as he waves her toward the ladder with both arms.

She sighs, but she climbs off her bed and follows Dennis down the stairs and into the main room, where everyone is congregated, with the same strange smiles Dennis had.

“What’s going on?” she demands

“Just now there was a motion on the floor,” Patrick tells her, before winking at J. D., who blushes a little.

“What kind of motion?” Rudi asks.

“As you probably can imagine,” Patrick goes on, “only men can become brothers here. It’s actually written in the bylaws. But we checked these same bylaws and discovered that there’s nothing in them about women becoming honorary brothers. And, by unanimous consent, that’s just what you’ve become.”

“What?” Rudi mutters, not certain how to react to this. She isn’t even certain whether it’s something good or bad.

At the same time, J. D. rises to his feet holding a large gift-wrapped box, and he says to her: “This is for you. We all chipped in, even me.”

“What is it?” she utters, still in a state of disbelief.

“Get your ass over here and find out,” he utters back.

Hesitantly, she makes her way to J. D., and she takes the box, and just as hesitantly she unwraps and opens it, exposing a yellow Sigma Nu jersey with her name stitched on the back.

“I sure hope you guys weren’t expecting me to wear this,” she tells them, with a big

happy smile.

“Put it on!” they started chanting. “Put it on! Put it on!”

“All right,” she relents, and she places her arms inside the garment.

“You have to take off your T-shirt first,” Johnny jokes, to the laughter of everyone in the room, including Rudi, who says to him: “Dream on, brother.”

She then puts on the jersey and strikes a reluctant pose, to the cheers of all her brothers, including J. D., who further wraps one of his big arms around her shoulders and gives her an equally big kiss on the head.

Chapter 107

Rudi makes her way down the stairs and sees a group of her brothers standing in the foyer, along with all the pledges.

“What’s up?” she asks, as she comes to a stop on the bottom step.

“We’re taking the pledges to Beefsteak Charlie’s,” Dennis tells her, with one of his smiles. “All the ribs and shrimp you can eat, and all the beer, wine, and sangria you can drink.”

“Well, have fun.”

“You’re coming, of course.”

“Dennis, you know I’m a vegetarian, and you know I don’t drink.”

“They’ve got a great salad bar,” he retorts, after grabbing her arm, “and you can get soda, too.”

“No,” she retorts back, for lots of reasons, with the restaurant’s menu being the very least one.

“It’s your brotherly duty,” he insists, while dragging her toward the door.

“Dennis!” she cries out.

“You hardly ever leave the house.”

“And you know why,” she whispers.

“Nothing’s gonna happen with us around,” he whispers back.

“Yeah, I’m sure they’ll be real frightened of you.”

Ignoring this, Dennis keeps pulling her.

“At least let me get my coat and cap,” she begs.

“You don’t need any coat or cap,” he tells her, “it’s warm out.”

“But . . .”

It’s then a wave of men behind her push her forward. Though they also keep her well hidden in the moonless night.

Before long, they cross the park facing the White House, and Rudi sees something that makes her pause. She sees a half-dozen homeless men in the distance. Men she knows well, and she really wants to say hello to them. But she’s afraid of exposing herself, and then Dennis wraps his arm around her and forces her ahead.

They soon after arrive at the restaurant, and while everyone is waiting for their initial order of baby back ribs, Rudi checks out the salad bar. She does this nibbling on a carrot, and she has to admit that Dennis had been right about the food. She also has to admit that she’s happy she’s come, and happy to be around everyone. But she really becomes happy when she sits down and starts eating and notices Dennis staring — not at the big plate of ribs in front of him — but at her. He’s staring at her as if what she’s doing is the most special thing in the world.

She not only smiles at this, but she feels warm everywhere, and this only increases when he leans over the table and whispers into her ear: “You make the world spin.”

Playfully, she pushes him away, even though this is the last thing she wants, and she

further forces herself away from his grin. Which is when she sees all the gluttony around her, which makes her grimace and feel a bit nauseous.

Then an idea pops into her head, which leads her back to the salad bar, where she grabs two large plates. On one she piles cold shrimp from a huge bowl in the center of the bar, and she takes this and the other plate back to the table, where she steals a rib from everyone nearby and places it on the empty dish.

Seeing this, Dennis figures that it's just some form of protest. But she keeps doing it as further helpings of ribs come, until there's a mountain of meat in front of her, and finally he asks, "What are you doing with all that?"

"You'll see," she answers, just as the waiter brings everyone a sixth order of ribs, which he insists will be their last.

"Whoa," J. D. utters, as he wipes his big chin with the back of his hand, "it's supposed to be all you can eat!"

"The manager didn't even want me to give you these," the waiter utters back. "No one's ever had more than four orders. Not even the sumo wrestlers that were here last month."

"What a rip-off!"

"Don't mind his growl," Rudi interjects — "he's actually a sweetheart. Just bring us the check. And do you think I could have a doggy bag?"

"Sorry," the waiter tells her, with a shake of his head, "no doggy bags allowed on all-you-can-eat."

Rudi responds by motioning the man toward her with her finger, and he leans down so she can whisper something into his ear. Something that stuns him.

"I'll see what I can do," he whispers back.

A little later, the man returns with the check, and as he's about to leave he glances around in all directions before surreptitiously handing Rudi a large insulated bag under the table. A bag that had been hidden between his hand and the tray.

"Keep it out of sight," he murmurs. "Or it's my job."

"I promise," Rudi murmurs back, as he rushes off.

"That asshole's getting a shitty tip," J. D. remarks.

"Oh, no he isn't," Rudi remarks back. "You're giving him the biggest one you've ever given."

"And if we don't?"

"You won't like it if I have to stand up."

These words create waves of laughter that overwhelm J. D., and he himself pays the entire tip. A huge one.

Everyone then leaves the restaurant, with Rudi hiding in the middle so the manager won't see what she's carrying, and they quickly reach the park across from the White House. Which is when Rudi tells her brothers: "I'll be right back" — and though she knows it'll expose her she marches toward the homeless men with the doggy bag.

"Where you going?" Dennis mutters, once he realizes where she's heading.

"I'll be right back," she repeats.

"You want some of us to go with you?" he calls out, with lots of concern in his voice.

"No," she calls back.

"You sure?"

"I've never been surer of anything."

Not long after this, Rudi reaches the men, who are shocked to see her.

“Rudi?” they all utter, more or less in unison.

“Hey, guys,” she says, with a gentle smile.

“What happened to you?” one of the men asks.

“I got into some bad shit,” she tells him. “I’m still in it actually.”

“We were looking for you.”

“I know, and you don’t know how much that means to me.”

“Whatcha got there?” another man asks, while pointing at her bag. The smell of which is intoxicating him.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you guys about,” Rudi says. “Actually, I have a big favor to ask.”

“What’s that?”

“You see, I was just at this restaurant, and some jerks ordered this gigantic meal and then split before it came. And, and they were just gonna throw it all away.”

“Really? What kind of meal?”

“Oh, I don’t know — ribs and shrimp, I think. Anyway, I was wondering if you guys might be able to find someone who’d like it.”

“We might be able to help.”

“Thank you so much!” Rudi cries out, before giving the man a hug and a kiss on the cheek, which makes him blush a bit. She afterward hands him the bag while telling everyone:

“I’ll see you guys soon.”

“You better,” another of the men say to her. “We miss you.”

“I miss you, too.”

She says this and starts backing up, and she further returns to the men, who are looking as

if the air had just been knocked out of them.

“What’s the matter?” she asks.

“Dessert’s not agreeing with us,” Dennis tells her.

“What dessert?”

“A big piece of humble pie.”

“You should be proud of yourselves,” she insists, before pointing at the homeless men in the distance as they enjoy the food. “Look at all the people you fed. I bet there aren’t many fraternity guys who can say that tonight.”

“But tomorrow,” Dennis mumbles, “tomorrow they’ll be hungry again.”

“You know,” Patrick interjects, “you see these people all over the place. They’re literally everywhere you go. And we just ignore them. If they were cats or dogs we’d help, but because they’re human beings we just ignore them.”

“If you’d like to do more . . .” Rudi says.

“Actually,” Patrick tells her, “we’ve been looking for a community project.”

“I know just the thing.”

Rudi then wraps her arms around Dennis and Patrick, and as they make their way home she tells them her idea.

Chapter 108

Rudi and Dennis watch TV together late into the evening in the darkened main room, with her leg on top of his and their faces aglow, and their hands in constant search of each other. Though, as midnight approaches, he stretches his arms and says, “We have a big day tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” she says back, and the two rise and make their way up the stairs hand-in-hand. As they do, she can’t help wish Dennis would ask her to spend the night. She wishes this hard. But when they get to his door he asks her something else. He asks her if she’s planning on attending the White Rose formal the following weekend.

“It’s gonna be at the Willard Hotel,” he says to her, “not far from where we were tonight.”

“That’s not for me, Dennis,” she says to him back, with an emphatic shake of her head. “It’s not me, period.”

“The thing is I need a date.”

“Something tells me you won’t have a hard time finding one.”

“Maybe, but there’s only one girl I want to go with.”

“You’ll make do. You always do.”

“Is that so? Tell me, have you seen me with another girl since we met?”

This statement sounds so preposterous to Rudi that she sneers at Dennis. But, no matter how hard she tries, she can’t think of a single woman she’s seen him with. Though this gives her no comfort, as she knows that caring about her that much is dangerous.

“I better go to bed,” she utters, before hurrying toward the ladder. “We have a big day tomorrow.”.

“Just think about it,” he calls out.

“I don’t even have a dress,” she calls back. “And I’m not getting one, either.”

Chapter 109

Reverend Samson returns to the mission after an interfaith breakfast, and he's stunned to see a dozen young men on his roof repairing it. He's so stunned that he thinks he's witnessing a vision, which makes him recall the last visions he experienced.

Don't take the brown acid.

These were the infamous words, more or less, of the announcer at Woodstock. Words that came just a few minutes too late as far as Samson was concerned. Though the terrible trip that ensued made him rethink his life, and its purpose, which eventually led him to where he's standing right now.

This is when the mission door swings open, and Rudi steps out wearing her wool cap and sunglasses while carrying a pail of pink liquid and a stack of plastic cups.

"Rudi!" the minister shouts with great joy, as he spreads open his arms.

With lots of happiness herself, Rudi drops what she's carrying, and she rushes into the man's arms and hugs him.

"You don't know how worried we were about you," he whispers.

“I know,” she whispers back. “I know.”

“Are you okay?”

“Better,” she says, before breaking their embrace and pointing at her brothers while adding, “You’re finally getting your roof fixed.”

“I should’ve known your hand was in this,” he mutters. “Man, it’s like what I said before, one day all of GW will be helping in my mission.”

“It’s just one fraternity,” Rudi retorts.

“A *fraternity*?” Samson blurts out, with so much shock that he almost tips over. “That’s even more amazing.”

“That’s them.”

“Can I get you boys anything?” the minister calls out to the young men on his roof

“Beeeeeeerrrr!” Johnny calls back from his knees, with a big mallet in his hand.

Everyone around Johnny laughs, but Patrick glowers at him, and he turns to Samson and says, “Sorry about that, Reverend.”

“That’s quite all right, son,” the minister tells him, with a bit of a chuckle. “I was your age not that long ago.”

“How about some lemonade instead?” Rudi interjects, as she picks up both the pail and the cups.

Chapter 110

Maria visits Rudi in the attic, and when she sees the Sigma Nu jersey her friend is wearing, she almost falls backward down the ladder.

Proudly, Rudi turns her body, so her friend can see the name stitched on the back. She's actually so proud of what her brothers did at the mission that she's promised herself to wear the jersey every week until it falls apart, and maybe even afterward.

"Oh, my God!" Maria cries out. "I can't fucking believe it!"

"I guess this proves anything is possible," Rudi says, both unable and unwilling to hide her smile.

"So it's true?" Maria utters. "I thought people were joking when they said you joined."

"It's sorta true," Rudi utters back.

"If only the 17-year-old version of yourself could take a time machine and see you at this moment. She'd explode."

"Have I changed that much?"

Maria responds by taking Rudi's hand, and she tells her: "In none of the important ways."

The two then sit on the broken-down couch and Maria tries to hand Rudi some cash.

“I have enough,” Rudi insists, while waving her off. “More than enough.”

“Mrs. Goodwin keeps sending me tons of money,” Maria says. “What should I do with it?”

“Just keep it for now,” Rudi tells her. “I’ll give it back to her as soon as this is over.”

“That reminds me,” Maria tells her back, as she stuffs the cash in her pants pocket, “I finally got hold of my uncle.”

“And?” Rudi asks, with just a bit of hope in her voice.

“It turns out I was wrong. This Miskitia isn’t a new country. It’s actually an old one.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was a kingdom about a hundred years ago. But now it’s part of Nicaragua.”

“Nicaragua?”

“You know, the country where they’re fighting that civil war. My uncle says that Miskitia is one of the areas supporting the Contras. They’re the ones fighting the government.”

“Strange,” Rudi mutters.

“What?” Maria asks.

“How come I couldn’t find anything about it in the library?”

“It was probably listed under its English name: Mosquito.”

“I don’t know if this helps me at all,” Rudi mumbles, with a bit of a sigh.

“Sorry,” Maria murmurs.

“Who could these guys be?”

Maria shrugs.

“I’ve heard of lots of drug lords,” Rudi goes on, “but I’ve never heard of a single one

from Nicaragua.”

“What about the White Rose?” Maria asks, wanting to change the subject.

“What about it?” Rudi asks back.

“Are you going?”

“Are you kidding? A formal dance? Look, I haven’t changed that much.”

“Dennis has been asking me all sorts of questions.”

“What kind of questions?”

“I’m not saying.”

Chapter 111

A short but solidly built man in his thirties warily approaches a junkie, who's sitting on the ground and leaning against a mailbox looking only half alive.

Undeterred by Rudi's insistence that she can solve her problems herself, Mrs. Goodwin not only doesn't call off the private investigator but doubles their efforts, and they in turn send this short but solidly built man down to Washington.

The man, whose name is Collins, has been there more than two weeks without turning up anything. He actually has come up with only one clue, from a DEA agent who once worked for Collins' boss at the FBI. This man hooked him up with someone working undercover in the area, who had seen someone matching Rudi's description at a notorious crack house. Though when Collins went to this house, the colorfully dressed man running the place — a man with a toothy smile — asserted that he'd never seen anyone like Rudi. Which was kind of the truth.

The truth is also that Collins is getting desperate, and not just because his boss is pressuring him for results. He is further tired of living out of a hotel, and he misses his family, especially his newborn son. So he's willing to try anything. He even followed Maria for a few

days and is now approaching a random junkie.

“Have you seen her?” he asks the man, after showing him a picture of Rudi.

At first the man doesn’t reply, but when Collins asks again he mutters, “What do you want?”

Collins responds by asking a third time, and he is just about to walk away when the junkie says, “Maybe.”

“What maybe?” Collins asks.

“There’s something in my eyes.”

Collins smirks at this, right before taking out a roll of cash and peeling off a twenty, which he hands to the junkie, who says, “I have two eyes.”

Again, Collins smirks, and he gives him another twenty, knowing that it isn’t his money anyway.

The junkie then looks at the picture, and though he doesn’t recognize the girl in it, he recognizes her description. He also recognizes a huge payday, and while leaping at this opportunity he utters, “I’m pretty sure her name is Rudi.”

This causes Collins’ jaw to unhinge, which causes the junkie to smile. He even rises off the ground a bit. “See,” he says, “that forty dollars was a bargain.”

“Where can I find her?” Collins demands.

“That’s gonna cost you a lot more, friend.”

“How about I just beat it out of you?”

“That won’t help, because I don’t know where she is right this minute. But I do know a couple of guys who do. And I’ll set it up, for the right price.”

“How much?”

“A grand.”

“I’ll give you a hundred.”

“Five hundred.”

“Two-fifty.”

“All right,” the junkie says, while reaching out his hand.

“You’ll get the money when I see the girl,” Collins tells him.

“All right. Come back tonight.”

“Here?”

“No, in that house over there,” the junkie tells him, while pointing the way. “That’s where I live.”

Warily, Collins turns in the direction of the man’s finger and sees a condemned building, and while thinking of his newborn son he says, “No way.”

“Here’s fine then. I’ll have them come here at nine tonight.”

Chapter 112

Collins arrives at the mailbox at a quarter to nine, and there's no one around, so he checks his pistol, and then checks it again.

Even well past nine there's no sign of the junkie, or anyone else, and something tells him to get out of there. But because he already told his boss that he had a hot lead he instead waits some more. He waits until he hears a voice call out, "Hey!"

Collins reacts to this by spinning around, and he sees the junkie on the front stoop of the condemned building waving him over there.

"I said, no!" Collins hollers. "I'm not going in there."

"She's inside," the junkie insists.

"Who?"

"Rudi!"

"Tell her to come out."

"She can't. She can't come anywhere. And she doesn't look too good."

Collins sighs, but after feeling the holster beneath his jacket he reluctantly approaches the

building, and he even more reluctantly climbs the steps and slithers into the house, which is illuminated somewhat by light from the street, which pours in through both the open door and the house's broken windows. He then steps into the foyer, and the junkie greets him with a smile.

"Where is she?" growls Collins.

"This way," the junkie says, while pointing deeper inside the building.

But Collins doesn't move. He just pauses in thought. He pauses a long time.

"Come on," the junkie pleads, and Collins follows him further, just as the front door of the house slams closed.

With lots of fright, Collins spins around, and he sees the larger goon inching his way toward them while placing a pair of brass knuckles over his fingers. So Collins reaches inside his jacket for his gun. But this is when he feels a piece of cold metal pressing against his temple. It's also when the shorter goon tells him: "I wouldn't do that."

"Shit," Collins murmurs, with his thoughts only on a baby boy fast asleep in New Jersey.

"Fucking shit."

Chapter 113

In the early hours of the morning the two goons leave the condemned building.

While Collins knew as little about Rudi's whereabouts as they did, they were able to glean one small but possibly significant clue: the name of a certain girl and where she lives. Along with this information, they now also have a photograph Collins once possessed, which Mrs. Goodwin had given his boss. A photograph of Maria and Sandra from Rudi's wedding.

Chapter 114

Rudi is sitting alone in the main room of the house watching TV when Chuck steps inside wearing a tuxedo and holding the hand of a young woman in a light blue dress. The same young woman Rudi pushed him toward during the party weeks earlier. He also has a big grin, which Rudi both sees and smiles at.

“How’s it going?” she asks.

“Incredible,” he mutters. “It’s going incredible.”

“I can see.”

“You coming tonight?”

“Nope.”

“Does Dennis know this?”

“If he doesn’t, he’ll figure it out soon enough.”

“All right. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow.”

He says this and the couple skip out of the house together, and Rudi returns her attention

to the TV. But as the hour gets later her thoughts are anywhere but on the screen. They're on a certain Ken doll.

She just assumed Dennis would've been begging her all day to go to the dance, but she hasn't seen him at all, and she starts wondering if he perhaps took her advice and asked someone else. Which infuriates her, in spite of herself.

Then Dennis shows up. He saunters into the house and up to the threshold of the room wearing a T-shirt and jeans and carrying a black garment bag and a single white rose, and he grins at Rudi, who won't even look at him.

"So who's the lucky girl?" she growls, between her clenched teeth.

Dennis shrugs, and says to her: "You probably wouldn't know her."

This infuriates Rudi even more, and with a face turning redder by the second she spins toward Dennis and points at the garment bag, and she barks, "That your tux?"

"No," he answers, before unzipping the bag and exposing a red Versace gown, which not only takes Rudi's breath away but just about everything else.

"You're gonna look pretty funny wearing that tonight," she mumbles, while gazing at the dress.

"Ah," he says, "but you won't."

Chapter 115

In the ballroom of the Willard Hotel, lots of brothers, pledges, little sisters, and all their dates are swaying to Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher" when the doors to the hall swing open.

Standing there is Dennis in a tailored tuxedo, with Rudi grasping the white rose with one hand and Dennis's arm with the other. She's also wearing both the gown and an embarrassed grin.

Seeing her like this, the entire room stops dancing and gawks at her, and afterward they hoot and holler and whistle as Dennis leads her inside.

"Let's dance," he tells her.

"Not to this," she insists, before coming to a stop on the edge of the dance floor.

"Not a big fan of Van Halen, eh?"

To this she gives him a look that says, "You must be joking," and he spins toward the DJ and loudly snaps his fingers.

With a big smile, the DJ scratches the needle across the record, and he starts his other turntable. Which is when "Heaven" begins to play.

“You had this all planned out, didn’t you?” Rudi utters, while waving at Maria and Sandra, who are dancing nearby.

“Guilty!” he utters back, and he grabs her hand and drags her onto the dance floor, where they dance, too. They also sing with the song.

“I have to admit,” she whispers to him during the guitar solo, “you’ve worn me down.”

“You’ve worn me down, too,” he whispers back. “And I like it.”

She responds to this by gripping him tightly, unable to believe that she’s really there, and that she’s happy she’s really there, and with him. She’s even happy about what she’s wearing.

“I hope you know I don’t put on a dress for just anyone,” she murmurs.

“I know,” he murmurs back. “That’s the only thing that makes it special.”

Right then, he dips her, causing her to shriek, and after lifting her up again he says, “Did you notice anything special about this place?”

“It’s beautiful,” she says back, while looking at all the glass chandeliers.

“Anything else?”

“I don’t know.”

“You know that it’s not just a ballroom.”

“It’s a hotel.”

“And you know what else it is?”

“What?”

“It’s not a fraternity house.”

He says this and pulls out something from his pants pocket, and he places it in her hand.

“What’s this?” she asks, while feeling the cold piece of metal.

“The key to the best room in the place,” he answers. “It’s up to you to decide what to do

with it.”

Chapter 116

Rudi inserts the key into the lock and tries to turn it, which isn't so easy with Dennis all over her and nibbling on her ear.

Though she somehow gets the door open, and the two stumble inside the Jenny Lind Suite, where Rudi becomes stunned, as the place looks like the royal quarters of some fairy tale, with furniture and fixtures that exceed even the princess' apartment. There are also countless rooms abutting from everywhere.

"I had to book this place weeks in advance," Dennis tells her, happy that he's finally impressed her.

"Like I said," she says, "you've worn me down."

"Wait till you see the rest of the place," he cries out, and he grabs her hand and drags her further inside. They then rush up a set of stairs, and at the top they come to a circular window with a perfectly framed view of the Washington Monument.

"My . . ." Rudi gasps. But she doesn't gasp this for long, as Dennis drags her again, through room after room until they reach a bedroom, which has an immense dome-like ceiling

and a wrought-iron canopy bed.

This stuns Rudi even more, and Dennis releases her hand and hustles up to a silver bucket that's sitting on a table by the bed, and to the bottle cooling inside it.

Finally, Rudi comes out of her stunned state, and with her hands gripping her hips she growls, "Dennis, you know I don't drink."

But Dennis just keeps smiling, and he lifts a magnum of sparkling apple cider, which causes Rudi's mouth to open so wide that he could stick the whole bottle inside it.

"What's the matter?" he asks.

"I can't believe it," she mumbles.

"What can't you believe?"

"That someone would go to so much trouble for me."

"You're worth every trouble there is, Rudi Weiss."

This sends her running to Dennis, and she leaps into his arms, and she kisses him as hard as she can while feeling them both tremble. In spite of this, Dennis somehow shakes the bottle and pops its cork, sending cider splashing all over them.

"Aaaaahhhh!" she screams with joy as the two become drenched, and she pushes Dennis onto the bed and mauls him. Though she stops when she notices that he isn't mauling her back.

"What's wrong?" she whispers.

"I'm nervous, believe it or not," he whispers back.

"Get out of here," she utters, even though she can see he's telling the truth. She can see it in his eyes.

"I'm serious," he tells her. "I've never been this nervous, not even before my . . ."

"It's gonna be beautiful," she tells him back, before kissing his shaking hand.

“You’re so beautiful,” he tells her back.

“Nah.”

“You are, and every day you’re somehow more beautiful.”

Again, she looks into his eyes, and again she sees he means it.

“I want this,” he pleads, “I want this to be my first time.”

“It will be,” she tells him.

“Only you can make it happen.”

The two then kiss, slowly but surely, and this is how they remove each other’s clothes. They further touch everywhere while discovering every inch of themselves, sending both of them into an euphoric state that keeps rising and rising. Finally, it overloads, and she feels his heart pounding against her, and hers answers as if there’s but one between them.

Wanting them to be one everything, she rolls him on top of her, and she wraps her legs around his back while slowly pushing him inside her. Which makes him mutter incoherently as he shivers all over. Never has he felt such pleasure or even imagined it. He didn’t even expect it, with his mind so focused on pleasing her.

At the same time, she tries to mutter something back, but she can’t speak, or even see. All she can do is feel. She can feel his body becoming hers, and she isn’t even sure if what she feels comes from him or from her. Nor does she care.

It’s not long before he can move no farther. But this doesn’t stop the intensity of their coupling. It somehow even grows as they drown in each other.

“Go,” she mumbles, with her fingers clawing his shoulders and her eyes stinging from both their sweat. “Go.”

At first he doesn’t move. He can’t. He exists somewhere else. But her cries persist and

something listens to them, and this something rises off her, only to plunge even further.

Together, they shriek and shake as if shot with electricity, which happens over and over with each plunge and somehow increases. Soon, she can barely keep him on top of her.

“Rudi!” he bellows through his clenched and quivering jaws. “I can’t, I can’t . . .”

“Go!” she yells, with her nails digging into the small of his back, after having left a trail of red all the way down his spine. “Go!”

It’s then he feels it. He feels his whole body splitting apart, and the same force explodes into her, breaking her and sending both them and the mattress to the floor.

For a while, they don’t move or talk or even breathe. They just are, and just for each other.

“Nothing is like this,” he murmurs. “Nothing.”

Desperately, she wants to murmur something back. Something to express what she feels and how she feels about him. But no words can say it right. So she just kisses him. She kisses him as gently as she did that night by his door, and she holds him as tightly as she can, and she won’t let go.

Chapter 117

With the sun rising behind Thurston Hall, the blue Mercedes sedan parks in front.

For days now the two goons have been tailing Maria. But she led them nowhere until the night before when they saw Rudi and Dennis waltz inside the Willard Hotel about an hour after Maria had with Sandra. Which was a sight that surprised them, as they had been looking a junkie and not some princess in red. For many seconds, they weren't even sure it was the same person.

Then they weren't certain what to do, as Rudi wasn't wearing the overcoat. So they conferred with Eduardo over the car's phone, and they did so again multiple times during the night and the early morning before coming up with a plan. Which they're just about to execute as Sandra jogs out of the dorm and down the street.

It's then the larger goon jumps out of the car in a suit and tie and steps inside the building's lobby, where he sees a security guard snoozing nearby.

Smiling at this, he starts forward.

"Can I help you?" groggily asks the guard.

Right away, the goon stops and turns toward the man, and with a big grin he says, "Yes,

I'm going to see my cousin Maria. Maria Gonzalez. She lives in unit 931. Many times I have been here before."

The guard responds by looking over the goon, and finding him a plausible cousin for a Maria Gonzalez — and wanting to go back to his snooze — he waves the man through.

Chapter 118

Maria is watching television alone in her room when she hears a soft knock.

Quickly, she jumps up and hurries to the door, and she opens it, exposing the goon, who's sweating and breathing hard — the result of having run up the stairs.

"Can I help you?" she asks, a bit bewilderedly.

"Are you Maria — Rudi's friend?" the goon asks back.

"Yes."

"My name is Juan. I work at the Willard Hotel. Perhaps you know it."

"I was there last night."

"Well, your friend Rudi has been in a terrible accident."

"My God!" Maria gasps. "What happened?"

"Some crazy men with guns — two of them — they shot her."

"Oh . . ."

"Please come with me. She begged me to find you. She wants to see you before it's too late."

Chapter 119

Rudi wakes, with the soft light of the sun streaming through the windows of the dome-like ceiling, and she's smiling, which seems the natural state of her face.

Right away, she notices that she's still clutching Dennis and that he's still clutching her, and that they're still on the floor, along with the mattress. She further notices the strong odor of apple cider, especially on herself, and she gently removes his arms from here, and with lots of difficulty she rises to her unsteady feet. Then, with even greater difficulty, she stumbles off in search of a bathroom.

Eventually, she finds one, which has another circular window and another magnificent view of the Monument, and she takes a long shower while recalling every moment she's spent with Dennis. Not just the night before, but from the night she met him. Even the bad moments she no longer minds, as they seem necessary pieces of a complex puzzle that can't be solved otherwise.

She's still recalling everything as she turns off the water and hears the sound of another shower, off in the distance. She then dries herself and puts on one of the white robes she finds

there, and she looks for the other bathroom, and when she finds it she steps inside and notices the key to the room by the sink.

“Hey!” she calls out.

“Hey!” he calls back, from behind a stained-glass shower curtain.

“You okay?”

“No. And I’ll never be okay again.”

“That seems to be going around.”

“Come on, get in here!” he howls.

“I just took a shower,” she tells him.

“Take another!”

“We’ll never get out of here.”

“So?”

“I’m gonna get dressed,” she insists, knowing that if she doesn’t leave at this very moment there’s no hope of ever doing so, and she grabs the key and adds, “I’ll check us out and meet you downstairs.”

“Rudi!” he pleads.

“We can continue this back home.”

“Yeah?”

“If you have the strength.”

“I’ll find it!”

“I just hope I can find the exit.”

Chapter 120

Rudi is still high when she reaches the lobby and jumps off the elevator.

Right then, she sees a small line of people waiting by the front desk, including Johnny and Rich, who are near the end of the line, and she hurries up to them before stopping behind an elderly man who's standing in back of the two. Then, just before she can say hello, Rich murmurs, "I guess we're gonna have to pay."

"Yup," Johnny murmurs back.

"We almost made it. If she could've just held out for another month or so. Shit, what's it been now — six months?"

"Seven, I think. But let this be a lesson to us: if the great and omnipotent Dennis Winston says he's gonna nail someone, he's gonna nail someone."

The two afterward fall silent, and they stay that way as Rudi steadily boils behind them, with everything becoming clear to her. She now knows that Dennis never cared about her, or even liked or respected her. It was all just a big joke to him, and she's the biggest joke of them all. She realizes this just as the elevator door opens and Dennis steps out, and seeing her he

smiles and calls out, “Rudicakes!”

This causes Johnny and Rich to slowly turn their heads, and they see both Rudi and her fury.

“Oh, shit,” Rich mumbles.

Ignoring this, Rudi spins around, and with her fists clenched she marches toward Dennis, whose smile quickly fades.

“What’s wrong?” he gasps, when she stops in front of him.

Her response is the flinging of the key at his feet.

“I don’t understand,” he utters.

“I don’t have any silver to give you,” she howls — “let alone thirty pieces of it!”

“What are you talking about?”

“How much?”

“How much what?”

“How much did you win for fucking me?”

“I . . .” Dennis mutters, before looking at Johnny and Rich, who both have guilty and embarrassed expressions. “I can explain.”

“No, you can’t!”

Rudi says this and storms off, and Dennis hurries after her, and he grabs her shoulder and cries out, “Please, Rudi, you have to —”

“— I don’t have to do nothing!” she screams, before taking his arm and flipping him over her onto a heavy oak coffee table, sending both it and him crashing to the floor.

At once, excruciating pain shoots through Dennis’s back. But this is nothing in comparison to watching Rudi run out of the hotel.

Chapter 121

Rudi's anger hasn't abated by the time she returns to the fraternity house. Nor does it after she runs upstairs to the attic, which is where she tears the red dress off her body.

Then, as she stews there, feeling both humiliated and disgusted at herself, she decides to move out, even if she still has nowhere to go.

"Rudi!" a boy calls out from downstairs. "You have a phone call!"

"I'll be down in a minute!" she hollers, before hurriedly putting on a T-shirt and jeans. She further grabs the remains of the dress and marches down the ladder with it, and she throws it at Dennis's door before continuing downstairs. Which is where she yanks the receiver from the pay phone and howls, "Yeah?"

"They've got Maria!" Sandra howls back.

"What?" Rudi mutters, with all her anger disappearing.

"They, they said they're gonna kill her!" Sandra goes on.

"Slow down!" Rudi yells. "Start from the beginning."

"I, I . . . when I came back from my run this morning the phone was ringing. And some

guy said that they had Maria and that they'd kill her if you don't give them back some overcoat."

"An overcoat?"

"What's going on, Rudi?"

"I don't know."

"Should we call the police? They told me not to."

"Where do they want me to bring it?"

"They said there's an old warehouse on 1st and N Street, Southeast."

"All right."

"They said by noon."

"All right! I'll be there!"

"Rudi, if anything happens to her . . ."

"Nothing's gonna happen to her!"

Rudi screams this and hangs up, and she races to the attic. Then she finds the overcoat and carefully looks it over.

"No one kills over a coat," she says to herself, and she feels around the garment, without finding anything unusual. She also searches through every pocket, but finds nothing but the junk she herself put there. Finally, she checks the lining, and in the back of the coat near the bottom she feels something, and she rips the fabric away. Which exposes a printed document. A bill of lading for nearly two million barrels of Iranian oil.

Meanwhile, Dennis stumbles into the house, clutching his aching back. But he tries not to think about it. He tries to focus on the only thing that matters, and he keeps trying to do this as he limps up the steps.

Finally, he reaches the third floor, and he sees the red dress in front of his door, and he

hurries down the hallway and up the ladder. Which is when he sees Rudi staring at the bill of lading with lots of confusion.

“Rudi, please,” he begins.

“Do you know what this is?” she growls, while holding up the document.

“What?”

“I asked you a fucking question!”

Quickly, he staggers toward her, and he takes the paper, and while glancing at it he says, “It, it’s a bill of lading.”

“I can fucking read!” Rudi barks. “What does it mean?”

“It’s kinda like a receipt,” he tells her, before again glancing at the document. “A receipt for an oil shipment.”

“Why would it be so important to someone?”

“I . . .” Dennis mumbles as he looks over the document a bit more carefully.

Soon, shock crosses his face, which Rudi notices.

“What is it?” she screams.

“Rudi,” he gasps, “this, this is a negotiable instrument.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s like a bearer bond. This paper by itself could be worth, I don’t know, it could be worth tens of millions. What are you doing with it?”

Now, Rudi understands. She understands almost everything, and she grabs the document and says, “I need to borrow your car.”

Chapter 122

The Eldorado speeds down Pennsylvania Avenue, with Rudi in the front passenger seat and her arms crossed, including the one clutching the bill of lading.

“You didn’t have to come with me,” she growls.

“Nobody drives this car but me,” Dennis growls back. “Nobody.”

Rudi doesn’t respond.

“I guess,” he goes on, “I guess there’s no point in saying I’m sorry.”

“Why didn’t you just fuck me,” she mumbles, even though this is the last thing she wants to think about.

“What?”

Furiously, she spins her head toward Dennis and howls, “Why didn’t you just fuck me at that stupid Christmas party? You’ve had lots of other chances, too. What were you waiting for?”

“By then,” he mutters, “by then the bet meant nothing to me. I know, you have no reason to believe me, but it’s true. It never meant anything to me, no matter how hard I tried to make believe it did. It was all just stupid bravado. Everyone thinks I’m some kind of god, but the truth

is that I'm just as insecure as everyone else. That's probably why I've slept with so many girls, just to prove I really was that god everyone thinks I am. But I can tell you that this didn't make me any less lonely, only more so. Only with you am I not alone."

Again, Rudi doesn't respond.

"Please, Rudi," he pleads.

"I believe you," she says, after a long deep breath. "I don't know why I do but I do."

"Rudi —"

"— Look, I have to deal with this first."

"What is this?"

"Just get me there."

"This address — it's in a really dangerous area."

"It's not the address I'm afraid of."

"You're scaring me."

"Just drive faster!"

He does, and before long the Eldorado comes to a stop in front of a large and crumbling warehouse with a broken gate. Which is when Rudi reaches for her door, and Dennis reaches for his, too, while saying to her: "I'm going with you."

"No, you're not," she says back. "Just go home."

"I won't!"

With lots of exasperation, Rudi thinks it over, and she afterward drops the document onto her lap and mutters, "All right."

"We should really call the police," he goes on. "I saw a phone booth . . ."

Dennis can't complete his thought. He can't because Rudi's fist hits his chin, and he falls

back against his door unconscious. She then picks up the bill of lading and starts to leave.

Though she suddenly stops. She does this and gently kisses Dennis just where she had punched him.

Chapter 123

Rudi reaches the entrance of the warehouse, and she folds the bill of lading into a square and stuffs it in her back pocket. She then steps inside the darkened building.

“Hello?” she calls out, as she steps farther inside. “Is anyone here? Maria?”

There’s no reply, so she continues on while calling Maria’s name every few seconds.

“Where is it?” comes the accented voice of someone right behind her.

Rudi responds by spinning toward the voice, and she sees that it belongs to the smaller of the two goons.

“Where’s the coat?” he demands.

“Where’s Maria?” she demands back.

Instead of answering, he grabs her arms and hollers, “Give it to me!”

“You got it!” she hollers back, while kneeing him in the groin, causing him to collapse onto the ground gasping in pain.

“Where is she?” Rudi yells.

“Fuck yourself,” he mumbles, with his hands clutching his wound.

This only angers Rudi more, and she slams her foot onto his head, pounding it against the concrete and knocking him out.

“Damn!” she screams, before calling out for Maria again. This time much louder than before.

“She’s in here!” comes another accented voice from far off. A voice that echoes through the building.

Chapter 124

Dennis comes to in the Eldorado, not certain what hurts more: his back, his chin, or his pride.

“Why couldn’t I fall in love with a pacifist?” he mutters, before realizing Rudi is gone. Which is when he calls out her name, and when this accomplishes nothing he tumbles out of the car and onto the street, before raising himself up and stumbling toward the warehouse.

Chapter 125

Rudi takes a cautious step into a large hall. A hall that has many thick beams and is lit by many holes in the ceiling, which allow the sun to seep inside.

Underneath one of these holes in the distance Rudi spots the larger goon, who has his right arm around a frightened Maria, with his left hand covering her mouth. She also sees a well dressed man standing next to them. A man she's never seen before, who's holding a gun.

"Funny," Eduardo says, as Rudi approaches, "you don't look like a crack whore."

"Sometimes looks aren't deceiving," she says.

"Where is our colleague?"

"He had an accident."

"Accidents seem to happen a lot when you are around."

"People should be more careful."

"I will make certain that I am very careful."

"Let her go," Rudi tell him, while coming to a stop a safe distance away. Or at least what she thinks is a safe distance away.

“Where’s the coat?” Eduardo asks.

Rudi responds by taking out the folded-over bill of lading, and she unfolds it and shows it to him while saying, “I think this is what you want.”

“Bring it here.”

“Let Maria go. Let her go and I’ll drop it.”

“Oh, you’ll drop it, all right.”

Eduardo says this and aims and fires his gun, sending a bullet into the upper right side of Rudi’s chest.

Chapter 126

Hearing a gunshot, Dennis moves faster and deeper into the warehouse, and he soon comes upon the unconscious goon. He also notices a bulge in the man's jacket, and he pulls away the garment and sees a holster and the gun inside it. Which he hesitantly reaches for.

Chapter 127

Rudi grips her bleeding chest and tries to ignore the pain. She does this while Eduardo stands over her reading the bill of lading, with the goon by his side, holding a now frantic Maria.

“It was nice doing business with you,” Eduardo says to Rudi, as he folds the document and places it in his inside jacket pocket.

“This has something to do with that stupid war, doesn’t it?” she mutters.

“It has everything to do with it. You see, your congress — quite shortsightedly — decided to stop funding us.”

“You mean the Contras.”

“Correct. So we’ve had to get a little creative with the accounting. It’s actually an amazing example of international cooperation. Your government secretly sells weapons to Iran so they can fight Iraq, and they in turn release Americans held hostage in Lebanon. And the proceeds of these sales go to us. Everyone wins. Well, everyone except you and your friend.”

“What, what were you doing in a crack house?”

“Unfortunately, we’ve needed to find alternative sources of funding. But now, now we

can get out of that awful business.”

“The guy who died there . . .”

“That was my cousin Hector.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? You saved me a bullet, and for that I’m eternally grateful. I want you to know that we aren’t all like that scum and these two buffoons of mine. Most of us just want the same freedoms you have here. So I do hope that you don’t take this personal, because it’s not. Under different circumstances we might’ve even been friends.”

It’s then Eduardo raises his gun, and at the same time Dennis tries to aim his own weapon from in back of a beam by the entrance to the hall. Which isn’t easy with his hand shaking so much — shaking because all he can see are the big eyes of the doe. The one his father shot long ago.

Carefully, Eduardo aims his gun at Rudi’s head, and she looks up at the man with her fluttering eyes. But he isn’t all she sees. She also sees Tommy standing behind him, and she calls out his name.

Frightened, Eduardo spins behind himself, without seeing anyone. Though he does hear something somewhere and he shouts, “Who is there?”

“You’ve come for me,” Rudi murmurs to Tommy, as she teeters on unconsciousness, with the pain beginning to fade. She even smiles. She smiles at the thought of eternity with him. But Tommy just shakes his head and nods toward the spot where Dennis stands with his shaking hand.

Meanwhile, Eduardo assures himself that there’s no one around, and he once more points his gun at Rudi’s head, and he begins pressing down the trigger when a bullet flies at his foot.

Which causes him to jump back. It also causes the frightened goon next to him to raise a crying Maria in front of his body for protection. The man further yanks out a gun from his holster and points it, in no particular direction.

“Who are you?” Eduardo hollers.

“Someone who’s a dead shot from this distance,” Dennis hollers back, while using his left hand to keep his right one steady. He also adds, “Which you’re gonna find out if you don’t drop your gun.”

But Eduardo doesn’t do a thing. Instead he thinks over all the possible permutations of what could happen.

“You wouldn’t want me to start a countdown,” Dennis goes on. “Because I’m real bad in math. I might just fire before I get to zero.”

Eduardo responds to this. He does by carefully placing his gun on the ground, and he raises his hands in surrender.

“The asshole next to you, too!” Dennis continues. “Tell him to drop it!”

Eduardo nods at the goon, who doesn’t make any move to lower his weapon. So Dennis shoots him in the foot, and the man screams in pain while releasing both his gun and Maria, who falls upon her friend and hugs her.

“Rudi!” she cries out, with tears pouring down her face. “Rudi!”

“Now get out of here!” Dennis yells at the two men.

But neither moves.

“Ten!” Dennis calls out. “Seven . . . three . . .”

“All right!” Eduardo calls back. “We’re going!” Though as he does he glances at Rudi and says to her: “I can find you again. And your friends.”

“You won’t have to,” Rudi gasps, before falling unconscious.

Eduardo nods at her anyway, and he marches off, followed by the limping goon. Then, once they leave the hall, Dennis sprints to Rudi, who’s still being held by Maria, who’s still crying.

“Let me take her!” he cries out.

But Maria won’t budge. So Dennis pushes her away and he kneels down to pick Rudi up, and he sees blood pouring out of her chest, just like what he saw in the vision he had of her on the night they met.

“She’s gonna die!” Maria howls.

“She’s not gonna die!” Dennis howls back, before lifting Rudi up and rushing off.

Chapter 128

The Eldorado speeds up Pennsylvania Avenue, doing so much faster than it sped down it.

Maria is now driving and Rudi is lying on Dennis's lap in the front passenger seat, with Dennis trying to stem the flow of blood with the jacket of his tuxedo.

Since leaving the warehouse, Rudi has been coming in and out of consciousness, but she's now been out of it for more than a minute, and Dennis is becoming frantic.

"Come on, Rudi!" he hollers. He then turns to Maria and hollers, "Faster! Fucking faster!"

"My foot is already on the floor!" she hollers back, as she wildly weaves through traffic with tears pouring down her face.

"Then push it through the floor!"

Dennis afterward returns his attention to Rudi, and not knowing what else to do, he starts singing to her. He sings Black Flag's "Rise Above," which is a song that has always pumped him up. But, in spite of how loud and passionately he sings it, Rudi is just as lifeless.

"Goddammit, Rudi!" he shouts. "Goddammit, if you don't come to I'm gonna start

singing Van Halen! I swear I will!”

“I’ll fucking kill you,” she mumbles.

“She’s alive!” Maria utters, while continuing to cry.

“She’s alive,” Dennis repeats, before crying himself as he cradles Rudi in his arms while silently whispering all sorts of oaths to himself.

Soon, the Eldorado reaches the hospital, and it jumps the curb as it makes a sharp stop in front of the emergency room entrance. Which is when Dennis flies out of the car with Rudi in his arms, and he stumbles inside the building with her.

“Get my mom!” he howls, as he falls to his knees. “Somebody get my mom!”

Chapter 129

Rudi finds herself in a strange and ever-changing dream. One second she's in one place and in one time, and the next she's sometime and somewhere else.

She then feels herself moving. She's moving down a corridor, and she looks up and sees a tall blonde woman walking alongside her. A woman whose face is covered by a surgical mask. In spite of this, Rudi can tell that she's smiling at her.

"So you're the girl my son can't stop talking about," the woman murmurs, with a thick accent.

"Can, can I ask you something?" Rudi murmurs back.

"You can ask me anything."

"How . . . how do you say 'thank you' in Czech?"

"*Děkuji*," the woman says.

Chapter 130

Rudi is experiencing another strange dream. In this one time keeps spinning and spinning, flashing thousands of faces in front of her eyes, of people she knows and loves, along with just as many places and moments.

Drowsily, she comes out of it, and she finds herself in a hospital bed, feeling lightheaded. She also feels someone holding her hand, and she turns her head, and she sees the late afternoon sun streaming through the window and Mrs. Goodwin sitting in front of it.

The day before, the woman rushed to the airport right after Maria called her, and when she discovered that there were no commercial flights leaving for hours, she chartered her own. Then, ever since arriving in the hospital, she's barely left Rudi's room, and has barely stopped praying.

"This is becoming a habit," Rudi mutters to the woman.

"Perhaps one day we'll break it," her mother-in-law mutters back.

"Don't count on it," Rudi says, with her eyes irresistibly heavy.

"How are you?" the woman asks.

“Been better,” Rudi answers, before falling back asleep.

The next time Rudi opens her eyes it’s dark out. But, as Mrs. Goodwin is still holding her hand, she doesn’t sense time has passed.

“Where’d the sun go?” she asks.

“You’ve been sleeping for five hours,” the woman answers.

“Did I miss anything?”

“Lots of visitors. Actually, you’ve had lots of visitors since I’ve been here.”

“Yeah?”

“There’s been Maria and her friend, and Jared and his wife, who just happened to mention how they’re naming their child after you.”

“Yeah.”

“They also said something about making you the child’s godmother.”

“Yeah.”

“I suppose you’ll tell me that they don’t have any special reason for doing these things.”

“I don’t know.”

“Your boss has come by as well — a couple of times. Once with a very eccentric minister. They were telling me about all the people you’ve helped in such a short period of time. My head was spinning.”

“It was nothing.”

“There you go again.”

“Listen to you talk — raising all that money to fight AIDS and not telling me about it, even after I practically accused you of doing nothing. So maybe, maybe I really am my mother’s daughter.”

“Speaking of which,” Mrs. Goodwin mumbles, before involuntarily releasing Rudi’s hand. “I’ve been talking with my lawyer, and I, I’ve started the paperwork.”

“Paperwork?”

“To legally adopt you. That is, of course, if it’s all right with you.”

With a big smile, Rudi retakes Mrs. Goodwin’s hand, and she tells her: “I don’t need any paperwork to know you’re my mother. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Oh,” the woman cries out, before falling upon Rudi and holding like a newborn. Which is just before she adds, “After my husband died, I thought I’d never be happy again. But you make me so happy.”

“You make me happy, too.”

It’s then Mrs. Goodwin breaks her embrace, and she wipes her eyes and says to told Rudi: “I almost forgot, there were a bunch of fraternity boys here — a whole army of them, all at once.”

“Yeah?” Rudi utters.

“And they, they were strangely saying you were one of their brothers.”

“Yeah,” Rudi says, a bit bashfully.

“I’m not even gonna ask how you managed that,” her mother says back.

“It’s not as wild as you think.”

“Nothing about you is, at least under the hood. Under there is the sweetest girl in the world.”

“No one’s ever called me that before.”

“Well, you better get used to it. Because I’m gonna be saying it a lot, and there’s not a thing you can do about it.”

Chapter 131

Rudi wakes in lots of pain. She's also alone. But this doesn't last long, as Mrs. Goodwin comes to the door, and she says, "You're up."

"I'm up," Rudi says back.

"How are you today?"

"All right."

The woman then peeks down the hallway, and she glances at something.

"What is it?" Rudi asks

"Remember when I told you about all those fraternity boys?" her mother says. "Well, there's been one in particular. One who's been lurking the halls almost every time I look. And it doesn't seem as if he's slept much."

"Does he look like a Ken doll?"

"That's the one!"

Involuntarily, Rudi turns from the woman a bit.

"Is he that 'no one special' you weren't talking about?" Mrs. Goodwin asks.

“I don’t know,” Rudi mutters. “I don’t know what he is.”

“I’m guessing that’s Dennis Winston.”

Rudi nods.

“I actually know his father a little,” the woman goes on. “My husband knew him well. Said he was the worst man alive.”

“Well,” Rudi says, “sometimes the apple falls far from the tree.”

“Would you like to speak to him? Dennis, I mean.”

Rudi responds by turning to her mother, but she doesn’t know what to say.

Chapter 132

Sheepishly, Dennis steps inside the room, and even more sheepishly he sits next to Rudi, who smiles at him and says, “*Děkuji.*”

This causes Dennis to smile back, and he utters, “*Není zač.*”

“What does that mean?” Rudi asks.

“It was nothing,” Dennis says, and Rudi chuckles at this.

“What’s so funny?” he asks.

“It doesn’t matter,” she tells him.

“So, so you’re not mad at me anymore?”

“You’re the only reason I’m alive. Maria, too.”

“There’s something I have to say.”

“Me, too.”

“Me, first.”

“All right.”

“I . . .” Dennis begins, after dropping his eyes a bit, “I’m not Tommy, and I never will be

him. Nor am I Superman or Byron. I'm just one big set of flaws. But I . . ."

"You're wonderful," she murmurs, as she takes his hand.

"I am?" he murmurs back, while feeling as if he's floating to the ceiling.

"And you're gonna make someone very happy one day."

"*Someone?*" Dennis gasps, before quickly tumbling back to earth.

"I'm going home," she tells him. "Back to New Jersey."

"What?"

"I don't belong here. I never did. I only came here because some stupid doctor said I needed to get away from my memories. The truth is, the truth is I've just been hiding from them. But no more."

"But I . . ."

"Let's not ruin that one night," she interrupts, knowing exactly what he's about to say and not wanting to hear it, fearing she won't be able to stop herself from saying the same thing back. "It was beautiful," she adds, "in spite of everything that happened afterward. But it's never happening again."

"So . . . so when are you going?"

"I don't know. Soon."

"How soon?"

"How soon is now?"

"What does that mean, Rudi?"

"I don't know — in a couple of days. Probably."

"Can I come by again?"

"Maybe you shouldn't."

“Rudi.”

“Please. Please let me go.”

Chapter 133

Mrs. Goodwin comes to Rudi's room with a policeman, who had been notified by the hospital that Rudi had been shot.

"This gentleman wants to ask you some questions," the woman utters while nodding toward the officer. "But I don't think you should talk to him without a lawyer."

"It's all right," Rudi insists.

"But —"

"— It's all right."

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I am about anything."

Rudi says this and the policeman strides up to Rudi, and he takes out a pen and a notepad and says, "Who shot you?"

"I don't know," Rudi answers.

"Male, female? Age? Color?"

"I don't know. I didn't get a good look."

“Do you know why they shot you?”

“I have no idea.”

“Where did this happen?”

“I don’t remember.”

The man sighs, and he returns both his pen and notepad before saying, “You should expect a visit from a detective in the coming days.”

“Why?”

“He’ll be asking the questions.”

The policeman then leaves, and Mrs. Goodwin whispers, “Can you tell me what happened?”

“Later,” Rudi says. “I promise.”

“As long as you’re safe I really don’t care.”

“I’ve never felt safer than I do right now,” Rudi murmurs, and she lifts her hand toward her mother, who rushes over and grabs it.

“When can I go home?” Rudi asks.

“It’s up to you,” the woman answers.

“I wanna go home now.”

“If it’s because of that detective . . .”

“It’s not because of him.”

“Then what’s the rush?”

“There’s someone I need to visit.”

Chapter 134

Dennis stammers into the fraternity house feeling punch-drunk. He also feels as if part of himself were still in the hospital.

“Your dad called,” says Chuck from inside the main room. “Actually, he’s been calling a lot.”

Dennis shrugs, but he makes his way to the pay phone, and even though his father is the last person he wants to speak to, he calls him.

“Where have you been?” the man howls.

“Out,” Dennis answers.

“I’m your father, dammit. You can’t give me the courtesy of returning my calls?”

“What do you want, Dad?”

“I’m speaking tomorrow night at a dinner for the Family Research Council, and I need a family. We’ll pick you up at five sharp.”

“That’s the only reason you had me, isn’t it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“So I could accompany you somewhere.”

“I don’t like your tone of voice.”

“Well, I don’t like you at all.”

“Just be ready at five o’clock tomorrow night, wearing the suit we bought you for Christmas. And get a damn haircut!”

With that, the line goes dead, and Dennis goes to his room, where he stays for the rest of the day and into the night, thinking of only one thing. Then, late in the evening, he realizes something. He realizes that he can’t let Rudi leave the hospital and his life without telling her the words he couldn’t express earlier — words he wouldn’t’ve been able to express even if she had let him. He even practices saying these words over and over, and afterward he runs out of the house and to the hospital, not even willing to wait until morning.

But once there he finds Rudi’s room empty, and when a nurse tells him that Rudi has already gone home, he almost collapses.

Still, he somehow makes it back to the fraternity house, where he crashes on one of the couches in the main room while barely sleeping at all, and the next morning he just sulks. Which everyone notices, especially J. D.

Finally, the big man stops in the threshold of the room and growls, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Dennis says, without looking at J. D. or anything else.

“What-is-wrong?”

But Dennis won’t say a thing, so J. D. marches up to him and repeats his question. This time a lot firmer.

“Rudi,” Dennis mutters, after a drawn-out sigh. “She went back to New Jersey. For good.”

“Come with me.”

“Where?”

“Just come with me.”

Dennis sighs again, but he stands up, and with his head down he follows J. D. out of the room and down the corridor.

“You want me to steal you another newspaper machine?” J. D. asks, as the two make their way toward the back room.

“That’s okay,” Dennis answers, with just a hint of a smile.

“Cause I would.”

“I know.”

“I’d do anything for you.”

“Even lay out in front of a speeding tricycle?”

“Even that.”

It’s then the two reach the back door of the house, and J. D. opens it, exposing both the driveway and the Eldorado.

“Go after her,” J. D. commands.

“It’s not that simple,” Dennis insists.

J. D. responds by grabbing Dennis’s car keys from a nearby hook and saying, “Sure it is.”

“I don’t even know where she lives.”

“Find out.”

“I gotta be somewhere tonight.”

“You gotta be in New Jersey.”

With yet another sigh, Dennis thinks it over. But he still makes no move for the keys.

“Let me tell you something,” J. D. murmurs, with no small amount of emotion, “if I had someone even half as special as Rudi, I’d be halfway through Delaware right now.”

Chapter 135

Maria approaches Thurston Hall with her mind elsewhere, back in the warehouse, where her short life almost ended. Then, just as she reaches the doors someone calls out her name, and she stops and turns her head, and she sees Dennis across the street in his convertible.

“Hey,” she says to him.

“I’m looking for Rudi,” he says back.

“Isn’t she in the hospital? I was just about to head over there.”

“She went home, to New Jersey.”

“She did?”

“You, you wouldn’t happen to know her address there and how I can find it?”

Maria smiles at this. She smiles big.

Chapter 136

Dennis has been driving for hours, with his foot barely touching the brakes and his mind focused on what he'll say to Rudi.

He has long decided to throw out everything he planned to say the night before, thinking now that he can't just express how he feels in words, as he knows they mean little. He knows that anyone can say them without meaning them. He knows this from his own experiences. He knows that he has to express them in a way that she can't possibly doubt.

But how? he asks himself over and over. How?

This is when an epiphany strikes, and his face lights up. Though it doesn't stay that way for long, as he hears a police siren ringing out behind him.

"Not again," he utters, before pulling off onto the shoulder of the road.

Chapter 137

Mrs. Goodwin's silver Jaguar coasts down a scenic tree-lined road, and inside the car the woman glances at Rudi in the front passenger seat. She in particular glances at her melancholy, and she tells her: "You know, while we're changing your last name we could change your first as well."

"I think I'm just gonna keep it," Rudi says.

"I thought you hated 'Gertrude.'"

"I did. But someone named me that for a reason. And besides, Gertrude Stein was one of the greatest writers there ever was."

It's then the Jaguar makes a right turn, and Mrs. Goodwin parks in a nearly empty lot.

"It's right over that hill," she says to her daughter, while pointing the way.

"All right," Rudi mumbles

"You want me to come with you?"

Rudi shakes her head.

"You sure?" the woman asks.

“I need to do this myself,” Rudi answers.

“All right.”

With lots of hesitation, Rudi grabs her backpack off the floor, and with even more hesitation she opens her door. She then spins around and hugs her mother, and she tells her: “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too,” the woman whispers.

Rudi soon breaks their embrace, and she gets out of the car, and with lots of pain of all sorts she makes her way toward the hill.

Chapter 138

Elizabeth rushes down the hallway, with the sound of a bell echoing off the walls, and she opens the door and sees Dennis.

“Can I help you?” she asks.

“Yeah,” Dennis mumbles. “I, I’m a friend of Rudi.”

“She’s out right now with her mother, but she should be back soon. Would you like to wait inside?”

“Actually, Rudi once mentioned . . .”

Chapter 139

Rudi comes to a stop beside Tommy's grave, which is next to an empty plot. A plot in which she knows she'll one day lie.

By his grave she stands awhile before kneeling in front of the tombstone, upon which is written: "Loving Son and Husband." She then tries unsuccessfully to control her emotions.

"Hi, baby," she whimpers, with her eyes beginning to tear. "You've been visiting me so much of late that I thought it was time to return the favor."

Rudi says this and sits on the grass, and she adds, "I want you to know, I want you to know that I'm gonna do what you said. I'm gonna live. I'm gonna live big. I'm gonna live so big that when we meet again — when we meet again for good — you'll be proud of me. I'll be proud of me, too."

At this moment she pauses, before opening her backpack and taking out her "Moonlight Serenade" tape, which she lays the against the gravestone with her shaking hand while saying, "I brought you something."

Again, she pauses. She pauses for just a second and adds, "I, I don't want you to think

that I'm never gonna listen to this song again, because I am. I'm just not gonna listen to it all the time."

Right then, she starts crying. She also places her hand on the stone and caresses the letters of Tommy's name with her fingers while murmuring, "I know you understand, and I know you love me. And I love you, too."

She afterward continues her crying. She cries for so long that she wonders if she'll ever stop. But finally the tears cease and she stands up, and she makes her way back down the hill.

So she doesn't see the spindles of the cassette begin to move.

Chapter 140

The Jaguar eases its way down South Orange Avenue, with Mrs. Goodwin peeking at Rudi's teary and downcast face every few seconds while wishing she could say something that could uplift her.

Though all she can come up with is: "Next time, next time we're doing this together. We're gonna visit both our husbands together."

"I always wanted to meet him," Rudi tells her.

"He would've loved you."

"You think?"

"He wouldn't've had any more choice than I've had."

The woman says this just as the Jaguar turns onto her driveway, which is just before it comes to a screeching stop.

"What's wrong?" Rudi utters, with her eyes still downward.

"Well," her mother says, "if it isn't that 'no one special.'"

Slowly, Rudi lifts her wet face, and with lots of surprise she sees Dennis a short distance

away, sitting on top of his Eldorado with a look of both longing and hope.

“He’s even brought dinner,” Mrs. Goodwin goes on.

“What?” Rudi mumbles, before seeing the box of Reservoir pizza beside Dennis on the hood.

Understanding exactly what this means, she slams open her door, and she bursts out of the car, and forgetting all her pain she hurries toward that someone special and his big box of love.

The End