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EVEN PUNK GIRLS BLUSH
by
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Chapter 1

With the sun collapsing behind it, a shiny red Porsche swerves off Route 22 and speeds onto the lot of a crumbling and empty motel on the edge of Newark, before coming to a screeching halt in front of the office.

In the passenger seat of this car sits a 17-year-old girl, whose fear contradicts everything else about her. It contradicts her high contrast black-and-white makeup and her spiked jet-black hair, but most of all it contradicts the apathy she's trying to convey.

But as the car's engine cuts off, Rudi gives up on this apathy and lowers her eyes, and she crosses her arms while wishing she were somewhere else. Anywhere else. She wishes and wishes until this else comes to be, and she finds herself in a police holding cell many miles away, and a pair of weeks earlier. There on a cold floor she sits with her back against the wall, with the same crossed arms and the same fear and the same lowered eyes.

Still, she sees all around her hookers and addicts and violent women, who frightened her not at all. She fears something worse — something that makes her crave for the music that's gotten her from one day to the next, and to and from each hopelessness.

But the cops have taken her Walkman, and everything else, leaving her only thoughts, of how she got here and the big mistake that made it all possible. Which makes her think of her oncoming nightmare and how she can remove herself from it. But these thoughts go nowhere, and feeling desperation everywhere, she straps a pair of headphones onto her ears that exist only in her head, and she hits the play button there.

This sends sounds rattling into her head. The sounds of Black Flag's "No Values." These sounds are clear and loud and unrelenting, and with them comes strength and confidence and the feeling she's not alone.

Jumping to her feet, she yells out lyrics that describe someone who's got nothing left to lose. She dances, too, kicking her legs high over her head.

All at once, her cellmates recoil from her, and as far as they can, in spite of her petiteness. But Rudi doesn't notice this. She notices only the song and how it makes her feel. Soon this feeling becomes overwhelming, and she jumps onto the bars, screaming how she wants to smash everything in her way.

"It's about time!" howls a raspy female voice from somewhere unseen.

Rudi doesn't respond to this. But she does stop singing, and she hears footsteps marching toward her, along with the clanking of keys. Louder and louder they both get, and with them comes a large middle-aged woman dressed in blue. "Let's go!" she snaps.

"Go where?" Rudi snaps back.

"You'll find out!"

Chapter 2

Paul Cross drops his wrinkled gray suit, and the wrinkled frame inside it, onto a creaky wooden chair while flinging a manila folder onto the creaky wooden desk in front of him. He then draws one of his last remaining fixes from a crumpled box of Marlboros, and he places it between his stained fingers and lights it.

While nursing on this cruel breakfast, he reads through a file he knows way too well. He reads it with the eyes of a man teetering on another world. These eyes are sad and tired, even more than he is. Still, they keep reading, in spite of his mind begging them to stop. In spite of it screaming: *she's a loser!*

The facts glaring at Paul from the page also tell him this, and they further tell him that she'll never see twenty. Others have told him this, too, especially his boss, who ordered him this morning to bury the girl where she belongs. But Paul just can't make himself believe what he knows is true.

It's then a sharp knock on the door breaks his concentration, and he growls, "Yeah?"

The door responds. It creaks open and the woman in blue leads Rudi, who's manacled on

both her wrists and ankles, inside the tiny office.

Paul pretends not to notice them. He pretends to read his file. But Rudi is someone he can't help notice. It's not her outrageous makeup and hair, or the scowl on her face. Nor is it the tattered and frayed jeans, or the torn black T-shirt stitched together with safety pins. It's something underneath all this. Something he notices but just can't see.

"Take off the cuffs," he says.

The woman glances at Rudi before turning to Paul and uttering, "I wouldn't recommend it. It took four of us —"

"— Take off the cuffs."

The woman sighs, but she does what she's told and says, "Would —"

"— Wait outside."

"You can't talk to me like that," barks the woman, while pretending that this barking has nothing to do with the fact that he's black and she's white.

Paul says nothing, and this makes the policewoman even angrier. She storms out of the office and slams the door, leaving Rudi and her scowl. Which Paul again pretends not to see.

Rudi pretends, too — to hate this man. She grasps her hips and glares at him. She does everything but roar. But she can't get his attention anymore than she can figure out why he cares. So she growls, "If you're just gonna ignore me . . ."

"Sit down," he growls back.

She doesn't move, and he doesn't repeat himself. He just waits, and finally she marches over to him, and she plops herself down on another creaky wooden chair in front of his desk. She also flings her black and laceless Chuck Taylor's, and the feet inside them, on top of the desk.

"Shoes," he says.

“They’re not shoes,” she says back.

Paul responds, by taking one last drag of his fix, and he stuffs out the remainder on the tin throwaway ashtray by the folder, which he slams closed. He also flings her feet off the desk while glaring at her with those sad and tired eyes.

As if answering a dare, Rudi glares back at him, and the two keep this up even after he blows smoke onto her face.

“How could you be so dumb?” he mutters.

She doesn’t quite answer. She just lowers her head while regretting that one big mistake, especially as she almost had enough money to escape. Not just to escape her “home” and her town, but also a certain someone named Deke. She even tells herself that she might’ve escaped her demons, too, even if she knows this is a lie. The biggest one there is.

It’s then an image pops into her head, of Penn Station in Newark — a place she likes to go, even though she hates it. It’s the trains and buses leaving there that she likes. She likes to imagine herself on one, even if they never go anywhere better than the nowhere she already is. Just the idea of leaving has gnawed at her, and this is what made her both impatient and dumb. Now all her money is gone, and so is her supply. Which is not really hers. Which means she’s now screwed. So screwed that the police and her probation officer are the least of what’s screwing her.

“It’s not a rhetorical question,” the man tells her. “I really want to know what happened.”

“Fucking Quincy punk,” she mutters, while shaking her still lowered head, with the image of Penn Station now replaced by an undercover cop who looks just a little too much like Sid Vicious.

“Am I supposed to know what that means?”

“Look,” she barks, after raising her head, “the other day fucking Reagan was on the tube talking about how ‘entrepreneurship is the foundation of our democracy,’ or some stupid shit like that. And what does he do? He and his fucking police state arrest me.”

“How can you keep messing with this shit? Don’t you see you’re playing Russian Roulette? One day it’s really gonna go off.”

“How am I supposed to make money? Working at McDonald’s? Or maybe you prefer I sell my body on the streets.”

“Something tells me you wouldn’t get very far in that line of work.”

“Fuck you.”

“Judge Vinson wants to rescind your probation.”

Rudi tries to pretend that this means nothing to her. She even shrugs. But she has to do so while averting her eyes and crossing her arms.

“You really want to go back to juvie?” he asks, even though he knows the answer.

“It’s no worse than anywhere else,” she insists. But just the mention of that dank and foul-smelling place causes her to shiver. She shivers as if someone had just scratched their nails against a chalkboard. Then, once this feeling passes, it’s replaced by something worse: the knowing that within the walls of the detention center there would only be danger, especially from her demons. Worst yet would be when she got out, because Deke would surely be waiting.

“I don’t know why I fucking try!” Paul hollers, while slamming his fist onto the desk — slamming it so hard that the folder almost tips over.

“Me, neither!” Rudi hollers back, louder than him. She also slams her fists onto the desk harder than him. She slams it so hard that the folder flies onto the floor. But this is when Paul finally sees what’s underneath Rudi’s attire and attitude. He sees a frightened little girl, who’s

desperate for something she's never really had: hope. He further sees a certain magic pouring out of her that she couldn't diffuse if she tried, and this magic means more than all the facts lying on the floor.

"Two hours," he says to her.

"What?" she says back.

"I spent *two fucking hours* on the phone with the judge, so you can have one last chance."

"I don't want it!"

"But you're getting it, you little piece of shit! And that's not all you're getting!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I made arrangements for you to stay with my brother Stephen."

"Your what?"

"He and his wife can't have kids. So they're foster parents."

"That's real sweet. But I already got a, a whatchamacallit — a stepdad. Whom I love dearly."

"He already signed-off on this."

"That motherfucker."

"We all think a change of environment could change everything."

"It won't change nothing!"

"And as an added benefit, my brother will also be your new guidance counselor."

"Guidance counselor? Guidance counselor where?"

"Columbia."

This word causes another image to pop into Rudi's head: a horrid place smack in the middle of more horridness. "In fucking Maplewood?" she howls.

“Yes,” he tells her, with a bit of a grin, “in fucking Maplewood.”

“I can’t even stay awake in that fucking town!”

“You’re gonna fucking learn.”

“I won’t do it!”

“Look, you either move to fucking Maplewood or spend the rest of your childhood in county lockup. It’s your fucking choice.”

Rudi says nothing. She just lowers her head and closes her eyes, and she wishes she were somewhere else.

“Well,” he utters. “What’s it gonna be?”

This is when a thought strikes Rudi, which could possibly remove her from her impending nightmare, and she raises her head and asks, “Who will know I’m in Maplewood?”

“Why?”

“Just answer the fucking question!”

“Lots of people will know. Me, your stepdad, the judge, social services, the police —”

“— What I’m asking is this: if someone were to call up and ask my whereabouts, would they tell them?”

“Rudi, what’s going on?”

“Just answer the fucking question!”

“Nobody’s gonna fucking know!”

Again, Rudi puts her laceless Chuck Taylor’s, and the feet inside them, onto the desk. She even has a bit of a grin.

Chapter 3

Through the hallway of the Irvington Police Department marches Paul, who's sucking on his very last fix. Following him a few steps behind is Rudi, who's wearing an old navy-blue overcoat that's way too large and way past falling apart. On top of this, across her shoulder, hangs a small and worn white canvas seabag, from which she yanks out her Walkman.

At the same time, she straps on the headphones and slaps a tape into the machine, and she smashes the play button with her thumb. Which sends the Dead Kennedys' "Police Truck" into her head, and she screams along with it.

Sighing, Paul reaches for his aching head, and while rubbing it he wishes he had buried Rudi like he was told. He wishes hard. Still, he continues forward.

He gets to the automatic doors just as the song nears its end. Which is when Rudi stops by a group of officers and belts out the penultimate verse, about performing on her a most impossible sex act. Paul stops, too, and he turns around and covers her mouth, and he picks her up and tosses her outside.

In the sunny but cold autumn air, Rudi slowly turns toward the street. She does this while

holding her breath, and she notices that no one's waiting for her. A certain no one in particular, and this causes her to chug in some air and jack her player all the way up.

"Let's get your things," Paul tells her.

"What?" she responds.

He responds back by smashing the stop button of her Walkman with his thumb, and he repeats himself.

"Am I still under arrest?" she asks.

"No," he tells her.

"Then I can get my shit myself, and I can get there myself."

Paul snarls at both her and her words, but he yanks out a scrap of paper and a pen from his jacket, and he writes out an address and a phone number. Which he hands to Rudi while telling her: "Lewis Drive. It's right above Wyoming. By the reservation."

"By or *in*?" she growls, before grabbing the paper and stuffing it into her coat pocket without looking at it.

"You need bus fare?" he asks.

She replies with a sneer, and he says to her: "If you're not there by six tonight, you're on your own, missy. I'll give your case to someone who doesn't give a fuck, which is everyone." He then starts down the steps while adding, "And be advised: my brother is a Marine, too. Worse than me. So fuck not lest ye be fucked."

Mockingly, Rudi blows Paul a kiss, and as if sensing this, he stops and spins toward her. "You're still expected to go to NA," he tells her. "There's one that meets over in South Orange. Stephen will get you there."

"I can hardly wait," she says, with her hand over her heart.

“I meant it, Rudi. This is your last chance. I, I want to be there at your graduation. Your college one, and your postgraduate one, too. Don’t let me down. Don’t let *you* down.”

Rudi says nothing in reply. She just watches him turn around and continue down the steps, and she watches him jump into his old and battered blue Oldsmobile and race off.

Finally feeling free, she races off herself. She runs down the steps and up the street, with her arms flailing about and only one thought in her head: to get away. She wants to get away from the whole fucking world and disappear. She wants to become invisible — to cease seeing and feeling and being. But she just can’t run fast enough, or far enough, and when she reaches Springfield Avenue she doubles over out of breath and hope. She wants to cry, too. She not only wants this, but also wants something to take away this want. She wants them both equally and badly, but she refuses either. She refuses to be weak. Instead, she rises up, and she glances around, again for that certain no one.

Though all she sees is her rotting hometown. Which causes her to reach into her bag and find a tape labeled “Fear,” and she exchanges it for the current one and plays “I Love Livin’ in the City.” Then, while howling along with it, she tells herself that this time she’ll be patient. She’ll be patient while she hides from Deke, and she’ll wait for her opportunity. A hustle was sure to come by, and when it does she won’t hesitate. She’ll fly away for good, no matter where.

It’s then she sees something: an oasis down the street called Vintage Vinyl, and she sprints toward it while screaming even louder with the song. Soon, she gets to the door, and she smashes through it and doesn’t even hear the sounds of the Circle Jerks pouring out of it. But she does see the man behind the counter, who’s wearing a Black Flag T-shirt and shaking his fists and most of his body while screeching along with “I Just Want Some Skank.”

His name is Butch, and because he’s middle-aged he seems out of place. Not that he cares,

as he's having way too much fun.

Eventually, he notices Rudi and her grin, and he grins back. He also lowers the volume of the record player behind him and raises his open palm while calling out, "Sweet Rudi Brown Eyes!"

"What's up, motherfucker?" she says to him, before slapping his hand so hard that he has to shake it. He afterward glances around the store, which is smaller than some Cadillacs but still somehow always has more than twice as many good records as any store more than twice its size. He glances, too, at the only customer there: an odd and unkempt teenage boy with wild curly brown hair, who's looking at some albums with his back to the pair. Butch then leans toward Rudi and whispers, "Whatcha got for me?"

"Nothing," she whispers back, with lots of exasperation. "I got busted."

"Shit. They get much?"

"Everything. Stash, loot, fucking everything."

"Shit. Does Deke know?"

Deke.

Like with "juvie," the word itself is enough to make Rudi ill and scared, and make her long for her demons.

"What's wrong?" Butch asks.

"I don't know if he knows," Rudi answers. "But he's sure gonna find out. And I can tell you this much: if he finds me, I'm shit-fucked."

"Come on, he's gotta understand this kind of thing."

"Does he?"

"Sure. It's what they call, what they call 'the cost of doing business.'"

“Maybe you can explain it to him.”

“Not me,” Butch mutters, with a slow shake of his head, and he adds, “What about you?”

“Me?” Rudi utters.

“Are they sending you back to juvie?”

Rudi doesn’t say a thing.

“Is it a secret?” Butch mutters.

“If it were, could you keep it?” she asks.

“Of course.”

“You wouldn’t tell Deke?”

“I barely know the guy.”

Rudi gives Butch an incredulous look. Which gets more and more incredulous.

“I swear!” he insists.

“They,” she says, “they’re sending me to live with some fuckhead Marine in Maplewood. Out by South Mountain.”

Butch doesn’t say a thing in reply. He doesn’t even express anything. Then he laughs. He laughs and laughs.

“What’s so funny?” she demands.

“I think Dante mentioned that place,” he tells her. “And that was without the fuckhead Marine.”

Rudi chuckles at this, even if it’s the last thing she wants to do. This is actually why she likes Butch, in spite of his flaws. He can always make her laugh. Which she really needed.

“It was either there or juvie,” she says.

“Me,” he says back, “I’d choose juvie. Or even the chair.”

“What about the new DKs album?” Rudi demands, wanting to change the subject.

“What about it?” he demands back.

She looks around the counter, and she spots a small stack of *Trouser Press* magazines, and she grabs one and shoves it in Butch’s face while growling, “Fucking *Trouser Press* said it was coming out in October.”

“Well, fucking *Trouser Press* doesn’t deliver it,” he growls back. You’ll get it when I get it.”

Rudi sighs. She sighs loudly, because she really wants *Plastic Surgery Disasters*. She wants it so badly that even though she knows it’s dumb she yanks out the scrap of paper Paul gave her, and she says to Butch: “I’ll give you my new number. But don’t give it to nobody. Not even fucking Leila. And call me the second the record comes in. I don’t care if it’s three in the fucking morning.”

She says this and slaps the paper onto the counter, and she regrets it at once.

Chapter 4

Rudi leaves the oasis and makes her way to Stuyvesant Avenue. But as she turns the corner at the intersection she sees it: a shiny red Porsche 944 parked in front of a tenement down the block. A car that could only belong to one person.

Right away she jumps back and hides against the wall of a building, where she doesn't even breathe. She just waits. She waits until she hears the car's engine roar. Which gets more and more distant.

This causes her to peek her head out, and when she sees the car speeding away from her, she heads that way, too. She heads there fast, and she reaches a crumbling brick building, which looks much like its neighbor and its neighbor's neighbor. She further storms inside its broken glass door and notices a junkie underneath the staircase. She also notices him shooting up, with eyes so glazed over that she can't tell if he sees her, or anything at all.

She notices all this but pretends not to, mostly because she wants to remain apathetic to the misery all around her. But the problem is that she knows that she's not apathetic, by the very definition of who she is. She knows it's preppies who are apathetic, and JAPs and jocks and all

other mutations of life in suburbia. But not punks. That, after all, is the whole fucking point.

Still, she keeps pretending, and she rushes up the stairs to the second floor. She then rushes inside an apartment just outside the stairway, where she sees from the doorway a large heavysset man pushing forty. She sees him sitting in a brown faux leather easy chair, with a frosty can of Schaefer beer in his paw.

Having spent most of the past 24 hours in that chair, Dan Reese has a face full of whiskers and greasy unkempt hair. But Rudi doesn't notice this. What she notices is his clothes: a torn and dingy wife-beater T-shirt, a pair of stained striped boxers, and black dress socks. She also notices that he's watching TV — a big black and white set that is so old it needs a couple of minutes to warm up every time it's turned on. She notices, too, that he's watching *The Joker's Wild* and watching it with eyes as glazed as the junkie's downstairs.

"Joker! Joker! Joker!" Jack Barry screams. But not even this can lift Dan from his stupor. Which Rudi stares at. She stares at it while trying to hate the man behind it. But much like with Paul, she just can't. She can't feel anything. Which makes her so mad that she slams the door behind herself.

"Hey, Daddy!" she squeals, over the sound of him sucking in some beer. "Thanks for helping me out with my probation officer. You really saved the day."

"Go fuck yourself," he blurts out, without even a hint of emotion.

"That's more your style, isn't it?" she tells him, before marching toward an open door across the way. "Knock yourself out," she adds, as she steps onto the broken linoleum of a small bedroom. There she looks out onto the clothes strewn everywhere and onto a torn single mattress on the floor, and she sees all the records and cassettes piled around a tiny and cheap stereo in the corner of the room.

While closing the door behind herself, she drops her seabag, and she hurries to her records, where she collapses on both knees. She also scavenges through the mess until she finds what she's looking for: a worn copy of *Fresh Fruit for Rotting Vegetables*. From the sleeve of this record, she plucks out a handful of bills. Not even \$20 all together, which is all she has left in the world, and about as useful to her as her broken bed.

Still, she stuffs the money into her jeans, along with the spare change she finds on the floor. She even collects the pennies, which are caked in dust, and she sits down. She sits on the cold linoleum and crosses her arms. Then, while becoming more and more frightened, she begins to fall apart. Like outside the police station, she wants to both cry and stop this want. But, like then, she refuses both. Instead, noticing a certain album nearby, she picks it up and yanks out the vinyl, and she slams it onto the turntable. She further drops the needle onto just the right spot and turns the player on at full blast, filling both the room and herself with the Ramones.

The opening chords of "Blitzkrieg Bop" by themselves are enough to get her jumping about. They're enough to make her forget everything other than that she's alive, and that there's something positive about this, and this only increases when she starts screaming the words, and when she starts dancing on the walls. She's now someone else. Someone with hope.

But it doesn't last. Loud banging fists pound a wall from the unit next door, along with the voice of her neighbor, who hollers, "Stop that fucking racket!"

She responds by pounding her own fists against the wall. Over and over they pound it until they start smashing it apart. "How's this for a fucking racket?" she yells, before choking on the dust from all the broken plaster.

She then quiets, and she notices that her neighbor has quieted, too, and she picks up all the clothes from the floor and brings them over to her bag. Which is where she dumps the clothes

and the contents of her bag, before packing her clothes. On top of this she tosses her makeup and some toiletries, and finally she stuffs a large and random selection of tapes into the remaining space. She does all this and sits back onto the floor, and she listens to the rest of the record while trying to pretend that the music won't stop — that it'll go on forever, and that she'll never have to leave her room or move to Maplewood.

But the music eventually does end, and she stands up and reaches for the door. Though something makes her pause, and this same something makes her shuffle over to a window and glance outside, where she sees it once again: the Porsche.

Jumping away from the glass, she holds her breath while hoping Deke hasn't seen her. She hopes this hard and long and doesn't dare peek. She just waits. She waits until she finds the courage to look outside again, and she sees that the car is gone again, and she rushes over to her bag and picks it up in her arms. She also bursts out the bedroom door and into the living room, where her stepfather is still sitting, and still watching the *The Joker's Wild*, still with a frosty can of Schaefer in his paw.

This sends a certain jingle into Rudi's head — about the beer he's drinking, and how it's the one to have when you're having more than one. She even sings it a bit while trying again to hate the man. But she still can't. She still can't feel anything. So she swings her now heavy bag over her shoulder and cries out, "Have fun, Daddy Dearest! And don't fuck with my records. Or I'll fucking kill you!"

He belches in response, in her general direction.

"I love you, too!" she replies back, and she rushes out of the apartment before slamming the door behind herself.

There she waits, for a reason she doesn't know. Which is when Mr. Reese turns toward

the door. He does this while trying to convince himself of how happy he is. He's been waiting years for this, he tells himself, and he recalls how he shook his fist earlier when Paul called him about the arrangement. He further tells himself that she's been nothing but trouble forever, and that she isn't even his.

But in spite of all this telling, and in spite of all his rage toward Rudi for being the cause of him not sleeping the past 24 hours, he knows that from the moment she walked into the door he'd been feeling something strange. Something bordering on ambivalence, and this something only got stronger and stronger until it became the real thing. Now, with Rudi out of his home and out of his life for good, this feeling changes into something else. Something he hasn't felt since Rudi's mother left him years earlier.

Meanwhile, Rudi continues to wait outside a home where she doesn't want to live. A home she's never wanted to live in. Ever since she was a little girl she's been waiting for this moment. So why is she waiting?

She has no answer to this, so she just stands there. She stands there until she hears her stepfather cry through the wall.

Again, she begins to fall apart — and desperately wanting to escape this — she runs. She runs into the stairway and down the stairs. She runs and runs and doesn't look back.

Chapter 5

Rudi reaches the front door of her building and comes to a sharp stop, and through the glass she looks out in every direction.

Not seeing the Porsche or the person inside it, she flies out into the setting sun, and she keeps flying until she comes to Springfield Avenue and a bus stop. There a half-dozen people are waiting, and Rudi hopes this means that a bus is coming soon.

But something comes sooner: the Porsche, which is a couple of blocks away and lumbering toward her. This causes her to drop to one knee behind a trio of elderly women, where she pretends to tie her now laced Chuck Taylor's.

She keeps pretending until she hears the roar of an approaching bus. Turning toward it, she notices the Porsche continuing down Springfield, and she jumps to her feet. She further cuts in front of the elderly women as the bus opens its doors, and she bursts inside and pays the driver, who doesn't notice her or anything else.

Rudi sits behind him, and through the window she watches the Porsche drive off. It's almost out of sight when it stops at a red light, and she takes a long and deep breath as the final

passengers board. The last one is a limping aging man with a cane, who reaches the driver just as the light down the street turns green, which is just before the Porsche makes a screeching U-turn and hurries back toward the bus.

“Fuck,” Rudi utters. She also turns to the limping man and sees him fishing out his wallet, doing so as slowly as possible.

“Come on,” she growls. “Move.”

Ignoring this, the man sifts through his billfold, and the Porsche again stops at a red light. This time just a couple of blocks away.

“Hurry up,” she cries out.

Again ignoring her, the man pulls out a five-dollar bill, and he says to the driver: “This is all I got.”

“I don’t give change,” the driver says in a dreary monotone, without looking at the man or anything else. “I take it, but I don’t give it.”

“Well, I certainly ain’t paying 5 dollars to go to Maplewood.”

He says this as the light down the street turns green, and the Porsche speeds forward before coming to a halting stop across from the bus.

Frantic, Rudi jumps to her feet, and she yanks some change from her jeans, and she flings it into the receptacle and howls, “Can we fucking go now?”

Though the bus driver still waits. He waits for the limping man to find a seat, and as he limps toward one, Rudi watches the door of the Porsche swing open, and she watches Deke climb out.

Deke is a man in his late twenties, with wiry muscles and long curly light-brown hair, which settles just below his shoulders and contrasts with his pasty white skin. He’s also

average — average in height and weight and everything else, including fashion. A walking billboard for the 1980s, Deke's wearing aviator sunglasses and a black leather jacket, along with a pair of Sasson blue jeans and cowboy boots.

After waiting for some cars to pass, Deke, while wiping his nose, marches toward the bus, just as it starts off.

Again, Rudi takes a long and deep breath. A much longer and a much deeper one. She also plops herself down onto her seat and doesn't notice Deke strut toward Vintage Vinyl. She only notices the neighborhood she's entering, which gets better and better, especially after the bus makes a right down Valley Street. This brings Rudi lots of discomfort, for lots of reasons. But mostly because she's always felt discomfort amid affluence.

To counter this, she plucks out her Walkman and plays it, with the sounds of "I Don't Care About You" wiping away all her discomfort. She jumps up and sings with the song, too, and she dances on the seats, which sends the elderly women and even the limping aging man scurrying away from her. Even the bus driver now notices her, and when she howls a crude invective in his general direction he wants to scurry himself.

Like in the holding cell, Rudi notices none of this. She notices only the music and how it makes her feel, and she smiles all the way to Parker Avenue.

There she exits, right in front of Columbia High School. Which is a large and rather odd-looking building. Half of it looks a hundred years older than the other, and she glares at both, with her discomfort again rising. It keeps rising and rising until it explodes.

"Fuck this shit," she barks. She also shakes her head and forgets everything she told herself about being patient, because the suburbia all around her makes her want to puke. It makes her so sick that she storms off.

But she doesn't get very far, because she still has nowhere to go. This fact leads her to making a quick stop, and she yanks out the scrap of paper Paul gave her and reads it while trying to convince herself to follow its directions.

For many seconds, she just stands there, before finally pushing herself toward her new home. Which means hiking up steeper and steeper hills in the darkening skies. This is when she notices that the houses are getting more and more expensive, as if the angle of the road were somehow proportional to its value. So to her this journey is much like walking deeper and deeper into the petrified forest of some nightmarish children's fairy tale, especially as the affluence here makes the bus trip to school look like a ride through a slum.

Soon, her discomfort overwhelms her, and when she reaches a streetlight at the bottom of Collingswood Road she digs into her seabag for one particular tape. She digs and digs until she finds a cracked cassette labeled "Bad Brains." Which she plays. She also sings along with "Big Takeover," and she gets so excited that she struts up the street like a cock. She even struts over a pair of parked cars. She struts over their trunks and their roofs and their hoods. But as she approaches a third car she's cut off, by a big gold Mercedes, which turns onto a driveway.

Fuming with rage, Rudi stands there and glares as the car parks next to an even bigger black BMW, in front of an upscale colonial. She further glares at the well dressed woman who exits the car, who looks at Rudi and her appearance in shock. It's as if she's looking at an alien from Mars.

"What's your fucking problem?" Rudi demands. "Can't you fucking see?"

"I . . ." the woman mutters, before looking toward the front door of her home and shouting, "Honey? Oh, honey?"

There's no response, and Rudi starts up the hill. But she doesn't take more than a handful

of steps before a light goes on in front of the house and before a small balding man steps out.

“What’s the problem here?” he barks, while looking at Rudi much as his wife had.

“Your wife’s fucking blind,” Rudi says to him, after stopping and slapping her hands upon her hips. “That’s the problem here.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, and that’s probably why she married you, you ugly fuck.”

“You, you better call the police,” the woman mutters, with lots of fear in her voice.

Not really wanting to spend another night in jail, Rudi sighs. She also continues up the hill while telling the pair: “Fucking pigs.”

The couple doesn’t reply. They can’t. They’re literally speechless as they watch Rudi make her way up to Wyoming Avenue. Which is where she hangs a right and marches a couple of blocks to Lewis Drive before starting up yet another hill. This the steepest yet, and the most affluent, and as she approaches the top and the beginnings of South Mountain Reservation — a woodland preserve that goes on for miles and miles — a fatigue sets in. Which comes not only from her trip but also from her lack of sleep the night before. So she’s barely upright when she stops by a large brick manor, in front of which two preteen boys are playing tackle football underneath a floodlight.

Reluctantly, she turns off her music and says to the pair: “This 21 Lewis?”

Just as reluctantly, the boys stop playing, and the taller one points the football toward the number atop the house’s front door, and he utters, “What, you can’t fucking read?”

Rudi responds to this, by marching toward the boy while rolling up the sleeves of her oversized overcoat, and she says to him: “You’re gonna be the one who can’t read.”

This is when the front door of the house swings open, and a tall and statuesque man in his

forties takes a single step outside.

This causes Rudi to stop, and she turns toward the man and his crew cut, which is much like the one he wore in the Marines many years earlier. This man in turn bores his eyes into Rudi while trying to fathom what's in front of him. "Can I help you?" he finally asks.

"You Mr. Cross?" she asks back.

"You must be Rudi."

"I must be."

Stephen frowns. He frowns not only at her impudence but also at what she is — and mostly because of this, in spite of his brother having warned him about her. Years earlier, he thought he'd never witness anything as loathsome as hippies, but Rudi makes him yearn for the dirty long hair and peace signs.

"You're late," he tells her. "My brother said you'd be here by six. The time we eat dinner every single night."

"Sorry, I didn't realize I'd have to climb fucking Kilimanjaro."

"No cursing."

"Excuse me?"

"No cursing while you're in my home."

"But," Rudi screeches, while pointing at the taller boy, "that brat just cursed at me."

"She's lying!" the boy cries out.

"You're gonna be lying on the ground in a moment!" Rudi cries back.

"Enough!" yells Stephen. "Look, Rudi, we all get along here, more or less. And so are you if you want to stay here."

But Rudi doesn't want to stay, and she even opens her mouth to express this.

“By the way,” Stephen goes on, while pointing at the boys, who are snickering among themselves, “this is Todd and Derek.” He says this just as the front door of the house opens again. This time stepping through it is a tallish woman wearing gray slacks and a white cashmere sweater. “This is my wife Pam,” Stephen adds.

Pam is in her early forties, but she looks much younger because of a baby face that hasn’t a single wrinkle. She’s also pretty, in a girl-next-door type of way, with an excess of wholesomeness. She actually looks much like an Ivory Girl. She looks like the type of person who’s always happy and smiling, and the latter is exactly what she was doing until she sees Rudi.

Over the years, the couple have had lots of wild children living in their home. Many were also wild looking. But Pam has never seen anything like Rudi before, and she’s frightened of her. She’s so frightened that she takes a deliberate step toward her husband and mutters, “You, you must be Rudi.”

“I must be,” Rudi says, with even more impudence than what she expressed to the woman’s husband.

Pam responds to this. She does by turning to Stephen and mumbling, “Why, she’s so . . . so . . . I can’t even think of the right word.”

Chapter 6

Stephen passes Rudi an oversized plate of thinly sliced roast beef, with the entire family sitting around a white porcelain kitchen table.

While barely glancing at the plate, Rudi passes it to Derek on her left.

“What’s wrong with it?” Stephen growls, while pointing at the meat.

“I’m a vegetarian,” she states, before picking up a bowl of mash potatoes from the center of the table and serving herself most of it.

“Is that a Buddhist thing?” asks Pam. “Or is it Hari Krishna I’m thinking?”

“I really don’t know what you’re thinking,” Rudi tells her.

“If you want, I can make you some —”

“— She’ll eat whatever we’re eating,” Stephen insists. “We have plenty of vegetables every night.”

“Unfortunately,” mutters Todd.

“Now, as I was saying,” Stephen says to Rudi, “you get a ten-dollar-a-week allowance. But in exchange once a week you are to thoroughly clean the upstairs bathroom you and the boys

will share. And I do mean thoroughly. We also expect you to keep your room tidy at all times, and for you to do your own laundry and to clean up after yourself. And your turn for washing the dinner dishes is Mondays and Wednesdays.”

“What is today?” Rudi asks.

“Wednesday. But since you must be tired from that trek up Kilimanjaro, you and Derek can switch —”

“— Ten dollars for all that?” she blurts out, while thinking back to all the money she made selling drugs. “That, that’s less than minimum wage.”

“Complain to the National Labor Relations Board.”

“What if I don’t want the ten dollars?”

“Don’t take it. But you still have to do the chores.”

“This is total . . .” Rudi almost adds the final word, only stopping when she sees Stephen’s glare.

“Anyway,” he goes on, “as to the rules here . . .”

“Rules?” Rudi barks. “You mean, there are more of them?”

“The rules here are simple: no sex, no drugs . . .”

“No rock ’n roll.”

“Just keep the volume down. And curfew’s at eleven. Seven days a week.”

“Eleven? I’m barely up at eleven.”

“And our bedroom, which is across the hall from yours, is off limits.”

Stephen says this and starts eating, and Rudi grabs a half-empty bowl of string beans and empties it onto her plate. She does this and begins eating, too — while thinking how with her stepfather she could eat what she wanted and when she wanted, and she didn’t have to clean or

do any chores, and there were never any rules. Which makes her strangely miss living with the man. Something she thought she'd never miss. Even stranger, she misses *him*, no matter how much she tries to deny this.

"You know, Rudi," Pam says, "after dinner the whole family's gonna watch *That's Incredible* together in the living room. With plenty of Jiffy Pop, of course. How does that sound?"

"It sounds like . . ." Rudi begins, before once again noticing Stephen's glare. "Actually," she adds, "actually I'm pretty beat. I'm just gonna go to bed." She then drops her utensils and rises.

"But you've barely eaten," Pam insists.

"I'm not hungry," Rudi insists back.

"I'll show you to your room."

"You don't have to."

"I want to."

Rudi sighs, but she lets Pam lead her out of the kitchen and into the marble hallway by the front of the house, where Rudi picks up her seabag and takes out her Walkman from her coat hanging on a rack.

"You have an interesting name," Pam says.

"Yeah?" Rudi says back, while barely paying attention.

"I never heard of a girl with that name before."

"Well, I like it," Rudi growls, with lots of defensiveness.

"I didn't say I didn't like it. I just said I never heard of it before."

"Well, it's a whole lot better than my real name."

“What’s that?”

“Something that makes me chuck.”

“Well,” Pam utters, while looking around for an excuse to change the subject, “what, what do you think of this place?”

“It’s something,” Rudi says.

“I actually grew up here.”

“You don’t say?”

“Isn’t that wild? My parents gave us the house as a wedding present.”

Rudi nods a couple of times, not knowing what else to do, and the two make their way to and up the carpeted staircase.

“It’s going to be so nice having a girl with us,” Pam goes on.

Once again, Rudi nods.

“We haven’t had one in more than a year,” the woman continues.

Rudi’s now all nodded out, so she just ignores the woman and the two reach the second floor, where they quietly walk down a corridor, with Rudi feeling discomforted by the woman’s warmth. Something she doesn’t want or like.

“I want you to know that if you ever need advice on anything,” Pam tells her, “just ask.”

“Advice?” Rudi utters. “Advice on what?”

“You know, girl stuff.”

“Ah-ha. I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.”

Rudi says this just as the two come to a stop between a set of doors, and Pam points to the left one, from which hangs a “NO ENTRY” sign, and she murmurs, “This, this is our bedroom. It . . .”

“It’s off-limits,” Rudi says.

“Yeah,” Pam says back, with a bit of a blush. She further opens the door to her right, exposing a frilly and very pink little girl’s bedroom. Which just horrifies Rudi, and not just because of all the dolls and dollhouses and doll accessories that line the four pink walls. Also horrifying to her is the pink carpet and the pink dresser, and the mirror on top of the dresser, which is framed in pink. She’s further horrified by the small pink canopy bed that looks like something Goldilocks slept in. Though she does notice an almost unpink desk across from the dresser, on top of which sits, in addition to school supplies and a manual typewriter, a boombox.

“This was my bedroom,” Pam says with a big smile.

“You don’t say?” Rudi utters, while continuing to look on in horror.

“Isn’t it nice?”

“It’s something.”

“Well, I guess, I guess this is goodnight.”

“Yeah.”

Slowly, Pam backs out of the room while looking at Rudi with hopeful eyes. All her life she’s wanted a little girl of her own, and while Rudi isn’t exactly what she’s had in mind, she’s still hopeful, and nothing Rudi can do can change this. Not even when Rudi slams the door in her face.

It’s then Rudi drops her bag by the door, and she drops her Walkman on top of it. She further slithers to the bed before plopping herself down on a mattress that almost swallows her.

“Oy vey,” she mutters, while thinking about leaving right then — not only the room but also the house and the town. But again she realizes that she has nowhere to go. She also realizes that as bad as the bedroom is it’s still a lot better than where she didn’t sleep the night before,

and it's way better than facing Deke.

So she unpacks, and she removes her makeup, and she plays some of her bedtime music on the boombox: Siouxsie and the Banshees. She sings along with it, too. She sings "Happy House" and dances to it into the corridor and down to the landing, where she watches the family watching *That's Incredible* in the living room. She does this while thinking that the song is about them: a perfectly boring and vapid family, who live in a world so impossibly different than her own.

Eventually, the song ends, and Rudi returns to her room, where she undresses while staring into the endless forest through the window. It's something as alien to her as the Gobi, and something she continues to stare at as she lies on her way-too-soft bed.

There she also tries to sleep. She tries and tries, but she just can't, and it's not just because of her anxieties, which are heavy enough to sink her through the mattress. It's just too quiet. There are no sounds at all. Not from the street or from within the house. There's no screaming, no loud music or TV, no cars or honking horns. It's as if she were in a vacuum, and this makes her crazy.

"I won't make it a week," she screeches to herself, before pulling the covers of the bed over her head.

"Rudi?" Stephen calls out from the marble hallway downstairs. "You still up? Pam wants to know what kind of Pop Tarts you like."

Rudi moans in response. She does while wondering if she can even make it a day.

Chapter 7

The sun begins to rise in front of a towering three-story home in Newstead, which is not only the most exclusive section of South Orange but also one of the most affluent areas of the state. It's an area that almost makes where Rudi now lives look like Irvington.

Before long, the sun reaches a window on the second floor of this home, from which on a clear day you can see all the way to Manhattan twenty miles away, and it splashes light into a bedroom and onto a display case full of trophies and awards. Which tell the story of an athlete who's excelled in just about every sport, especially football. The wall behind the display case also tells a story. A framed newspaper clipping there describes how the athlete, as a junior the year before, had been named an all-state flanker.

The other walls of Tommy Goodwin's bedroom tell further stories, including of how he was named to the honor roll every quarter of his high school career. There are lots of pictures on these walls, too — not only of the Yardbirds and Bruce Springsteen, but also of a smiling and handsome and confident young man, who has wavy brown hair and dark penetrating brown eyes, and no shortage of friends and admirers of both sexes.

But the bed in this same room tells a much different story. It tells of a terrified and lost boy, who's crying for a reason he doesn't even know.

"Tommy, you up?" comes a soft voice from outside his door.

"Yeah, Mom," he tells her, while wiping his eyes.

"I'll see you downstairs for breakfast."

"All right."

Tommy says this, but he really doesn't want to see her downstairs for breakfast. He doesn't want to go anywhere. But he lifts his muscular frame to his waist anyway, and he drags himself out of bed and into the adjoining bathroom, where for many seconds he stares at the image in the mirror. The image of a boy who has everything and wants for nothing.

Feeling a sudden urge to destroy this image and everything it represents, he lifts his fist toward the glass. But instead of punching it he just turns on a nearby shower faucet and steps into the tub. There, under the scolding hot water, he tries to burn it all away. Everything he feels and doesn't. But it just won't work.

So he turns off the water and dries himself, and he returns to his bedroom, where he contorts himself into a pair of freshly ironed pleated khakis and a starched blue button-down Oxford. Over the latter, he places a white wool Polo sweater, and he steps into a pair of shiny black penny loafers. This is when he picks up a blue-and-white football jacket hanging off a chair, which has a big "C" stitched into the front along with his name.

Slowly, he puts the jacket on, and he staggers toward a nightstand, where waits a backpack and a small brown library-bound book. Both of which he grabs, and he gazes at the book as he leaves his room and slithers down a big wooden staircase with an ornate white railing.

He's still gazing at the book as he reaches the bottom of the stairs and the edge of the

dining room. Which is when his gaze turns to something else: a woman in her fifties, who's sitting at a table a few steps away. This woman's a bit smallish, with her dirty-blond hair combed tightly in a bun. She's also wearing a pastel-blue Dior dress, which seemingly has been chosen to complement the flowers and the fruit bowl in the center of the table.

Soon, the doors leading from the kitchen swing open, and a large black woman, also in her fifties, steps inside the dining room wearing a bright white uniform. This woman is carrying a tray, on top of which lies a Spanish omelet and buttered toast, along with coffee, orange juice, and a folded-over copy of the *New York Times*.

Reflexively, Mrs. Goodwin smiles, at both Elizabeth and what she's brought, and Elizabeth smiles back before bringing over the tray and placing the items on the table in front of the woman.

"Thank you," Mrs. Goodwin murmurs.

"You're very welcome," Elizabeth murmurs back. "Can I make Tommy something?"

"He'll be down shortly."

"All right. I'll be in the kitchen."

"All right."

Elizabeth nods, and Mrs. Goodwin again smiles at her, and she watches the woman reenter the kitchen. Which focuses her attention toward the other end of the table — at the empty chair there. A chair she knows will forever be empty.

She stares at this chair. She stares at it as if she were lost in some different time.

While watching her, Tommy stuffs his book into his backpack, and he throws his backpack across his shoulder, and he marches into the room with a big phony smile on his handsome face. He looks right now much like the pictures of him on his walls — like a boy

who's not only confident but indomitable, too. This boy then kisses his mother on the cheek, and the two exchange good mornings.

"What would you like for breakfast?" Mrs. Goodwin asks.

Reflexively, Tommy grabs an apple off the bowl.

"That's not nearly enough," Mrs. Goodwin insists. "It's bad enough this crazy diet kick you're on . . ."

"I gotta run," he tells her, while trying hard to maintain his smile.

"Will you be home for dinner?" she asks.

"We'll probably just grab something at Reservoir after practice."

"It seems like we never eat together anymore. I know, why don't you invite Darlene over for dinner tomorrow night. I'd love to see her."

"There's a football game tomorrow night."

"Then Saturday."

"Maybe. I'll see ya."

He says this and walks off, with his smiling fading as he does. Though Mrs. Goodwin doesn't notice this. All she notices is the empty chair at the end of the table.

Meanwhile, Tommy enters the garage. He enters with the apple in his hand, and he pushes a button on the wall, which causes one of the three doors to open. Which exposes three vehicles: a silver Jaguar, a yellow Corvette, and a Harley Sturgis.

Choosing the bike, Tommy plops himself down on it and yanks out a pair of headphones from his jacket, which he straps to his head while playing *Born to Run* on his Walkman. Then, after placing a pair of Ray Bans on his beautiful face, he speeds out of the garage to the sounds of "Thunder Road." He also takes a small bite of the apple and tosses the rest into a garbage can

as he flies down the driveway.

Without slowing or even checking traffic, Tommy turns right onto Overhill Road before making a left, which leaves him descending the steep mountain on South Orange Avenue. It's there he really speeds up, with the wind blowing through his wavy brown hair and his mind blanker than the blue sky ahead of him. Still, he notices the traffic light turn yellow at the bottom of the hill, at the intersection of Ridgewood Road. He notices this but keeps speeding, even after the light turns red. He keeps speeding even after cars enter the intersection from both sides. He wants to hit them. He wants to crash. He wants to feel something as he screams out the last lines of the song.

But the cars won't cooperate. They come to a halting stop, and they honk their horns at him as he races through them.

Fuming with nothingness, Tommy flies up the next hill — the one that's taking him toward Columbia, and he keeps flying until he reaches Valley Road, which takes him to the school. There he parks in a lot not far from the front doors, and he sees a sea of blue-and-white football jackets just like his own. He also sees a sea of beautiful and well dressed girls mixing with it.

He tries to feel something upon seeing all this: happiness, loathing, anything. But he can't feel a thing.

"Tom-me!" one of the boys shouts at him, while waving his arm across his body. The other boys turn to Tommy, too, and wave, too. So do the girls.

All this fills Tommy with an urge — to take off and never come back. But instead he forces another phony smile, and he waves back, and he staggers toward them.

Chapter 8

Rudi glares at herself in the pink-framed mirror as she pulls a handmade Black Flag T-shirt over her body. She does this while listening to her favorite song on the boombox.

“How many times do I have to call you?” shouts Stephen from the marble hallway downstairs.

“I’m coming!” she shouts back. She also checks her makeup, and after turning off the music she grabs her seabag and her Walkman, and she marches out of the bedroom and down the stairs. She further flings on her tattered overcoat in the hallway and yanks open the front door.

“I’m still waiting,” howls Stephen from the kitchen. This causes Rudi to sigh, and she closes the door and rambles through the hallway and the swinging doors of the kitchen, where she sees the entire family eating Pop Tarts washed down with Ovaltine. Which makes her want to gag.

“I wasn’t sure what kind of Pop Tarts you like,” Pam says. “So I made lots of different ones.”

“Just hurry up,” Stephen adds.

"I'm not hungry," Rudi tells them.

"You sure?" Pam asks. "They're vegetarian. I think."

"I'm sure," Rudi insists.

"What's that shirt you got on?"

Rudi doesn't answer. Or even react.

"My wife asked you a question," growls Stephen.

Reluctantly, Rudi opens her coat.

"Why are you wearing a shirt for a bug spray?" says Pam.

"It's the name of a band," Rudi growls.

"Why would they name themselves after a bug spray?"

"They didn't. A black flag is the symbol of anarchy."

"I see. We actually use Raid."

"I'm gonna get going."

"I'll drive you," Stephen tells her.

"I can get there myself," Rudi tells him back.

"Not if you want to get there on time."

Again, Rudi sighs. But she follows Stephen to the garage, and they step inside a late-model Volvo. He then pauses just before putting the key in the ignition. He does this and glances at Rudi, and he tells her: "If you want, we can get you something at Ralph's. It's right across the street from the school."

"I'm not hungry," she insists, before crossing her arms and scowling.

"Fine," he says, and he starts the car. But he again pauses, and he says to her: "You know, I was looking at your transcripts last night after you went to bed."

“Yeah?” she utters, with apathy pouring out of her.

“And I have to admit my brother wasn’t exaggerating. Just imagine what you could do if you showed up at school more than once a month.”

Rudi shrugs.

“What’d you get on your SAT?” he goes on.

Rudi shrugs again, and adds, “I forget.”

“I bet. I bet it was perfect.”

“You’d lose that bet. They cheated me out of a few points.”

Stephen chuckles at this, and he asks, “Have you given any thought to what you’ll do after high school?”

“I don’t even know what I’ll do after today.”

Rudi says this and straps on her headphones, and she cranks up Bad Brains’ “Attitude” on her Walkman. She cranks it so high that Stephen can hear the lyrics. Something he really doesn’t want to hear, and this only gets worse when Rudi begins singing them.

So he glares at her, thinking this will get her to stop. But even if she wanted to stop she couldn’t. She couldn’t stop singing anymore than she can stop jumping up and down in her seat as the music jacks her soul.

Rudi’s still jumping when the Volvo parks in the school lot. The two then exit the car and approach the school, with Stephen reading through a manila folder while saying, “I wanted to tell you something yesterday . . .”

“What?” she utters, over the sounds of “How Low Can a Punk Get?”

With a bit of fury, he marches over to her and smashes off her Walkman. He does this much like his brother had the day before, and he whispers, “NA meets on Sunday nights at the

South Orange Recreation Center.”

“Terrific,” she says.

“I’ll take you there myself.”

“Sure thing, sheriff. Is there anything else?”

“Yes. I want you to know there are gonna be a lot of eyes on you. From all directions.”

Like in the car, Rudi shrugs, and she pretends not to care about this or anything. But as the two continue on, not caring becomes harder and harder, because she’s feeling more and more discomfort, about being out of place. Which peaks when the two near the front doors of the school, where Tommy and his friends are still hanging out.

It doesn’t take long for Rudi to notice Tommy, who’s the focal point of the whole group. She notices many things about him. In particular she notices that, while he looks much like his friends, there’s something different about him. He’s the only one not laughing or joking. He’s brooding, and he seems distant, too. Not just from his friends but from the whole world. He’s actually back in his room. He’s back there crying.

While Rudi notices there’s something different about Tommy, she convinces herself that the source of this something is only biological — that she’s only noticing it because he’s so good looking. She further convinces herself that he’s nothing but a dumb preppy jock, who represents everything she hates: conformity and privilege and vapidness.

“You guys are so goofy,” says a tall leggy girl who’s leaning against Tommy. A girl with permed strawberry blonde hair and a supermodel face, and a smile only money can buy.

“Excuse me, Princeton,” one of the boys says back.

“Oh, my God, Darlene,” cries out one of the girls. “You got into Princeton?”

“Yeah,” she says, in a way that’s intended to sound modest but sounds anything but.

“So you going?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Darlene tells her, while glancing at Tommy, who’s still far away.

It’s then the conversation comes to a screeching halt. It does because it’s then they all see Rudi. Never have they seen anything so outrageous, and they just stare at her, not knowing what to think, good or bad.

Their silence awakes Tommy, and he glances at Rudi. Like his friends, he’s unsure what to think of her. Part of him feels revulsion, toward something so out of order. But he’s also oddly fascinated by Rudi — a girl who walks so uprightly, and who seems not to care what anyone thinks about her.

But Rudi does care what people think about her. She especially cares what this one person thinks, and she can’t keep her eyes off this person, who’s probing her with his dark penetrating eyes. Though she also sees the grimace on his face, which causes both doubt and rage to build inside her. It keeps building and building until it explodes.

“What you looking at?” she growls, after stopping a short distance from Tommy, which is just before she flings her hands onto her hips. Stephen also stops, and he sighs, too, knowing nothing good is likely to happen.

Rudi’s explosion shocks Tommy. It shocks him that a girl half his size could scare him, especially as a few minutes earlier not even death could do this. It further shocks him that a girl could be so immune to him, and so out of his control. He’s so shocked that he puts his arm around Darlene without even realizing it. Darlene does likewise, because she, too, fears Rudi. She fears the way Tommy is looking at her, and the excitement in his eyes, which she’s never seen.

Seeing the two entwined only makes Rudi madder, even though she knows she has no

reason to be mad at all. She's so mad that she wants to scratch the girl's face.

"Guys," Tommy mutters while glancing at his friends with a nervous and phony smile, "I, I thought Halloween was last month."

His friends laugh at this, but not for long, as Rudi takes a threatening step toward Tommy with her fist cocked. Which is just before she growls, "How'd you like to go next year as a rug?"

This sends Tommy a step back, taking Darlene with him while Rudi continues forward. She only stops when Stephen grabs her shoulder.

"Those sound like fighting words, Tommy," one of his friends says, with a smirk and wink.

"I don't fight girls," Tommy says back, with his own smirk, and with his own wink. "Hell, I wouldn't even fight her."

Again, Tommy's friends laugh. But again not for long, as Rudi breaks free of Stephen, and with both fists cocked she rushes at Tommy, who again steps backward with Darlene. This time the two step right into the school wall, and Tommy's eyes widen as Rudi reaches him and prepares to throw a wallop.

But Stephen interrupts this, by once again grabbing Rudi, and he lifts her high into the air much like his brother had the day before. He also flings her toward the front doors of the school while softly hollering, "Nice start!"

"Fuck you!" she hollers back, not-so-softly.

"How many times do I have to tell you about cursing?"

"We're not at your fucking house anymore!"

Stephen responds to this, by smashing his shoulder into one of the school doors and by tossing Rudi inside the building like a rag.

Watching this is Tommy, who continues staring at the door long after Rudi is gone. Again, he's shocked. This time he's shocked at himself. He's shocked not only that he's still thinking about Rudi, but that he can't stop thinking about her. But what really shocks him is that he's actually feeling something.

Chapter 9

Rudi follows Stephen down a short passageway leading to a long perpendicular corridor. She does this feeling incensed, mostly because Tommy has incensed her.

She screams at herself that he isn't worth her incense. But she's just not that convincing. Though she does convince herself to keep a low profile, or at least as low as someone who looks like her can keep. She promises not to draw so much attention to herself and to stay innocuous and invisible until her chance to escape comes.

It's then Stephen comes to a stop in the intersection, along with Rudi, and from his folder he hands her a school ID, along with a meal card and a printout of her class schedule. He further points to an open door down the hall to his right and says, "Your homeroom is over there. Mr. Strothers will assign you a locker and a combination, and if you need anything else, my office is around the —"

Stephen can't finish his thought. He can't because a loud clearing of a throat interrupts him.

He and Rudi react to this by turning toward the sound, and they see a man glaring at them

from outside the school offices. This man is in his late forties, and he's medium in just about everything: height, weight, and complexion. He's also wearing a tight gray suit and an even tighter black tie, and these aren't the only things tight about Mr. Gonzalez, as underneath his black-rimmed glasses is a man wound tighter than the most unopenable knot.

"This Weiss?" he growls, even though he knows the answer. He does this while pointing at Rudi as if accusing her of something.

"Yes, sir," Stephen says to him, in a voice that's mixed with both reverence and a heaping dose of fear.

Again, Mr. Gonzalez points. This time he points to the offices with his thumb as if he were an umpire calling Rudi out. He also barks, "Get inside."

Rudi doesn't want to go. She doesn't want to go anywhere with this man, having long known his type. Still, she follows him. She follows him through the door and past the reception area, and she follows him into his corner office. It's there he perches behind a large and neat oak desk, on a huge leather chair that looks more like a throne. Which is where he reigns as "the biggest bastard principal on earth" — something everyone in school calls him behind his back, students and teachers alike.

It's from this chair that he orders Rudi to sit on a small wooden stool in front of the desk, and he opens a manila folder, which he reads through. At the same time, Rudi plops herself down onto the stool, and having nothing better to do, she crosses her arms and listens to the first song that comes into her head: "Nazi Punks Fuck Off!" She sings along with it, too, in her head. Though a few of the words make their way out, about how the real Nazis run the schools, which grabs the attention of the principal.

"What did you just say?" he growls.

“Nothing,” she growls back.

“It wasn’t nothing.”

“I was just humming.”

“Not in this office you weren’t.”

The man says this and returns to both his file and the page he’s reading, and soon surprise crosses his face. This leads him to shuffle through the pages underneath, which he glances at while glancing also at Rudi. He glances at the two as if he were trying measure what he’s reading with the girl he’s seeing.

“There must be some mistake with these transcripts,” he mutters to himself. “I’ll have someone call Irvington.” He then closes the file and goes back to glaring at Rudi, who yawns a yawn that’s both long and drawn-out.

“I’ll be quite honest with you, Miss Weiss —”

“— *Ms.* Weiss,” she interrupts.

“Excuse me?”

“Do I look like a ‘Miss’ to you?”

“I’ll be quite honest with you, Miss Weiss: I was opposed to letting you attend this school.”

“That makes two of us.”

“We have enough of a criminal element here already.”

Rudi sneers at this. She sneers at both the remark and the man. She also notices a framed picture on the wall behind him, and she nods toward it while telling him: “Yeah, well, criminals come in all varieties.”

Mr. Gonzalez turns toward her nod, and the picture of a smiling Ronald Reagan. Which

causes him to return the sneer. “Unfortunately,” he continues, “this being a public school, I had no choice but to take you. But if you step out of line in the slightest way — *in the slightest way* — I’ll throw you out of here so damn fast. And you know what that’ll mean for you.”

She does know, so after glancing at the nameplate on the desk, she sighs and says to the man: “Look, Mr. Gonzalez . . .”

“Gonthalez,” he insists.

“Excuse me?”

“The name’s Castilian in origin, and it’s properly pronounced ‘Gonthalez.’”

“Funny, there are lots of Gonzalezes in my old neighborhood, and they all just pronounce it ‘Gonzalez.’”

“Tell me: am I one of these neighbors?”

While gazing at the man and his smug expression, Rudi starts to forget all about her promise about staying innocuous and invisible. Eventually, it’s completely forgotten, and she says, “No, Mr. Gonzalez, you are certainly not one of them.”

“Say ‘Gonzalez’ one more time,” he bellows, with his nostrils flaring. “Just say it one more time. I’ve kicked people in the head for less than that!”

Rudi doesn’t say a thing in reply. She doesn’t even express anything. Then she laughs. She laughs and laughs.

“You think this is funny?” the principal howls, while trying to control his anger and not doing a very good job of it.

“Actually,” answers Rudi, “I think it’s hilarious, Mr. *Gonzalez*.”

The man looks right now as if he’ll explode. But this is when the school bell rings, so he instead points to his door. He points at it like how he pointed at Rudi minutes earlier, and he

orders her out.

Right away Rudi jumps to her feet, and she salutes the man while saying, “Aye, aye, captain.”

Chapter 10

Rudi exits a stairwell after climbing to the second floor, and she finds the classroom listed on her printout just as a bell rings. She further stops in the open door and looks inside.

There she sees three tables that, with the teacher's desk upfront, form something of a square. But that's not what she really sees. What she really sees is that among the dozen students is Tommy, who's sitting in front next to Darlene, who has her arm around his and who's looking at him with lots of affection. Which isn't returned, as his mind is somewhere else — back outside the school. But this Rudi doesn't see, and she again becomes incensed, and she steps closer and closer to the pair.

"Did you see *That's Incredible* last night?" Darlene says to Tommy.

"What?" he says back.

"*That's Incredible*: did you see it?"

"Ah, I missed it."

"It was like," comes a condescending voice from behind them, "it was like incredible."

Thinking this voice is only in his head, Tommy doesn't react. But when he sees Darlene

glaring at something behind him, he turns toward this something and sees Rudi, who adds, “Maybe we can all meet up at my house tonight and have a big TV party.”

Rudi segues this into Black Flag’s “TV Party.” She not only sings it, but she dances to it, too, and she kicks up her legs much like she did in the holding cell.

Tommy doesn’t recognize the song, but he recognizes the satire. He recognizes that she’s mocking him, and he doesn’t like it at all, or her. So he points out the door and howls, “Special Ed’s down the hall.”

“Then you’d better get going,” she howls back.

“Can I help you?” comes a high-pitched voice behind her.

Turning toward this voice, Rudi faces a small man in his early thirties. This man has bright white skin and a big brown Afro, and he’s wearing a tie-dye T-shirt underneath his tan corduroy sports jacket.

“Help me with what?” Rudi growls.

“I’m the teacher here,” he growls back. “Mr. Krasner.”

“Well, I’m the student here. Ms. Weiss.”

“This is *AP* English.”

Sighing, Rudi glances at her schedule, before glancing back at Krasner and saying, “What a surprise: that’s what it says here, too.”

Hurriedly, Mr. Krasner waddles up to Rudi, and he snaps the printout from her hand. He further reads it. He does this again and again before saying to her: “All right, Gertrude. Have a seat.”

Gertrude.

To Rudi, this word is worse than “Deke” or “juvie.” It’s even worse than the scratching

of a chalkboard. To her it's the most evil word there is, and she cringes at it. Though her classmates have a much different reaction. First, surprise crosses their faces, and afterward many of them mumble to each other: "Gertrude?"

"Gertrude, the punk rock girl!" Tommy calls out. "Appearing this weekend at a circus near you, alongside the ape boy." This causes everyone to laugh. Everyone but Rudi, who's raging at Tommy. Which he sees and grins at, with the laughter continuing.

"The name's Rudi," Rudi barks, causing the laughter to cease. But the smiles remain, including on the teacher, who points to the printout and utters, "It says here: '*Gertrude*.'"

"I don't care what it fucking says," Rudi howls, before snapping the printout from the teacher's clutches. "My name's Rudi. Rudi with an 'i'!"

"Fine. Have a seat."

Rudi takes one. She takes it as far from Tommy as she can, by the back table, next to a tall thin boy, who gives her a big wave and says, "Hey, Gertie!"

Rudi responds to this, by grabbing the boy by the collar and by holding her fist up to his frightened face, and she murmurs, "Hey, how would you like some dentures?"

A sound interrupts her. The sound of something hard hitting the table in front of her, and she releases the boy and turns to the sound, and she sees Mr. Krasner and a small brown library-bound book on the table.

"What's that?" she asks, while nodding at the book.

"*The Catcher in the Rye*," the man answers. "Have you read it?"

"Can't say I have."

"What a surprise. Well, you will be reading it, Rudi with an 'i.' And for your sake real soon. Because we have a paper due tomorrow comparing Holden Caulfield to a Shakespearean

character of your choice. But considering you're new here, I'll give you an extra week."

"Gee, thanks."

"You're welcome."

The teacher says this and struts toward the chalkboard in the front of the class. At the same time, Rudi flips open the book, with lots of irreverence. She also glances at Tommy, who's glaring at her while trying to make himself hate her. Rudi tries this, too, but she doesn't have to try that hard, especially when she notices his expensive clothes.

He represents everything you hate.

She tells herself this over and over, and to help with this telling she flips him her middle finger.

But he just smiles at this and blows her a kiss. Which angers her so much that she has to hold the table just to prevent herself from rising.

"At the end of class yesterday," Mr. Krasner says, while writing on the chalkboard, "we were discussing the subjunctive mood. Can anyone tell me the difference between it and the indicative?"

The teacher waits for a reply. But when none comes, he turns around and looks at the class, and he sees that no one's looking his way.

"Anyone?" he asks. "Come on, guys. You're supposed to be the best and brightest here."

Still, no one volunteers. So he turns to Rudi, who's looking away as well, and he smiles at her and says, "How about you, Rudi?"

"Excuse me?" she utters, after turning toward him. "I wasn't listening."

This causes muted snickering around the class. Which angers Mr. Krasner, who steps toward Rudi and growls, "The difference between the subjunctive and indicative moods?"

She doesn't answer.

"Do you have any clue what I'm talking about?" he goes on.

She still doesn't answer.

"I guess not," he says, with his smile having returned, and he struts back to the chalkboard and once more starts writing.

As he continues doing so, Rudi glares at him, and while this time she remembers her promise about staying innocuous and invisible, she can't control her fury at the man for thinking he's better than her. This fury gets hotter and hotter, and it quickly boils over. "Indicative," she calls out: "'I'm sitting in this stupid, fucking class.'"

Shocked, Mr. Krasner stops writing. At the same time, Tommy looks at Rudi with lots of surprise, which she notices even if she pretends not to, and this surprise only grows when she adds, "Subjunctive: 'I wish I *weren't* sitting in this stupid, fucking class.'"

Again, there's muted snickering, and the teacher spins his head around the room to make it stop.

"What's the matter," Rudi says to the man, "am I wrong, teacher?"

"And the imperative?" he says back. "Give me an example of the imperative."

"Cut that stupid, fucking Afro off. It's the eighties."

This time no one snickers. There are no sounds at all. There's only glaring, between Mr. Krasner and Rudi. Finally, he says to her: "You have until Monday to give me that paper. Monday."

He afterward returns to his chalkboard, and he tries to return to his writing. But he's so mad that his chalk breaks in half.

Though Rudi doesn't notice this, nor does Tommy. They don't because they have turned

toward each other. Only this time they're not glaring or smirking, or making vulgar gestures.

This time something odd is happening. This time there's a spark — a glimmer of possibility in all the emptiness, which causes them both to spin from each other as far as they can. Though this accomplishes not a thing.

Chapter 11

Rudi carries a tray of starchy vegetables down the center aisle of a large cafeteria, with everyone's eyes on her. She's even creating something of a wave as she goes by.

She ignores this, just like she ignores all such attention. But then she notices one particular set of eyes on her, belonging to a boy wading in a sea of football players and beautiful girls. She tries to ignore this, too, by pretending what happened in English class was nothing and meant nothing — to her and to him. Still, she walks faster and not so surely, or uprightly. She actually looks as if she's gonna walk right through the wall at the back of the lunchroom.

Instead, at the last second she stops and sits at a table nearby, and she tries not to look anywhere. She tries and tries, but still she sees Tommy, and she sees his eyes, which are expressing so much warmth that they're paralyzing her.

Not that this is Tommy's intention, as he, too, is trying to pretend that nothing happened in class. He further tries to tell himself that he's not attracted to Rudi.

She's a nightmare and acts like an animal, and just look at her.

He does just this. He looks at her and keeps looking at her.

Noticing the two is Darlene, who's sitting next to Tommy with her face getting more and more red. "She's also in my Chemistry class," Darlene says, while nodding toward Rudi.

Tommy shrugs, and Darlene adds, "She probably should be teaching it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tommy growls, a bit defensively, even though he doesn't know why he's being defensive.

"Do I have to spell it out?" she growls back.

"Spell out what?"

"She's a druggie."

"How do you know that?"

"It's all over school. She got caught, and that's why they sent her here."

Tommy knows this information should only affirm what he thinks about Rudi. But it doesn't stop him from looking at her, or from thinking about her.

"Someone like that doesn't care about anyone," Darlene goes on.

"Why are you telling me this?" Tommy barks. But her words cause him to stop looking at Rudi, because he knows there's truth in them. But not even these words can prevent him from thinking about her. Nothing can.

With Tommy no longer looking at her, Rudi can finally stop looking at him, even if she has his problem when it comes to thinking. She's actually so consumed by this that all she can do is pick at those starchy vegetables.

As she continues doing so, three boys stagger up to the end of the table, each with a tray of food. Each of these boys is small and awkward, with bad haircuts and even worse skin. They're also dressed awkwardly, wearing light-colored collared polyester shirts, and dark dress slacks that really don't go well with their white sneakers.

“We, we usually sit here,” mumbles Philip, who’s the tallest of the three.

Only now does Rudi notice that the three are there, and she turns toward them and growls, “So?”

“So, is it okay if we still sit here?” asks Doug, the second tallest.

“Why are you asking me?” Rudi barks.

“Sorry,” utters Eliot, who’s the shortest of the three.

Slowly, the three boys begin to back up, as if retreating from a lion. Which causes Rudi to both sigh and cry out: “*Oy vey!* Sit wherever you want!”

Right away the three boys come to a halt, and they eventually sit at the table, though with so much fear that they can barely control their utensils. Which just angers Rudi even more.

Chapter 12

Rudi rushes out her AP Calculus class — yet another she shares with Tommy and yet another where she has to prove she belongs — and she pushes her way inside a bathroom not far from her locker.

There by the sink she fishes out textbooks from her seabag until she comes upon her makeup. Which she uses to touch-up her eye shadow. She does this while convincing herself that there's no special reason for doing it, even though it's not something she normally does in the middle of the day.

As she finishes, the door creaks open, and a girl takes a step inside the room. This girl is small and plain and mousy, with long black hair and no makeup or earrings, or any kind of jewelry. She's also dressed very conservatively, with a simple white blouse buttoned all the way to the top, which contrasts not only with her light brown skin but also with her dark plaid skirt, which falls well below her knees.

While glancing at this girl through the corner of her eyes, Rudi recognizes her. She recognizes her from their History class, where more than once she caught Maria staring at her,

staring much as how she is staring right now — in wonder. She's staring as if she's witnessing a whole new species of life.

Rudi tries hard to ignore both the girl and her stare. She tries to focus on her makeup. But eventually she spins toward her and growls, "Is there something fucking wrong with you?"

Maria doesn't exactly answer. She just backs out of the bathroom, and Rudi returns her gaze to the mirror while mumbling, "These stupid, fucking people." She then tosses her makeup into her bag and throws the bag over her shoulder. She also grabs her books off the sink, which she plans to dump into her locker, and she storms out into the hallway.

There she looks around. For no one in particular, she tells herself. Though she doesn't spot this particular no one. Instead, she spots a big hulking kid down the hall, who's wearing a stained blue work shirt over a pair of long johns. This kid is also balding in the back of his head and has a face full of whiskers. He actually looks older than some of the teachers and isn't much younger than a few of them. But Rudi really doesn't notice any of this. She only notices that he's holding a thick textbook out of the reach of Philip, who grasps for it, with his two friends watching helplessly nearby.

"This is an awfully big book for such a little man," says the hulking kid.

"Come on, Owen," Philip cries out. "I really need it!"

"I need it, too. I've always wanted to learn . . ." Owen then glances at the book's cover, before stammering, "Phi-sicks."

Innocuous and invisible.

This is what Rudi tells herself as she approaches them. She tells herself this over and over, and she also tells herself that it isn't her fight — that it has nothing to do with her. She further tells herself that she doesn't care what happens to the boy, and that it's not her fault that he can't

stick up for himself.

Eventually, Rudi passes all four of them, and she heads to her locker.

“I tell you what,” Owen tells Philip. “I’ll give you the book if you give him a kiss.” He says this and points the book at Eliot, who turns to Philip in horror, with Philip looking at him in the same way. “Come on,” Owen coos, “you know you queers want to. I’ll give you three seconds, or you’re never seeing the book again. One . . . two . . .”

“Just give him back the book,” comes a voice from behind him.

With lots of surprise, Owen turns and looks at Rudi, who barely comes up to his chest. He further grins at her and says, “You say something?”

“Give-him-back-the-book.”

“Who’s gonna make me?”

“I’ll give you three seconds,” she says. “One . . . two . . .”

“Three,” he utters, with his grin having turned into the biggest of smiles.

Rudi responds to this, by dropping all her textbooks except for a big Chemistry one. This she swings across Owen’s jaw, sending him flying into a locker, where he cracks his head before falling onto the floor in a stupor amid dozens of stunned students.

As if nothing had happened, Rudi turns to the boys, who are looking at her as if she were some kind of Greek god. This is when she points to the physics book in Owen’s paw and says to Philip: “I suggest you take it, like, right now.”

This is what Philip does. He rushes up to Owen and yanks the book out of his grasp, and he cries out, “Thank you so much!”

“Yeah!” the other boys add as they join him.

“Now, don’t think this means we’re friends or nothing,” Rudi growls, while wagging her

finger at them.

But they smile at her anyway. They smile in defiance of her.

Rudi ignores this. She ignores it and kneels down to pick up her own books, still surrounded by the dozens of students, who are still stunned and who are staring at her with expressions mixed of horror and awe.

“What’s the matter with you people?” she screeches. “Have you never seen an ass-whipping before? Go on, get out of here!”

Quickly, the students disperse, and Rudi rises to her feet with her books. Which is when she sees Mr. Gonzalez glaring at her by the school offices, with his arms crossed. She further sees him motioning toward himself with his index finger.

With a deep sigh, Rudi slithers his way. She does this until she reaches the passageway leading to the front entrance, where Tommy and another football player are standing by a wall, staring at her in disbelief. Tommy’s disbelief is only partially because she just beat up the biggest kid in school — someone Tommy has feared for as long as he can remember. The other and much larger cause of his disbelief is that Rudi cared enough about Philip to stand up for him, as this runs counter to everything he believes about her, or has tried to believe. It actually runs counter to everything he thought he knew about punks — everything the media has told him about them, especially on TV shows like *Quincy, M. E.* It contradicts everything, and so he’s baffled. He also wonders what else she could care about.

Though Rudi misinterprets his reaction. She thinks he’s scared, and still fighting her feelings about him, she takes a sudden step toward him. Which causes both Tommy and his friend to jump backward and hit their heads against the wall, and this causes Rudi to chuckle.

Then, something unexpected happens. Tommy smiles at her, and he smiles with a smile

way different from the ones earlier that day. This smile has something special wrapped inside it — something that says, ‘I get you, and I like it,’ and this something makes Rudi shift her eyes away.

“Weiss!” Mr. Gonzalez howls. “Come here this instant!”

Quickly, Rudi runs off — to get away from Tommy’s smile, and just as quickly she’s in front of the principal, who says to her: “I see your future, Miss Weiss, as the village idiot.”

“Cool,” she says back, “we can hang together.”

Furiously, the man points to an open door in the opposite direction, and he hollers, “Detention is the next door down!”

“Detention?” she hollers back. “But that ass —”

“— And the next time something like this happens here, it will be the last time you happen here.”

Again, Rudi sighs, and she slithers down the hallway with her head down. At the same time, Mr. Gonzalez watches two teachers leaning over the still motionless body of Owen, and he has to work hard to suppress a smile, as he’s wanted to do what Rudi just did for years.

“If Mr. Connors comes to his senses,” he calls out to the teachers, “drag him into detention!”

The principal then enters the offices, exposing Rudi, who’s entering the detention room. Knowing that Tommy is likely still in the hallway, she doesn’t want to look his way. She really doesn’t. But she does anyway, and she sees that he is still staring at her. He’s still smiling at her, too, with a smile that’s making something inside her scream. What’s more, she’s got this strange feeling that if she were completely naked she wouldn’t be any more exposed to him, and this makes her cross her arms.

Though this doesn't help at all. So she tries to look through him, too. But she just can't. She just can't figure him out, apart from knowing that he's not as simple as she wants to believe.

"Come on," Tommy's friend says, while dragging him by the jacket, "practice, dude."

Tommy doesn't want to go. He really doesn't. But he lets his friend drag him off, with his eyes and everything else stuck on Rudi.

Chapter 13

Tommy sits on the outskirts of the practice field behind the school, with his knees crossed and his helmet by his side. There, over the sounds of the team practicing, he sits alone, staring into the dirt with his mind on only one thing.

No longer can he argue that he isn't attracted to Rudi. He knows now that he's more attracted to her than anything he's ever been attracted to. So his mind attempts to come up with reasons why his attraction is hopeless, in spite of the way she was looking at him in the hallway, and it doesn't take long for it to come up with one:

How could I ever interest a girl like that? She'd be bored of me in five minutes.

Tommy knows this is true because he finds himself boring. But this doesn't stop him from thinking about her. He even starts writing her name in the dirt with his finger.

"Goodwin, get the fuck over here!" bellows a deep voice from not far away.

Startled, Tommy wipes out Rudi's name, and he climbs to his feet, and he jogs over to the thickly set and angry coach. He does this while thinking of how football once meant everything to him — how it once made him happy, and now — even before Rudi came along —

he's had to force himself to be excited about it.

"What's the matter?" the man growls, before Tommy even comes to a full stop in front of him.

"Nothing," Tommy says.

"You're elsewhere."

"Sorry."

"You've been there the whole fucking season."

"Sorry."

"And stop saying you're sorry! Look, I know you've been dealing with a lot, but it's been months already. I'm benching you tomorrow."

"But —"

"— I don't care that you're all-state, and I don't care that you're the captain of the team, and I don't care that it's your last game. Whoever I play tomorrow is gonna wanna play, even if he has none of your talent. Now, get off my field."

Tommy nods, and he wanders to the lockers while trying to feel upset about what just happened. Then, in the shower, he gets under the scolding hot water, much like he did that morning. Only this time the heat bothers him. This time he cares that it hurts, and he jumps away. Which amazes him. It amazes him how much he's changed during the course of a single day. It amazes him how one person could do all this, and he smiles. He smiles not only as he dries himself, but also as he walks out into the locker room, where a handful of sweating and filthy players are scowling at him.

"Sorry," he mumbles.

"Stop saying you're sorry!" howls a boy bigger than most men while mimicking the

coach's voice.

This makes everyone laugh, including Tommy, who raises his palm to the huge boy and says, "Thanks, Joey."

Joey doesn't slap Tommy's hand. Instead, he hugs him and lifts him into the air, and after putting him down he says, "We're behind you, bro. All the way. We need you tomorrow."

"That's right," the other boys say.

"Even that asshole," Joey adds, while pointing outside, "even he knows we can't win without you."

"How about some pizza?" asks another of the boys.

"I was thinking of just going home," Tommy tells him.

"Fuck that," Joey says. "Besides, you're buying."

Tommy again laughs, and once his friends all shower, they go to a little Italian restaurant a short distance away called Reservoir. There, at a table by the window, a sea of blue-and-white football jackets devour three large pizzas, with Tommy somewhere else. He's back in the hallway with Rudi.

"I'm telling you," says a boy with "Billy" stitched into his jacket — the same boy who pulled Tommy away from Rudi in the hallway — "she knocked him out cold."

"Get the fuck out of here!" cries Joey. "Even I wouldn't fuck with that guy."

Billy responds by putting his hand on Tommy's shoulder, and he says to him: "We saw it, didn't we, Tommy?"

This brings Tommy back from the hallway, and he utters, "What?"

"Rudi Weiss," Billy utters. "We saw her knock out Connors, right?"

"Yeah," Tommy replies, with a big proud smile. "It was a thing of beauty. Been wanting

to see that since fifth grade.”

“Your fifth grade or one of his?”

Everyone laughs at this, and a boy at the end of the table named Leggie adds, “He must’ve been the only kid ever to take fifth grade three times.”

“She’s really something,” Billy mutters, while shaking his head.

“Who?” asked Joey.

“Rudi!”

“I don’t know about that, but I bet she fucks like a banshee.”

“What makes you say that?” Tommy growls, with an even more defensive tone than what he used with Darlene.

“Come on,” Joey insists, “just look at her, and the filthy mouth she’s got. Let me tell you, she’s in my gym class, and hell, my dad was in the Navy, and not even he curses like that. I’m not shitting you — I was fucking blushing out there.”

“I think she’s cool,” murmurs Leggie.

“What do you know?” Joey barks, before tossing some napkins in Leggie’s face.

“I know she’s pretty.”

“She’s a fucking horror show.”

“You know,” says Billy, “if somehow you got rid of all that crazy hair and makeup and clothes . . .”

“You guys,” Tommy tells them, while shaking his head, “you really don’t know shit.” He then wipes his mouth with a napkin and tosses it down the table, and he stands up and marches toward the bathroom.

“What’s with him?” Billy mutters.

“It’s his fucking diet,” Joey shouts, in Tommy’s direction. “Who ever heard of a real man not eating meat?”

Chapter 14

With the late afternoon sun pouring into the detention room, Rudi scribbles in a notepad behind a table in the back. There she sits a few seats from Owen, who's leaning against his chair and looking up at the ceiling in a daze, unable to comprehend what's brought him to his present condition. Also sitting in the room is a tall and bearded teacher, who grimly watches the two from his desk up front, which itself is in front of a blackboard that has his name written in big block letters: "THOMPSON."

Meanwhile, Rudi continues to scribble. She's actually drawing — something she likes to do now and then, despite not having much talent for it. She especially likes to do it when she's got nothing to do and feels some inspiration, which is exactly what she feels, even if she doesn't understand it as such. The drawing also helps her take her mind off a certain someone.

But not for long. Because, as the drawing comes to a completion, a realization hits her. She's been thinking that she's drawing Fear's Lee Ving, who's been her crush ever since seeing *The Decline of Western Civilization*. But she now sees that the drawing isn't Ving at all. Sure, the figure has the same penetrating eyes Ving has, which are cutting through her even when

rendered in only two dimensions. But the hair isn't right — it's way too wavy, and the jaw's too angular, and the nose and cheeks are thinner than what they should be. Then, there's his smile.

Realizing who's actually staring at her from the paper, Rudi rips the page from the notebook and crumples it up, and she tosses it down the table. However, no matter how hard she tries, she can't help retrieve it — and uncrumple it, and she stares at it, too. She stares while looking for some kind of answer. But all she gets are more questions.

"You guys can go," says Mr. Thompson.

Right away Rudi crumples the picture again, and she stuffs it inside her sack. She also jumps to her feet. At the same time, Owen groans, and Rudi strangely feels a little sorry for him. She feels sorry enough that she even thinks about saying something that'll make him feel better about getting beaten up by a girl, and a small one at that.

Instead, she picks up her things and rushes into the empty hallway, and she dumps her books into her locker and swings her bag over her shoulder. She further bursts outside into the parking lot, with her mind in some kind of netherworld, where the only thing that exists is a certain smile.

Though she must leave this world when she comes to a stop at a red light on the corner of Parker and Valley. It's there she sees a shiny red Porsche 944 speeding toward her, and she freezes, and when she finally unfreezes, it's too late. The car is parked in front of her, with MC5's "Kick Out the Jams" blasting out of its open windows, along with the voice of a man singing along with it.

The passenger door then swings open. But Rudi doesn't move, even after the man stops the cassette and says, "Get inside." She just looks around, not only to see if anyone's nearby, but also to see if there's any possible escape. But there's none of either. So after Deke repeats his

command — this time firmer — she sighs and steps inside the car, and she tries to accept the nightmare to come.

“Rudi! Rudi! Rudi!” Deke cries out, with a big grin and a bad Cary Grant accent. He does this with eyes that are badly bloodshot, which kind of matches the red spandex outfit he’s wearing. “What you doing out here?” he adds. “You going yuppie on me?”

“How’d you find me?” Rudi mutters, while avoiding his eyes, with her whole body shaking a little. Which Deke both notices and likes.

“Butch told me,” Deke tells her.

“That motherfucker,” Rudi mumbles.

“So where is it?” he demands, after he starts speeding down Valley.

“Where’s what?” she asks, as innocently as she can.

“Where’s what? Where’s my fucking money?”

“I got busted.”

“So I’ve heard. But not from you. You, you don’t call. You don’t write.”

“I was, you know . . .”

“Scared?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll give you this much: you’re not dumb. So what happened?”

“An undercover cop,” she tells him, meekly.

“Someone we know?” he tells her back, not-so-meekly.

“I don’t think so.”

“*You don’t think so?* Why didn’t you just stick with the regular customers? I made this so fucking easy for you!”

“I, I don’t know, Deke . . . this guy, he was gonna make a big buy. He had lots of money.”

“You mean, you got greedy!”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? What they get?”

“Everything. Stash, loot, fucking everything.”

“What a shame,” Deke says, with a slight grin and an even slighter shake of his head.

“You’re not mad?” Rudi asks, with a bit of surprise, while still not looking at him.

“Mad? Why would I be mad when you’re gonna make it all up?”

“What do you mean?” she mutters, with an eye toward her nightmare.

Deke responds by making a sharp left turn — almost clipping a passing station wagon — and he comes to a halting stop by the side of the road. There he takes a vial of coke from his leather jacket and pours a thin line on the back of his hand. Which he snorts before saying to her: “You want some?”

She doesn’t reply. So he asks again — this time firmer — as he wipes some blood from his nose.

“No,” she tells him.

“You never turned down anything in the old days,” he tells her back. “Well, almost anything.”

“The old days are old. They were old even when they weren’t.”

“Look at me,” he commands, and she slowly turns toward him. Which is when he says, “We’re about to hit the big time.”

“What?” she mumbles.

“We’re still in business.”

Right away Rudi feels some relief, knowing her fate could’ve been worse. Much worse.

But still she says to him: “Look, Deke, I need to stay straight.”

“Fuck that shit,” he barks.

“Or they’ll send me back to juvie — for the rest of my childhood!”

“There are worse places than juvie.”

“Please.”

“I’ve been trying for years to connect with these preps and jocks and daddy’s boys,”

Deke goes on. “They’re so loaded with cash that they can barely walk. I mean, this is gotta be the biggest fucking Jew town there is. They’re fucking everywhere here, and now, now you’re right inside with them.”

“I told you,” she pleads, “I can’t.”

“Sure you can,” he whispers, before putting his hand on her knee and adding, “You want to pay off your debt, don’t you? Or would you rather do it some other way.”

Grimacing, Rudi pushes his hand away, and she howls, “Neither way! I’m out!”

Deke right then slaps her face. He slaps it hard, and he growls, “I say who’s fucking in and who’s fucking out. Me! And when you’re fucking out, you’re really fucking out!”

“It’s not my fault I got busted!”

“The hell it wasn’t! And now I gotta pay for it!”

“It, it’s the cost of doing business!”

“I don’t even know what that means!”

“Look, I’ll pay you back somehow.”

“When?”

“I don’t know!”

“How?”

“I don’t know!”

Furiously, Deke speeds off, and he yells out, “Not good enough! Not fucking good enough!”

Chapter 15

From her front lawn, Pam watches her two foster sons rake and pack leaves in the setting sun. Though this is interrupted when Deke's Porsche makes a screeching stop by the curb, with the Stooges' "No Fun" blasting from its closed windows.

Inside the car, Deke turns to Rudi and turns off the stereo, and he grins at her. He grins because he really likes her. In his own strange way, he even loves her. She's so different from the endless street kids he's known and recruited, and it's not just her brains and toughness. It's something he can't describe. Something that makes her special. She's so special that he's invested a lot in her. He's taken the aimless and strung-out 15-year-old girl he met at rehab and given her direction, even if it hasn't always been the best kind, and he's taught her how to take care of herself in so many ways. He even introduced her to punk rock.

It happened when she visited his place soon after the two were released from the clinic. It was then he played her "Blitzkrieg Bop," whose opening chords alone made her flutter. He afterward played her another song, by Richard Hell, which was so personal that it became her favorite. Right away she was hooked, with the music giving her an outlet for all her anger, and a

means to escape. It's even helped her escape her demons a little, which was way more than anything did before.

Along with the music, Deke also gave Rudi her nickname. She'd been using "Trudi," but he convinced her that this was a "pansy name" — that "no one was ever afraid of a Trudi." But "Rudi," he insisted, "'Rudi' was someone who'd kick your ass."

Rudi is also someone he wants. He wants her badly. He's wanted her all along, but she's always resisted him. But now she owes him, and now it'll be much harder for her to resist, and this is her nightmare.

Fortunately for her, Deke really doesn't want to take what he desperately wants. He wants her to give it to him, and to this end he again puts his hand on Rudi's knee. He also caresses it while telling her: "I meant it before. You can pay off your debt in another way. You can pay it all off in one afternoon."

Again, Rudi pushes Deke's hand away, and she whips open the car door. But, before she can jump out, he grabs her arm and whispers, "I'm gonna come collecting real soon, babe. One way or the other."

Rudi pulls away from him. She does this and bursts out of the car, and she slams the door closed and sprints off, just as the car makes a U-turn and speeds down the hill. She further approaches the front door of the house, where she almost runs through Pam, who can't help notice how frightened she is.

"You okay?" the woman asks.

"I'm fine," Rudi says, without looking Pam in the eyes.

"Was that someone from school?" Pam says back, while pointing down the road at the Porsche as it makes a hard right onto Wyoming.

“Sorta.”

“You’re awfully late.”

“Let’s just say I was detained.”

“Stephen, he’s gonna be in meetings well into the evening, so I thought, you know, we’d have a little fun tonight and go to the Livingston Mall.”

“Sounds like a blast.”

“Yeah, I have an appointment there for my hair and I thought . . .”

“Thought what?” Rudi growls.

“Well,” Pam tells her, while pointing at her hair, “I thought maybe he could . . .”

“My hair’s fine.”

“Sure,” interjects Todd from nearby, “if you just stuck your finger in a socket.”

Derek laughs at this, and Pam has to hide her smile underneath her hand, but Rudi doesn’t find it quite so funny, so she warns the boy: “I’m gonna be sticking my finger somewhere else in a moment.”

“So,” Pam goes on, “if you’re ready . . .”

“I, I actually have a lot of homework to do,” Rudi insists.

“Already?”

“Yeah, they seem to be under the perception that I’m smart or something.”

“But what will you do for dinner?”

“Why don’t you bring me back some of that ‘fun.’”

Without waiting for a response, Rudi hurries inside the house and up the stairs, and she runs into her room. There she starts throwing her clothes into a big pile, knowing that there’s no longer any reason for hanging around this nothing little town. It’s actually standing in the way of

what she wants, and not just because of Deke, but also because of the crazy feelings she's been feeling. Feelings she knows will only make her weak.

However, she quickly realizes that she still has only twenty dollars, and that she still has nowhere to go. With this realizing, a panic sets in, and with it the shakes, and neither can she calm with any of her music. Not even "Blitzkrieg Bop," or her favorite song. So, with the house now empty, she rambles downstairs and looks for something: a drink. Only one, she tells herself — just to take off the edge, and she starts rifling through the refrigerator and the kitchen cabinets. But she can't even find a warm can of beer.

She further rummages through the entire ground floor, and the basement, too. But she still can't find anything, not even a locked liquor cabinet. She even tries her foster parents' bedroom, only to find it locked. Now frantic, she next checks the medicine cabinets for anything good, or even for something bad. But the cabinets are all bare, apart from aspirin and alike, and this alike doesn't even include cough syrup.

"They must've cleaned out the whole fucking place for me!" she bellows, and her panic grows worse, and her shaking grows worse. But there's nothing she can do about either. So she just returns to her bedroom and hides under the covers of her way-too-soft bed, desperate for anything that could take her mind off what she needs.

This leads to her grabbing her seabag, and pulling out the hardcover copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Chapter 16

Rudi is leaning against her bedpost as she reads *The Catcher in the Rye*. She's about halfway through it when she turns the page and sneers. She's sneers at the part where the pimp abuses Holden. She's actually so annoyed at the boy and his inability to stand up for himself that she wants to abuse him, too.

Instead, she flings the book onto the floor, not far from her seabag. Which is calling out to her. Actually, it's something inside the bag that's doing all the calling. It calls and calls until she reaches for the sack. Which is when she sees how frayed the rope holding it all together is.

Ignoring this, she opens the bag and yanks out the crumpled drawing. Which she doesn't want to uncrumple. She really doesn't. But she does so anyway, and she stares into those dark penetrating eyes — eyes that seem realer than any in real life.

It's so stupid, she yells at herself — to be so attracted to someone so impossible, and she becomes repulsed by her own feelings. But this does nothing to stop them. Nor does it stop her staring.

"You're so not good enough," she tries next, with her barely pent-up feelings of

worthlessness bubbling out of her. “You’re so not him.”

This realization makes her once again want to numb herself. But this isn’t an option. So she again crumples the drawing, and she chucks it into her bag, and she gets underneath her covers as deep as she can. She also grabs a pillow, and she holds it as if it were something other than a pillow while trying hard not to think what this something is.

It’s then her eyes become heavy, and they soon close. With this comes music — music way different than what she usually listens to. This music is slow and romantic, and it’s punctuated by a gentle but steady trombone, whose beat closely matches her heart. The music is also familiar to her, even if she can’t name the song — even if she knows it’s from a much different time.

Along with this music comes a dream, even though she’s still conscious. In this dream, she’s in a large and dusty hall from some forgotten era, surrounded by dozens of shabbily dressed dancers. There she notices that the music’s coming from a small orchestra nearby, led by a tall bespectacled man, who’s holding that gentle but steady trombone. She notices, too, that her arms are desperately clinging to someone. Someone she’s dancing with but can’t see, as his cheek is pressed against hers. Which feels good. Better than good. It feels better than anything she’s felt before. She feels light and high — a much different high than she’s ever felt, and she so wants to continue feeling this. She wants the dream to never end.

But the image starts fading, along with the music, and she falls asleep.

At the same time, someone else not far away is in their bed, too, and this someone else is having a dream, too. He, too, is holding a pillow as if it were something else, and he, too, is hearing music. The only difference is that Tommy knows exactly what the song is, and he knows exactly who he’s dancing with, and this makes him smile. Another of his unphony ones.

“Tommy, you up?” comes a soft voice from outside his room. Which causes the music to stop, and the dream along with it.

Reluctantly, Tommy opens his eyes, and he releases the pillow. “Yes, Mom,” he utters, while trying to hide his disappointment.

“Will Darlene be coming over tomorrow night?” she asks.

“There’s a football game tomorrow night.”

“Then Saturday.”

“Perhaps some other time.”

“All right. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

The woman says this and walks off, and Tommy again closes his eyes. He closes them while hoping his dream will come back, and the music, too. But neither does. Nor does the person he was dancing with, and this makes him want to cry.

Chapter 17

Friday morning Rudi bursts inside the school, and she almost believes there's no special reason why she's dressed nicer than the day before, with a plain white tee and a nearly untattered pair of blue jeans. She's even applied her makeup more modestly.

Though no one really notices this as she struts toward her locker, but she does notice something about them. She notices how they're smiling at her. A few even give her a thumbs up.

Not understanding this, she shrugs and goes to her locker, where she tosses her coat and yanks out her books. It's then she senses something unnatural, and she slowly turns her head, and she sees Philip, Doug, and Eliot grinning at her. But what she really sees is how they look much like her, with short and spiked jet-black hair and high-contrast black-and-white makeup. They're also wearing black T-shirts that have "DEATH" handwritten on them in indelible white ink.

"What . . ." she mutters, so shocked that she can't complete her thought.

"What do ya think?" asks Philip.

"You look like a bunch of Quincy punks," she barks.

“What’s a Quincy punk?” asks Doug.

“A fake punk, like on that stupid TV show.”

“But we look just like you,” Eliot insists.

“Besides the shirts,” Doug adds.

“What was that last word?” Rudi asks Eliot, while cupping her ear.

The three boys then glance at each other for a few seconds, before turning back to Rudi.

Which is when Eliot mumbles, “Shirts?”

“No, you idiot — *your* last word!”

Again, the boys confer with one another.

“You said,” Rudi utters with lots of exasperation, “you said that you look just like me.

But I dress this way because it’s *me*. Punk means being *you*, not me.” She afterward turns around and slams her locker closed, and she marches off, with the boys following. Which she reacts to by spinning back toward them, and while looking even angrier she tells them: “Take a look at Greg Ginn. He’s the guitarist for Black Flag — just about the best punk band out there. He dresses and looks pretty much like how you guys dressed and looked yesterday. The difference is he’s got an attitude. You wanna be punk? Get an attitude, and get that clown shit off you!”

Once more, Rudi turns around and marches off, and the boys once more follow her.

“And stop following me!” she howls.

“We don’t take orders from no one!” Philip howls back, in a voice full of attitude, just before both his friends slap his hands.

Rudi shakes her head at this, and she mutters, “*Oy vey*” as she rushes toward the bathroom.

“Hey,” comes a familiar voice as she reaches the bathroom door.

Slowly, she turns to the voice, and she sees a nervous Tommy, who's dressed in a suit, which is something all players must wear on the day of a game. Though Tommy's suit isn't just any suit. It's an expensive gray-striped Saint Laurent that makes him look like a jet-setter.

Seeing Tommy like this makes Rudi realize just how ridiculous they would be together. It also makes her realize that her dream the night before really was nothing more than a dream, and could be nothing more, and this upsets her so much that she doesn't even say anything to him. She just slams open the bathroom door and bursts inside, and this makes Tommy realize that his dream was just a dream, too. It also makes him feel even worse than how he'd been feeling before Rudi came into his life. He feels so worse that he wants to speed off into oblivion.

"Hey," comes a familiar voice.

Slowly, Tommy turns to the voice, and he sees Darlene. He further sees that she's wearing a killer red dress — a dress that shows off her flawless legs, and he knows he should be awed by this. He should be awed that the most beautiful girl in school is crazy about him. But he doesn't feel a thing, no matter how hard he tries. Though when she flashes a nervous smile, she looks vulnerable, and this makes him feel some sympathy for her, as he understands what it's like to care about someone unreciprocated.

This is when the school bell rings, and Darlene says, "You going to English?"

"Yeah," he tells her, and the two walk off together. She also takes his hand, without him even noticing.

Meanwhile, Rudi stewes inside the bathroom, angered by both her feelings and her lack of control over them. She so angered that even after the next bell rings at the start of class she remains in the bathroom and listens to music. The only problem is that she doesn't have the song she really wants to hear — the one she heard in her dream, or whatever it was. So she just

slithers out of the bathroom and makes her way to class.

In the doorway of it, she sees Mr. Krasner writing “Allusion & Metaphor in *The Catcher in the Rye*” on the chalkboard. But this isn’t what she really sees. What she really sees is Tommy holding Darlene’s hand. Which makes her furious — at herself, and this fury keeps building and building until it reaches the boiling point. It’s then she marches over to her seat in the back, where she yanks out her copy of the book from her bag and drops it onto the table as she plops herself down.

This causes everyone in the class to turn toward her, including Mr. Krasner, who with a wry smile says, “Nice of you to join us, Rudi.”

“Yes, it was rather nice,” Rudi says back, causing much muted snickering, much like the day before.

“Perhaps you can start the conversation rolling,” he tells her, while pointing to the writing on the chalkboard.

“I haven’t finished it yet,” she tells him back.

“A-ha. I gather that means you have at least started it.”

“Unfortunately.”

“A-ha. I gather that means you’re not a big fan.”

“It’s bullshit. Total bullshit.”

Again, Krasner smiles, and this smile’s even wrier than the first, and he utters, “*The Catcher in the Rye* — considered among the greatest coming-of-age novels ever — among the greatest American novels ever — and Rudi Weiss thinks it’s total bullshit. Care to elaborate?”

“Why,” she growls, “why should I care about some spoiled fuck-up from the forties who’s whining about how he can’t get laid? How does that relate to me and my life?” She further

glances around the class, and while pointing at the book she adds, “Come on, does this shithead relate to any of you? In any way whatsoever?”

The students all look away from her, even if they don’t all agree with her — one person in particular. But she grins at their silence, before turning to Mr. Krasner and saying, “See?”

“So tell me, Rudi,” the teacher says back, “what book relates to you? Maybe we can all read it next.”

“No book relates to me. No book I’ve ever fucking read. And I’ve read plenty. Probably as many as you.”

“Something must relate to you.”

Rudi shrugs.

“Come on,” he continues, “something must relate to you.”

“You want to know what relates to me?” she asks.

“I do.”

“You *really* want to know?”

“I want to fucking know!” Krasner hollers, while flailing his arms.

Right away Rudi jumps to her feet, and she flings out her Walkman. Which she slams onto the table. She also smashes it on and jacks the volume all the way up.

This is when things get a little weird, at least for Tommy. Because instead of hearing music dribbling out of the headphones, it sounds to him as if a live band were performing in the classroom.

He tilts his head at this, and he becomes even more shocked when he looks around the room and sees that he’s the only person shocked.

Like the day before, Rudi starts singing. This time she sings “Blank Generation” —

Richard Hell's anthem of alienation and self-loathing. She also jumps onto the table in front of her, and she kicks over every copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* near her. Then, as she finishes belting out the poetry of the opening verse, she dances toward Tommy, knocking over every book in her path.

Tommy is just amazed at this. He's amazed not only at her outrageousness, but also at something he can't even define. Something he knows he wants. He even reaches out toward it.

It's not long before Rudi is in front of him, and she kicks his book into his face. She also continues with her dancing and singing, with Tommy becoming lost — lost in the words of a song about someone who's just as lost, and very much alone.

Finally, the song comes to an end, and Rudi jumps off the table, and she returns to her Walkman and smashes it off. She also points at the device while glaring at Mr. Krasner, and she cries out, "What book says that?"

He doesn't reply.

"It's not a rhetorical question," she bellows. "I expect an answer."

Still, he doesn't answer.

"That's what I thought," she goes on, before grabbing her Walkman and bag and storming out of the class, with Tommy staring at her in awe. He's so in awe that he keeps staring at the open door after she's gone.

"Is there a problem, Tommy?" Mr. Krasner asks.

Startled, Tommy spins toward the teacher and utters, "What?"

"You were staring out the door."

"I was staring at . . ."

Slowly, Tommy turns his head, and he sees Rudi sitting in her seat. Which causes him to

become even more shocked than before, and he mutters, “You’re back.”

“Back?” Rudi mumbles.

“But . . .”

Quickly, Tommy glances around the room, and he notices that all the books are still on the table, including his own, and he says, “The books . . .”

“What about them?” Krasner says back. “Would you like to see the nurse?”

Tommy doesn’t respond. He doesn’t even seem to understand the question. So the teacher repeats himself.

“I’m fine,” Tommy growls.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Rudi was just about to tell us why she thinks *The Catcher in the Rye* is bullshit.”

Again, Tommy spins toward Rudi, with still more shock. Which only increases when Rudi says, “Why, why should I care about some spoiled fuck-up from the forties who’s whining about how he can’t get laid? How —”

She’s right then interrupted. By the school bell.

“Isn’t that a shame,” says Mr. Krasner. “Perhaps, Rudi, perhaps you can elaborate in the paper I expect to have in my hands Monday morning.”

He says this and most of the students rise, and they rush toward the door. But Tommy just sits there. He sits there in a stupor.

“You coming?” Darlene asks from the doorway.

“But class just started,” he insists, before coming to the only conclusion that makes sense — that he’d been dreaming, much like the night before.

Darlene shakes her head at his response, and she backs out of the door, followed by Rudi, who's also looking at Tommy and expressing something approaching concern.

Chapter 18

Like the day before, Rudi carries a tray of starchy vegetables through the center of the cafeteria. Like then, she notices that just about everyone's eyes are on her and that she's creating something of a wave. Only this time the entire lunchroom falls silent.

Not understanding this, Rudi comes to a stop, and she glances around, just as someone unseen starts clapping. Spinning toward this sound, Rudi sees its source: a heavysset boy with thick glasses, who's got a big smile on his face.

Soon, others start clapping, and others still, until much of the cafeteria is cheering her.

Still not understanding anything, Rudi turns in a circle. She turns until she sees Owen glaring at her from atop of a table in the corner of the room, where he is sitting by himself, slapping his big fist into his equally big palm over and over.

Rudi now understands the clapping, though she doesn't much care. She especially doesn't care about Owen's threat, as he's as scary to her as a bug passing around her head. She even wants to laugh at him. But instead she walks off. Then, with the applause beginning to subside, she approaches the table in the back of the cafeteria. She does this while noticing Tommy, who's

again wading in the sea of football players and beautiful girls. She also notices that he's staring into space, with Darlene caressing his arm.

Not that Tommy notices this. He doesn't even notice that Darlene is there. His mind is on just one thing: convincing himself that everything that happened in English class was just a dream. The problem is, like with what happened the night before, it seemed way too vivid to be a dream. He also asks himself: do people dream songs they've never heard? Even more eerie is the song itself, which seems to have been written just for him.

What if it were written for her, too?

Tommy asks himself this, but he has no answer to it, so he just climbs to his feet and staggers off.

"Where you going?" Darlene asks.

"To get some fresh air," he tells her.

"You want some company?"

"Not right now."

He says this and walks off, and Darlene turns her head toward Rudi, and she sees her staring at Tommy. So intense is this stare that Rudi doesn't even notice Darlene. She also doesn't notice Mr. Gonzalez, who's staring at her from the entrance to the cafeteria. Which is something he's been doing with his arms crossed from the moment the applause started.

He doesn't like Rudi. He doesn't like her at all, especially as she's upending an order he's spent way too much time establishing. So she has to go, he tells himself, and soon.

Chapter 19

Much like the day before, Rudi bursts out of her Calculus class, where she spent more time glancing at Tommy than at the differential equations on the board. Also, like the day before, she storms inside the bathroom and again works on her makeup, in spite of again insisting that she has no reason to do so.

“This is so fucking stupid,” she mutters into the mirror while touching up her lipstick. “He doesn’t care about you. Nobody cares about you. I don’t even care about you!” But she continues with the lipstick anyway.

As she does, Maria enters the bathroom, much as she did the day before. Like then, she stares at Rudi. Though this time there isn’t just wonder on her face. This time there’s also something else. Something called hope. But Rudi doesn’t recognize the difference, and even if she had, it wouldn’t’ve mattered.

“Again?” she growls at the girl, who again backs out of the bathroom.

Again, Rudi sighs, and she throws her lipstick into her seabag and flings the bag over her shoulder while grabbing her books off the sink. She further storms out of the bathroom and

marches toward her locker.

But she doesn't march very far, because Owen jumps in front of her, with his arms crossed and a sneer on his face.

"Again?" Rudi moans, after coming to a stop in front of him, with dozens of students encircling them.

"You're not gonna sucker-punch me this time," Owen tells her.

"You're right," she tells him back, before swinging her leg into his groin. Which sends him to his knees gasping while clutching what remains of his manhood. He soon after tumbles onto the floor, with the entire hallway cheering, and this sends Mr. Gonzalez storming out of the school offices.

"What's going on here?" he howls, and the circle of students break apart, exposing Owen on the floor, with Rudi standing in front of him.

"That's it, Weiss," the principal yells, "you're finished here!"

"Fine with me!" she yells back, despite knowing it likely means a return engagement to the Essex County Juvenile Detention Center, with all the dangers that go along with it. She tells herself that she'll at least be able to get out of her head one of the few things that scare her more. So she adds, "Why don't you take this stupid school and shove it up your —"

"— It wasn't her," interrupts a familiar voice behind her, causing her to spin toward it in surprise.

"What are you talking about, Tommy?" Mr. Gonzalez demands.

"It was me," Tommy insists. "I did it."

"You?"

"I'm sorry. I lost my temper."

The principal, not believing Tommy at all, turns to the other students there and says, “Is that what really happened?”

No one answers him, and they all look away, and the man sighs. He further tells Tommy: “I’m very disappointed in you.”

Tommy lowers his eyes in response. He also glances at Rudi, who’s glaring at him. But he doesn’t care. He doesn’t care how mad she is, because, dream or no dream, there’s something between them that he can’t afford to lose.

“All right,” Mr. Gonzalez utters, “all three of you in detention.”

“You mean me?” Rudi utters back.

“Yes, you!”

“But —”

“— Detention or suspension, Weiss — you pick!”

“Can I think about it?”

She can’t, because the man right away thrusts his finger toward the detention room, and Rudi slithers that way, along with Tommy.

“I don’t need your help,” she whispers to him, with her eyes straight ahead. “Or want it.”

“I know,” he whispers back. “You don’t need anything or anybody. But not all of us are like you.”

“Don’t think this means I owe you. I don’t owe you shit.”

“I didn’t do it for you.”

Not understanding what this means, Rudi shoots Tommy an inquisitive look. But he keeps the meaning to himself, and the two step into the detention room, followed by a slumped-over and limping and thoroughly deflated Owen. The three then sit at the table in the back many

seats apart from each other, watched by Mr. Thompson.

Unlike the day before, Rudi doesn't draw. She doesn't dare. She just sits and sits and sits. She does this until she feels an odd sensation. Turning her head, she sees Tommy staring at her with his warm eyes, which are even warmer than before. Which makes her feel all kinds of uncomfortable.

"Don't look at me," she growls.

"Quiet!" Mr. Thompson barks.

This causes Rudi and Tommy to turn from each other. Which happens just before a middle-aged woman steps into the room and says to Mr. Thompson: "Mr. Gonthalez would like to see you for a moment."

These words send the man jumping to his feet, and he rushes out of the room with the woman.

"*Gonthalez*," Rudi utters. "What a joke. This whole school is a joke." It's then she notices Tommy glancing at her again, and she bellows, "Did you not hear what I fucking said?"

Once more he turns from her, and this is when an argument begins in his head, over whether he should open himself up to her — something he's never done with anyone before. He argues over whether he should tell her everything and risk humiliation, all for someone who might not give a damn.

Knowing he hasn't much time to decide, he does so quickly. He decides against telling her anything. But then he thinks about the song she was singing in his so-called dream, and he realizes that if it weren't a dream, it could mean something incredible. It all depends on whether he believes — not just in the dream, but in her as well.

"You were wrong earlier," he murmurs.

“About what?” she growls.

“*The Catcher in the Rye*. It’s not what you think.”

“It’s bullshit. Total bullshit.”

“Actually,” Tommy tells her, with his voice breaking slightly, “it’s about being alone. It’s about being the only person in the whole fucking world. The only person who thinks and feels like you. And being so scared because of this that you don’t even know if you want to live. Holden Caulfield, he isn’t some spoiled fuck-up whining about getting laid . . . he’s you.”

“Speak for yourself,” she barks, before crossing her arms while once again feeling exposed.

“I am,” he says.

Again not understanding what he means, she turns toward him, and she sees something she never expected to see. She sees herself in his watery eyes.

Now, she knows exactly what he means, and she almost loses it. The big tough girl from Irvington almost starts crying, because she knows he’s just like her, and she knows there can be no more reasons not to care about him. Which will mean opening herself up, too, and risking everything, by letting someone get close.

Instead, she wraps her arms even tighter around herself, and she pretends she hasn’t heard a word he’s said, and she keeps pretending right up until Mr. Thompson returns and tells the three that they can go home.

Right away Rudi grabs her bag and books, and she flies out of the room, with Tommy not far behind. Then, while keeping a safe distance back, he watches her reach her locker and toss most of her books inside it, keeping only *The Catcher in the Rye* and a large hardcover copy of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, which she checked-out from the school library earlier that

day. She further stuffs these books inside her bag, and she grabs her coat, and she slams her locker closed before sprinting toward the exit while dragging her bag along the floor. Which is just before she runs into Tommy in the front passageway, where he sees that she's desperately trying to control her emotions.

"Just fuck off," she tells him, with her voice cracking, and she rushes to the front entrance while continuing to drag her bag. Though strangely, no matter how fast she rushes, she can't seem to get away from him.

Finally, she reaches the doors and bursts outside, and she flings her seabag over her shoulder, doing so with such force that the frayed rope holding the bag together breaks, causing the sack to fall to the ground and its contents to spew out.

At once, she stops and spins around, and on one knee she frantically collects her things back into the bag. She also notices Tommy exiting the front doors, with her crumpled drawing tumbling toward him in the breeze. Which he leans down to pick up.

"That's mine!" she hollers, with fright overwhelming her, and she speeds toward him with the bag in her arms, getting there just as he opens the paper. Which is when he sees himself. Actually, he sees something much better. He sees — even with her crude lines — that she's captured something no mirror has. She's captured a humanness trying to escape from under all the trappings. She's also captured a longing for something he can't even describe.

All this makes his jaw drop, and he can feel his body flutter, because it means that, in a fraction of time, she's learned more about him than everyone else had in seventeen years, including himself.

"I said, that's mine!" she screams, while yanking the drawing from him.

"Thank you," he mumbles.

“For what?”

He responds by pointing to the drawing.

“It’s not you!” she yells, before rushing off with the bag in one arm and the drawing in the other. “It’s Lee Ving!”

“I don’t even know who that is,” he tells her.

“You wouldn’t!”

“You know, there’s a football game tonight.”

These words cause Rudi to stop, but she doesn’t turn around. Instead, with rising indignation, she growls, “So?”

“So are you going?” he asks.

“Do I look like the type that goes to football games?”

“Well, it’s my last game, and, and I kinda like you to be there.”

With her indignation now turned up a notch, she spins toward him and says, “And why would *I* want to be there?”

He responds by again pointing to the drawing. Which causes her face to go way beyond flush, and she hides the paper behind her back while screeching, “I told you — it’s not you!”

He smiles at this, and all that it means. Which only makes her angrier. It makes her so angry that she cries out, “What’s so funny?”

“I didn’t know punk girls blush,” he tells her.

She has no response to this, or at least no good one. All she can do is bark, “Fuck you!”

But this only makes him smile more, and it only makes him feel more confident in what he feels, and he says to her: “Will you come tonight?”

“What, what about your *girlfriend*?”

Hearing the jealousy in her words, he smiles even more, and he becomes even more confident in what he feels, and he says to her: “I don’t have a girlfriend. Not really. At least not at the moment.”

This time Rudi can’t even come up with a lame response. So she just spins around and sprints off.

“8 o’clock!” Tommy calls out to her. “At Underhill!”

Chapter 20

Rudi is leaning against her bedpost as she reads the last pages of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Unlike the night before, there's no sneer on her face. She actually looks engrossed, and she's feeling guilty, too.

Holden Caulfield, he isn't some spoiled fuck-up whining about getting laid . . .

Trying not to think about this, Rudi turns the page. She also happens to glance at the alarm clock on her nightstand and sees that it's a quarter to eight. She does this while looking as if a huge argument were taking place inside her head. Which is exactly what's happening.

"Why would I want to go to a football game?" one half of her head asks the other, and the other answers: "Because the most beautiful boy you have ever seen is crazy about you. A boy so different than any you've known or imagined. A boy who — unlike everyone else — thinks and feels just like you. Then, then there was the dream, and the music."

The latter half of her head is winning the argument, but the former has control of her eyes, and it drifts them toward the pink framed mirror. There she stares for a long time, at both her face and figure, and while she knows that she isn't ugly, she also knows that she isn't beautiful,

either. At least not like Tommy. She also knows that she doesn't match up with the girls he hangs out with, especially the tall leggy one who's always draped over him. What's more, she knows there's no place for someone like her in his world, and she doesn't even want a place there. So she just shakes her head and starts reading again, and she once again becomes both engrossed and guilty.

"Hey," Stephen utters from the doorway.

This causes Rudi to jump, and it also causes her foster dad to giggle a bit, and to say, "Sorry about that."

"What did I do now?" she growls.

"Aren't we defensive?"

"It comes from everyone being so offensive."

"You've done nothing," he tells her. "It's just we're all heading out to the football game and were wondering if you wanted to join us."

"Do I look like the type that goes to football games?" she asks.

"We're going to Baskin Robbins afterward," he adds, in an enticing tone. "You know, they've got Bubblegum Ice Cream this month."

"Oh my God!" she cries out. "I think I just wet my panties."

"*Rudi.*"

"Look, I've got a paper to write for Monday."

"On what?"

"I have to compare Holden Caulfield with some character from Shakespeare."

"That sounds kinda interesting."

Rudi shrugs.

“Who you doing it on?” Stephen asks.

“The obvious choice,” she tells him, “is Hamlet. I figure every dipshit in class did it on him, especially as Salinger mentions him in the book. So I’m gonna do it on Helena.”

“Helena?”

“From *All’s Well That Ends Well*.”

“I’m not familiar with that play.”

“It’s the one Shakespeare stole almost verbatim from Boccaccio.”

“Boccaccio?”

“Giovanni Boccaccio,” Rudi growls. “The Italian Renaissance writer.”

“Oh,” Stephen mumbles. “That Boccaccio.”

“Anyway,” Rudi continues, “the play’s about this Helena, who’s in love with this guy Bertram, who’s completely out of her league. She’s so in love with him that she risks her life to save this king, in exchange for the king giving her Bertram. But Bertram doesn’t want her, and so even though he’s forced to marry her, he runs off. So now Helena’s not only lonely, but she’s also totally alienated, with enough angst to sink two Holden Caulfields. But what does she do about it? Does she weep in her bed for her husband and wish she were dead? No, she goes after what she wants, stopping at nothing to get it. And she damn well gets it!”

“You know,” Stephen says, with his head tilted a bit, “it’s been a long time since I’ve read *The Catcher in the Rye*. But if I remember it correctly, Holden handled his angst in a completely different way.”

“Exactly,” Rudi utters, while wagging her finger. “That’s why I’m gonna *compare* the two.”

Stephen smiles at this.

“What’s so funny?” Rudi demands.

“You’re liking this school,” he tells her, while still smiling.

“Get out of here.”

“Look, I’ve been a guidance counselor long enough to know when someone’s excited about school. It happens about every blue moon.”

“Hey, I’m always excited,” she insists. “About everything.”

“All right,” he relents, “have it your way. But if you change your mind about the game, we’ll be holding you a seat. It’s at Underhill Field, right off Springfield.”

“I know where it is.”

“I’ll even leave bus fare on the kitchen table.”

Stephen says this and starts out. But, after just a couple of steps, he stops and turns back to Rudi, and he says to her: “Remember, curfew still holds even on a Friday.”

“What do you think I’m gonna do,” she barks, “slamdance with the crickets?”

Chapter 21

The sound of furious typing pours out of Rudi's bedroom. Which gets interrupted by the ringing of a phone.

She tries to ignore it. She tries and tries, but it keeps ringing, and after glancing at her alarm clock and seeing that it's well past nine, she jumps up and struts into the hallway. It's there she hears the phone in the bedroom across the way, which is echoed by another downstairs in the kitchen.

Choosing the shortest path, she steps up to her foster parents' door and tries to open it. But, like the day before, it won't open. Though she wonders if it's really locked, as there's no keyhole, and she applies more and more force, and it finally opens. She then walks inside the room and flips on the light, and she becomes shocked, as the room is covered with whips and chains and leather garments, and dozens of painful-looking sex toys.

"What . . ." she mumbles, before remembering the phone, and in a daze she staggers over to the device and picks it up while eyeing the mirror on the ceiling. "Hello?" she utters.

"Rudi?" utters back a young female voice, with a drunken slur.

“Who’s this?” Rudi asks, not quite recalling the voice in its present state.

“You’ve forgotten me already?”

“Leila?” says Rudi, with some surprise. “How’d you find me?”

“Fucking Butch,” Leila tells her.

“That motherfucker. He can’t keep his fucking mouth shut.”

“I forced it out of him.”

“I bet. So what’s up?”

“Motherfucking Bad Brains is up,” Leila howls — “at motherfucking CBGB tonight!”

“No fucking way!” Rudi howls back.

“Where and when do we pick you up?”

“I can’t go. I got a curfew.”

“Fuck that shit! Blow it off!”

“They’ll put me back in juvie, for what’s left of my childhood.”

“Not if they can’t find you.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re gonna follow the band down to DC tomorrow night. And from there . . .
wherever.”

“And what are you gonna do for money?”

“We’ll hustle something up. We always do.”

“I . . .”

“Come on, Rudi, you’ll be free — forever!”

Rudi thinks it over. She thinks it over hard, because she knows there’s some sense in the idea, as it could be the escape she’s been waiting for. Or a sort of escape. Though perhaps not a

perfect one. Perhaps she'd have to beg and even steal to survive, and perhaps where she went wouldn't be any better than where she already is, and perhaps it'd even be worse. Then there was being with Leila and her friends — people she likes, in small doses. Very small ones. They're also people who'd surely expose her to every bad temptation out there. But, on the other hand, she'd be able to get out of reach of both Deke and the police. At least for a while. Perhaps she could even get Tommy out of her head. Perhaps this is the best part of the whole idea.

“You still there?” Leila utters.

Chapter 22

Rudi comes to a halting stop by a curb, along with her overstuffed seabag, which has a new rope holding it all together.

“What am I fucking doing here?” she yells out over the sounds of a crowd and a marching band, while glaring into the packed stands of Underhill Field. She yells this while lamenting how she could’ve been on her way to seeing one of the best live acts in punk, if not the best, and then on to a sort of freedom. Instead, she’s now just a short walk from her very first football game.

So she tries to figure out what went wrong. It’s all kind of blurry, but she kind of recalls making arrangements to meet Leila and the others in Irvington, even though it would’ve been far easier to have been picked up in Maplewood. At the time, she told herself that it had nothing to do with the bus going past the stadium. But when the vehicle did stop at Boyden Avenue a little while earlier, she got off without hesitation, and she staggered to where she is right now.

It’s then the roaring crowd brings Rudi out of her blurriness, and she remembers why she hates football and anything else that had to do with large groups of people who think alike,

which she defines as any group larger than one. She also realizes that she still has time to meet Leila, and she turns around and starts up the road.

This is when things get a little weird. Because this is when everything falls silent. No longer can she hear a crowd or a marching band, and with lots of shock she spins around and sees that the stands are empty.

“It can’t be,” she mutters, before taking a small step toward the stadium. Then she takes another and yet another, and before long she’s underneath the stands. “This isn’t real,” she insists. “It’s a dream, like the one from last night. Or, or maybe I’m tripping somehow. Yeah, that could be it. Maybe I really did meet Leila. Maybe I even went to CBGB, and maybe someone slipped something in my drink. Yeah, I just need to sit awhile.”

But she continues on, and she soon reaches the outskirts of the field, where she sees a football player, who’s in the left end zone and squirming on the ground. This player further yanks off his helmet, revealing Tommy, who calls out, “Rudi!”

“Tommy?” Rudi utters, before shaking her head.

“Rudi!” he repeats.

Without thinking, she starts running toward him, and she calls out his name.

“I’m right here,” comes Tommy’s voice from nearby.

At once, Rudi comes to a stop, by the far end of the sidelines. She does this while again hearing the roar of the crowd and the marching band. She also feels something — something different than anything she’s felt before. Something better. Something way better.

Slowly turning to her right, she sees Tommy. She sees him standing in his clean blue-and-white football uniform, with one hand holding his helmet and the other holding her hand, with bliss all over his face. The same bliss that’s over hers, caused by the very same thing: the

touch of someone special, which makes her shiver with ever-increasing acceleration. Because of this, she stares at his hand. She stares at it in a daze.

But Tommy misreads this, thinking he's upset her. So he releases her hand, taking the bliss from both their faces, and he says, "Sorry about that."

Though she's the one who's sorry, and trying not to think about this, she turns from him and sees that the game between Columbia and East Orange is in its final minutes, with Columbia trailing 13-10.

"I'm glad you made it," he tells her, without telling her that she's all he's been thinking about from the moment the game started.

"What?" she utters, before coming out of her daze and turning back to him.

"You okay?" he asks.

"What the hell's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"The field . . . you . . . you were on —"

Right then she's interrupted, by the crowd, which roars in reaction to a fumble.

"All right, Tommy," the coach screams from way down the sidelines — "get in there! And don't disappoint me!"

"I gotta go," Tommy tells her, while putting on his helmet and suddenly feeling excited about playing football.

"No, don't," she tells him back, with fear scratching her voice.

"What do ya mean? I gotta score the winning touchdown."

"Come on, Tommy," howls the coach — "move your fucking ass!"

"I'll see you later," Tommy says to her, as he rushes backward onto the field toward the

huddle by midfield. “Maybe we could go to Reservoir.”

“Where?” she asks, but he’s already turned forward. “Tommy!” she adds, even though she knows he can’t hear her.

Not knowing what else to do, she glances around the stadium, and she sees the rest of the players up the sidelines, and the cheerleaders in back of them. This includes Darlene, who’s glaring at her with eyes full of murder.

“Rudi!” a familiar female voice yells from behind her.

Without thinking, Rudi spins around, and she sees Pam and Stephen in the stands waving her toward them, with the two boys sitting nearby.

“Up here!” Pam adds.

Instead, Rudi turns her head, and she watches Columbia break the huddle, with Tommy lining up on the right just behind the line of scrimmage. The tall quarterback then takes the snap and tosses the ball to Tommy, who’s running an inside slant over the middle.

Right away he avoids a huge linebacker who’s trying to take off his head, and he runs into the secondary, eluding some players while knocking others to the ground with his shoulder and free hand. He does all this while thinking one thing: he’s doing it for her.

Watching him, Rudi — against her will — shakes her fists in excitement, and she hollers, “Go, you motherfucker! Go!” She hollers this just before a defensive back flies toward Tommy by the twenty-yard line, leading with his helmet. “Look out!” she screams, with her eyes half-covered.

Tommy ducks, and the defender just misses him, and Tommy now has a clear path to the end zone, right through the hash marks. Though another two defensive backs are quickly converging on him from different angles.

“Go, Tommy!” Rudi cries out, while shaking all over. “Don’t stop running!”

It’s then Tommy crosses the end zone, and it’s then the two defenders smack into him. The first flies into the left side of Tommy’s upper body, and the second into Tommy’s right hip — sandwiching him, with the three afterward collapsing onto the ground. They do this just as the referee signals a touchdown.

Most of the crowd reacts to this by rising to their feet and roaring, and the band loudly plays, with joy filling the stadium. But it doesn’t fill Rudi. She’s actually terrified, because Tommy’s lying in the same spot of the field as when she entered the stadium, and this terror only increases when the two defenders rise, leaving Tommy squirming on the ground. Which sends silence through the stadium. The same silence Rudi heard outside it, and this silence only gets louder when Tommy yanks off his helmet and calls out, “Rudi!”

“Tommy!” Rudi calls back, before rushing out onto the field.

“Rudi!” he repeats.

Quickly, she reaches him and sees the blood spurting out of his mouth. Which causes her to cover her own mouth in horror, just as she’s pushed to the ground.

It takes her many seconds to recover from this, and when she does, she sees Darlene a few steps away, kneeling over Tommy’s unconscious body.

“Stay away from him, druggie!” Darlene hollers, on the verge of tears. “Stay the fuck away!” She says this and looks down at Tommy, and she howls, “Help! Somebody fucking help!”

Chapter 23

An old silver station wagon sputters toward the emergency room entrance of St. Barnabas Hospital before coming to a stop. In the front passenger seat sits Rudi, who's somewhere else. She's still following the speeding ambulance down Boyden Avenue after the game, so overwhelmed by everything that she's not even sure what she feels.

It's then she turns back toward the stadium, where she sees hundreds of people streaming out. This includes the three Quincy punks, who are pretty much back to their old selves, apart from their hair, which is still kind of black and still kind of spiked.

"Rudi?" comes Eliot's voice from the back seat of the car, which brings Rudi back to the hospital.

Right away she jumps out of the car, and she closes the door, and she smiles at the three boys. "Thanks, guys," she tells them, with her lack of attitude startling the three. It's almost as if she's someone else.

"Sure thing," Philips says from the driver's seat. "Anytime."

"You want us to wait?" Doug asks from the back seat.

“You don’t have to,” she answers, with a shake of her head.

“We’ll wait,” Philip says.

Again, Rudi smiles. She does this before rushing into the hospital, where she sees Darlene sitting down the corridor. So she takes a seat behind a large and heavy man, who keeps her out of sight as a distraught Mrs. Goodwin sprints inside the building and joins Darlene.

For many hours, the three just sit there, with Rudi changing her seat whenever her camouflage gets up and leaves. Then Darlene and Mrs. Goodwin jump to their feet, and they rush toward a woman in blue scrubs. Rudi jumps, too, and she follows them. She follows until the two women stop in front of the doctor with their arms around each other. Which is when Rudi stops nearby and hides behind a corner while she holds her breath and listens.

“We had to remove his spleen,” the doctor tells the woman, matter-of-factly.

“Oh, my God,” Mrs. Goodwin cries out, after covering her mouth in shock. Something Rudi also does.

“He’s lost a lot of blood,” the doctor goes on, “and his immune system has been weakened, leaving him susceptible to infections. But other than that he should be all right.”

These last words cause Mrs. Goodwin to close her eyes and take a deep and long breath, and Rudi does the same. Darlene’s also relieved, and she hugs Mrs. Goodwin, and the two get a little emotional before Mrs. Goodwin gets a hold of herself. Which is just before she says to the doctor: “Where is he?”

“He’s resting comfortably,” answers the doctor.

“Where?”

“Room 314.”

“We want to see him.”

“Tomorrow.”

“*Now*,” Mrs. Goodwin snaps, with a strange and coarse accent.

“He’s sedated, Mrs. Goodwin,” the doctor insists. “Come back tomorrow morning. If anything changes, we’ll call you.”

Mrs. Goodwin relents, mostly because she doesn’t want to make a scene in front of Darlene, and the two leave the hospital together.

Rudi wants to follow them. She wants to do this and forget the whole evening, but instead she sneaks up to the third floor, and she finds Tommy’s darkened room.

From the doorway, she looks inside and sees Tommy sleeping. No longer does he look like a big tough football player. He looks more like a helpless little boy, lying there with all sorts of wires and contraptions attached to him. But what she really notices is his hand. She notices it while remembering how good it felt upon hers, and she wonders if it felt the same to him.

It did, she tells herself. She saw it on his face, and this was as wonderful as the feeling itself, if not more so, and this sends her tiptoeing to Tommy’s bed, where she takes his hand.

Once more she shivers, and she’s feeling so good that she never wants to let go of his hand again. It’s then Tommy opens his eyes, and he sees the face of the angel hovering over him, and he mutters, “Rudi?”

“Hey,” she whispers, with just a bit of a smile. “How are you?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’ll be fine,” she tells him, with her smile now bigger. “I overheard the doctor. You’re gonna be just fine.”

“Did we win?” he asks.

She shakes her head, and she mumbles, “I don’t know.”

Dazed, Tommy glances around the room, and he notices a wall clock and that it's almost three, and he tells her: "It can't still be visiting hours."

"I've never been real good at following rules," she tells him back.

This makes him feel a big burst of warmth, and it gives him the courage to say, "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," she says back.

"This is gonna sound real crazy, but is there, is there a song called . . . shit, I don't even know the name. It's about being part of a blank generation."

"Yeah," she tells him, "that's what it's called: 'Blank Generation,' by Richard Hell. It's actually my favorite song."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I've never told anyone that. Actually, not that many people have heard of it. Even a lot of my friends, who are mostly just into hardcore. Anyway, this guy I know, he likes older punk, and he turned me onto it. And, I don't know, I just really like it. It says everything I think. Everything I feel."

Tommy smiles at this, thinking back to the risk he took earlier, and realizing that it had all been worth it.

"What?" she asks in response to his smile, with a smile of her own.

"I like the song, too," he tells her.

"Yeah?"

"Even though I've never really heard it before."

"What?" she utters, with a confused expression.

"It doesn't matter," he tells her.

“You know, I actually got it in my bag — the song. Actually, it’s the very last song on every tape I’ve made. That way I know there’s always something good coming up.”

Once again, Tommy smiles. This time he smiles at how wonderful she is.

“Why are you asking me about it?” she goes on.

“You’d think I was crazy,” he answers.

“I already think that.”

“At first, I, I thought it was just a dream. Like the one I had last night.”

“A dream?”

“Today in English class I swear I saw you . . .”

“Saw me what?”

“It’s crazy.”

“Come on, tell me.”

“I saw you singing that song while dancing on the tables. It was the coolest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Get out of here,” she cries out, with a grin and a dismissive wave.

“I told you it was crazy,” he mumbles.

“I’ve actually done that before. Sorta.”

“Really?”

“Sure, in my old bedroom, and on my bed.”

“But not in class today,” he says. “Man, I think they’re gonna be sending me to a whole different type of hospital.”

“You and me both,” she says back.

“What do you mean?”

“I saw you tonight. Beforehand.”

“I don’t understand,” he utters, with the same confused expression she expressed only a few moments earlier.

“I thought it was just a dream, too,” she tells him. “Like the music last night.”

“Music?”

“I saw you lying there on the ground. I mean, before it happened. It was so strange. It was just you out there, with no one else around, in the same spot where it all happened. And you called me. That’s when I was calling your name, just before that last play.”

“You know what I think?” he mutters.

“What?” she asks.

“That, that there’s something connecting us.”

“I have a better explanation.”

“What’s that?”

“That we’re both crazy. A good crazy maybe.”

The two then pause, as if they’ve run out of things to say. But Tommy does have something to say. He says, “I want you to be my girl.”

It takes a little time for Rudi to react to this, as the words are as incongruent to her as if they’d been spoken in Martian. They’re words she never expected to hear, or even wanted to hear, and they frighten her. They frighten her so much that she releases his hand. Which is something she really doesn’t want to do, and something she regrets the moment she does.

“What’s wrong?” he says.

“This is crazy, Tommy,” she says back, while shaking her head. “I mean, really crazy. Look at us — we’re barely the same species.”

“It just seems that way.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” she insists, with rising emotion. “I, I’ve got a record. A long one. And I’ve done lots of drugs, too. I’m clean right now, but . . .”

“I don’t care about any of that,” he pleads. “I only care about now.”

“Sometimes you can’t separate now from the past. I know I can’t.”

“I don’t care.”

“You should. I’m trash.”

“Rudi —”

“— Even my mom thought so,” she screeches. “That’s why, that’s why she abandoned me when I was three, like I was nothing more than trash she was leaving behind. I don’t even remember her. And I don’t even know who my real dad is. I’m not even sure my mom knows. That’s if she’s alive.”

Tommy reacts to this, with tears.

“Why are *you* crying?” she howls, on the verge of tears herself. “I should be the one fucking crying!”

“I cry all the time,” he tells her. “Every fucking day.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I didn’t until now.”

The only response Rudi can make to this is to shake her head, as she can’t think of any other. She actually can’t think of much other than his hand, and how badly she wants to hold it. Though finally she clutches at something in her mind, and she tells him: “You, you’re better off with that cheerleader. You should’ve seen her tonight. She pushed me right onto the ground. No sane person would’ve done that. She must really love you.”

“But I don’t love her,” Tommy says.

“I can’t be your girl,” Rudi says back. “I can’t be anyone’s anything. Most of the time I don’t even want to be with me.”

She says this and starts slowly backing up toward the door. She also points in its direction with her thumb and utters, “Look, I . . . I gotta go. A bunch of Quincy punks are waiting for me.”

“Who?” he utters back.

She doesn’t answer. She just spins around and runs out of the room.

“Rudi!” he screams. But she keeps running. She runs even harder. “I tried running, too!” he goes on. “It doesn’t work! It doesn’t fucking work!”

Chapter 24

The silver station wagon stops in front of Rudi's house. But Rudi, who again is sitting in the front passenger seat, again doesn't notice they've parked. Again, she's somewhere else. This time in the hospital.

I want you to be my girl.

A few days earlier, these words would've been the biggest joke in the world to her. But now they're all she can think about.

"Rudi?" comes Eliot's voice from the back seat.

Like before, Rudi returns to the car, and she jumps out. She also glances at the three boys while noticing how different they seem from the day before. "You guys are the best," she tells them, while trying to control her emotions, which are flying around her head in a million directions at once, looking for any means of escape.

"You okay?" asks Philip.

"Sure," she tells him.

"You don't look okay," says Doug.

“You just don’t know me,” she says back.

“We know you,” Eliot tells her.

Rudi doesn’t know how to reply to this, so she just starts marching toward the house. Which she does while calling out, “I’ll see you three on Monday. And remember, no more spiked hair. Because I ain’t gonna be friends with a bunch of poseurs.”

The car then takes off, and Rudi reaches her house. Which is when the door swings open, exposing Stephen, who’s got on both a robe and a scowl. “Where have you been?” he barks.

“Out,” she barks back.

“Slamdancing with the crickets?”

She doesn’t reply. She just pushes Stephen aside and storms inside the house. Though he follows her toward the staircase and says, “It’s way past curfew. It’s almost past tomorrow’s.”

“Ground me,” she says back.

“How about I just return you to juvie instead? It seems you’re already packed!”

“Do whatever you want!”

Angrily, he grabs her shoulder and spins her toward him, and he yells, “Why do you insist on self-destructing? You could be something so terrific. You’re probably the smartest kid in that whole fucking school!”

“No cursing in this house!” she yells back.

“It’s my fucking house!”

They’re right then interrupted, by the ringing of a telephone, which calms the two.

“Who were you with all night?” Stephen goes on, once the phone’s picked up.

“Friends,” she tells him.

“Friends? You mean Tommy Goodwin, don’t you?”

“What?”

“You went to see him in the hospital, didn’t you?”

Rudi doesn’t exactly reply. She just turns away.

“Come on,” he growls, “we saw how the two of you were looking at each other at the game, and how you ran to him after he was hurt. The whole stadium saw.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she utters, with her head shaking in a near continuous manner.

“Tell me, is it such a crime to be normal?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

She says this and starts up the stairs. But she stops when she hears the swinging doors of the kitchen open, and she turns and sees Pam, who’s wearing a robe much like her husband’s.

“That was for you, Rudi,” Pam says. “A guy named Butch. Something about a dead Kennedy.” Pam then turns to Stephen and adds, “It must be Teddy.”

This almost makes Rudi smile. Instead, she mutters, “I’m going to bed. Assuming I still have one.”

“You still have one,” Stephen tells her. “But this conversation isn’t over.”

“Whatever,” she tells him back, and she rushes up the stairs and into her room. There, after slamming her door, she dives into her swimming-pool-like bed and gets under the covers. She also grabs a pillow, and just like that those million emotions escape, and she starts crying. She cries for the first time in years. She can’t even remember the last time she had.

The strangest part is that she doesn’t even know why she’s crying, or whether she’s crying because she’s happy or sad.

Chapter 25

Saturday morning Rudi's face is dry and her toughness has mostly returned, and while remaining in bed all morning she convinces herself that the previous night was nothing more than temporary insanity. Not just what happened outside the stadium, but also inside the hospital with Tommy.

She further convinces herself that she's better now and stronger, and that she won't allow herself to be weakened again. Never again will she have dreams about Tommy, nor will she think of that hand of his, or his tears, or the words he spoke, of how alike they were, and how perfect they could become. She also insists that he'll soon be back with the cheerleader, or one just like her, and that she'll return back, too — back to whatever it was she had before.

To help with all this insisting, Rudi listens to the most cynical song she has about the feelings swirling around her: "Love Und Romance" by the Slits — an all-female band Butch recently turned her on to. She listens to this song endlessly on her Walkman, and she sings it, too, and she soon knows exactly how long to hold the rewind button so that she can get the tape back to the beginning of the song.

Eventually, she feels in control of herself, and she immerses herself in her English paper, which is quickly becoming the size of a dissertation. This is because she just can't do anything halfway — good or bad, which is particularly true for a paper that is becoming more and more personal. Whenever she writes about Helena, she has difficulty separating the character from herself, and she has the same difficulty separating Holden from Tommy. All this makes the paper far more passionate than your typical academic work, and she often finds herself moved by her own words. Which only drives her deeper into them. So, as the sun begins to set outside her window, it's no longer a paper she's writing, but something closer to poetry. Also, despite all her insisting, she's once more on the verge of tears, especially when she looks out her window into the endless trees, toward where the hospital lies.

"You all right?" Stephen murmurs from her doorway.

Like the night before, Rudi jumps. She also wipes her eyes and growls, "How about knocking?"

"How about closing the door?"

With a drawn-out sigh, Rudi jumps to her feet and marches to her door, which she tries to shut. But Stephen holds it open, and he says to her: "You haven't answered my question: are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she tells him. "You know, I really wish you were more like my stepdad and just didn't care."

"I actually talked to your stepfather before you came here."

"Yeah?"

"And he didn't exactly sound like a man who didn't care. Quite the opposite, in fact."

"He could've fooled me."

“Maybe you’ve been fooling him, too.”

“Are we through with the psychoanalysis?”

“Actually,” Stephen says, “Pam and I are going out to dinner, and we’d like you to come with us.”

“I,” Rudi mumbles, before pointing to the stack of pages by the typewriter, “I gotta finish that paper I told you about.”

“Paper? It looks more like a book manuscript.”

“You don’t want me to flunk out, do you?”

“Something tells me that I’m not gonna have any worries about that. You sure you won’t change your mind about dinner?”

“I’m sure.”

“All right. We gave the boys some money to order pizza, and I expect you to have some.”

Stephen says this and starts off, but he quickly stops and turns around, and he tells her:

“Don’t forget about the NA meeting tomorrow night.”

“I can’t,” she pleads.

“*Rudi.*”

“I have to finish this paper!”

“It won’t take long.”

“Look, I’m probably not gonna get an hour of sleep this whole weekend. You don’t understand — this teacher just hates me. The paper has to be perfect.”

“Okay,” Stephen says, after thinking it over. “But no excuses next week.”

“Next week is Thanksgiving. Your brother never makes me go to meetings on holiday weekends.”

“Then the week after.”

“Fine,” she says, before returning to her paper, and she again becomes immersed. Though as night falls she starts feeling a certain hunger, which often comes after not eating for an entire day.

Annoyed at this, she rambles downstairs, where she sees the two boys watching wrestling on the TV in the living room. She afterward enters the kitchen and finds the remains of a large pizza on the white porcelain table, and she pulls out a slice. She further picks off all the pepperoni and stuffs the cold and greasy triangular glob into her mouth, before wishing she hadn’t. Then, after swallowing the mess with an accentuated grimace, she notices the nearby telephone, and the yellow directory not far from it. She also finds herself drawn to both, and once again forgetting all her insisting, she locates a number in the phone book and dials it.

“St. Barnabas Hospital,” a voice answers. “Can I help you?”

Rudi doesn’t answer.

“Hello?” the voice adds.

“I’m sorry,” Rudi says, before hanging up and returning to the safety of her paper.

Chapter 26

Tommy stares out the window from his hospital bed, much as he's been doing all day. He's looking through the night into the trees, trying to imagine where a particular person is.

"All I can say is that I'm happy I wasn't there," his mother says to him from the chair next to his bed. "I couldn't even stand listening to the way Darlene described it."

Tommy shrugs, and he mumbles, "I've been hit worse."

"I'm glad I never saw that, either. And I'm even gladder that was your last game. Now you can move on to more important things, such as college."

Tommy shrugs again.

"You haven't even opened those applications, have you?" his mother continues. "Why?"

He shrugs a third time, as college is the last thing on his mind. The only thing there is that particular person, who's been there ever since he awoke. What's more, not only can't he get this person out of it, he doesn't want to get this person out of it.

"Darlene told me last night that she's leaning toward Princeton," Mrs. Goodwin goes on. "Because it's close. Well, closer than Harvard or Yale. I think she's got a good point. Of course,

she's waiting to see what you decide."

"She shouldn't," Tommy says.

"Why not? Why shouldn't you two go to the same school? It'll make things a whole lot easier. And less lonely, too. I sure wish I'd been able to go to school with your father."

"Can we talk about something else?" Tommy begs.

"Such as?" she asks.

"I don't know — the weather maybe?"

"Darlene alluded to some problems you two are having."

"There are no problems with her, Mom. Believe me."

"That's good to hear. You know, I talked to her earlier today over the phone, and she should be here any time."

Tommy doesn't reply.

"Is there a reason why you won't look at me?" his mother asks.

With some reluctance, Tommy turns from the window and looks at his mother, and he forces a smile before telling her: "I'm just elsewhere."

"It's quite understandable after what you've been through," she says. She also takes his hand, and with her eyes beginning to water, she mutters, "You don't know how upset I was when I got the call. To lose both of you in such a short period of . . ."

"You're not gonna lose me, Mom," he insists.

"This place, it brings back such horrible memories. I wish they would've sent you to a different hospital."

She says this just as Darlene comes to the door, who smiles at both of them.

Mrs. Goodwin responds by pulling herself together, and she smiles back, before standing

up and telling the two: “I’m gonna let you have some privacy. I’ll be by tomorrow morning.”

“Goodnight,” Tommy says.

The woman replies likewise, and she grasps Darlene’s hand as she walks out.

At the same time, Tommy returns his gaze to the window, and he keeps it there even after Darlene sits in the chair next to him. He keeps it there even after she squeezes his hand while desperately trying to bring him to her.

To him, her hand’s cold and lifeless. It’s the opposite of another’s — the hand he wishes he were holding.

“I think we need to talk about some things,” Darlene murmurs.

“Yeah,” Tommy murmurs back. “We do.”

Chapter 27

Monday morning Rudi steps toward the entrance of Mr. Krasner's class wearing an old and torn Bruce Springsteen T-shirt. Which has "I Hate" scrawled on top.

Just inside the doorway she stops, and she looks inside the room, where she sees Darlene staring at the empty seat next to her. Something Rudi does, too.

"Good morning, Rudi," calls out the teacher from the front of the room. "I sure hope you have something for me."

These words cause Darlene to shift her stare toward Rudi, who does likewise.

"Well?" the teacher utters, a few steps from Rudi.

Rudi responds with a sigh, and she drops her seabag on top of the back table. She further reaches inside the sack and yanks out the paper, which is so thick that it's bound with extra-large rubber bands. She then hands this to a more than shocked Mr. Krasner, who reads the title:

HELENA AND HOLDEN: A PARTIAL DICHOTOMY

In something of a daze, the teacher removes the rubber bands, and he shuffles through the pages while mumbling, “I, I was only expecting a half-dozen pages. You didn’t even have to type it.”

“You didn’t tell me that,” Rudi tells him, not knowing there was actually a good reason why he didn’t tell her these things: he wasn’t expecting anything. Never before has a student gone so beyond his expectations, even in AP English.

Eventually, he reaches the last pages, and he glances at the copious references.

“You also didn’t say whether you wanted footnotes or endnotes,” she goes on. “I hope it’s okay.”

He doesn’t reply to this. He just waddles toward the front of the room with his tail between his legs, and he reads the paper’s opening paragraphs:

Loneliness. Despair. Alienation.

These are emotions that cross gender and time and social status. What a penniless medieval French girl felt is really no different from what a well-to-do Manhattan boy felt centuries later, or what a girl or boy from Irvington or Maplewood feels today.

Do I belong somewhere?

Have I worth?

Should I even bother?

Shakespeare’s Helena and Salinger’s Holden basically ask themselves the same questions. The same questions many of us ask. The differences between the two lie only in the answers, and the actions resulting from these answers, and finally the outcomes of the actions. But these events don’t change the fact that the two characters are essentially the same lost souls, and they live on today because even the modern reader can see themselves in them.

As he finishes reading, Mr. Krasner places the cover on top of the page. He also puts the rubber bands back over the entire paper, and he turns to Rudi, who's sitting in her seat and staring out the window with such sad and longing eyes that he has trouble believing that it's the same girl from last week.

Chapter 28

Rudi staggers out of her first Calculus class in which there was nothing to divert her attention.

Out of habit, she enters the bathroom, and she places her bag by the sink. She also looks in the mirror and thinks about touching herself up, even though she knows that this time she really doesn't have a reason to do so. She even takes out her mascara.

As she stares at herself, one of the stall doors behind her opens, and Maria steps out. This shifts Rudi's stare to the girl, who does likewise. Rudi further tries to work up a glare, but she just doesn't have it in her. Instead, she tries to figure Maria out, and to this end she asks, "Why are you so afraid of me?"

Maria doesn't reply.

"Well?" Rudi growls. "Do you think I'm gonna bite you or something?"

Maria shakes her head, and she mutters, "I'm sorry." She also rushes toward the exit.

Feeling a little sorry herself, and lonely, too, Rudi tries a different approach. She tries to make conversation, by saying, "How come you don't wear any makeup?"

This question forces Maria to stop, just in front of the bathroom door. But she doesn't look back or even move, let alone give an answer.

"You must be the only girl here who doesn't," Rudi goes on.

"My dad won't let me," Maria says.

"Why not?"

"I don't know," she says with a shrug. "He, he's real strict."

"Would you like to try some of mine?" Rudi asks.

Shocked, Maria spins toward Rudi, and she utters, "I just told you, my dad —"

"— Is your dad here in this bathroom?" Rudi utters back.

"I . . . I don't know."

"You don't know if you want to try some makeup, or you don't know if your dad is in this bathroom?"

Maria grins at this.

"Come on," Rudi insists, while waving the girl toward her, "I won't punk you out or anything. Not until tomorrow."

This makes Maria giggle, and she takes a hesitant step toward Rudi, and after glancing at the bathroom door, she shuffles over to her.

"Here," Rudi then tells her, while offering her the mascara wand.

Reluctantly, Maria takes it in her shaking hand. She also shakes her head at her reflection and says, "This isn't a very good idea."

"The best ones usually aren't."

"What?"

Rudi doesn't answer. She just takes the girl's wrist and gently moves the wand to her

right eyelash. “You want to start at the base,” she tells her, and while wiggling her hand some she adds, “and move it a bit, side to side. Then, then sweep it up.” Rudi does this, and Maria stares at her eye. She stares at it as if she’s never quite seen it before.

This makes Rudi smile, and after the two apply a couple of coats, they do the bottom eyelash, too. Rudi afterward releases Maria’s wrist and says, “You do the other eye.” Which Maria does while glancing at Rudi constantly. At the same time, Rudi reaches into her bag and pulls out a bottle of baby powder — something she holds up while saying, “I don’t think this is quite your color.”

“Me, neither,” Maria says with a grimace, before finishing her eye. Which is when she says, “How’s that?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think.” Rudi says back. “It doesn’t matter what your dad thinks, or what other people think. It only matters what you think. So what do *you* think?”

“I . . . I think I like it.”

“All right then.”

“Can we take it off now?”

“After you’ve showed the world.”

It’s then Rudi starts dragging Maria by the arm.

“Where we going?” Maria cries out, with no small amount of fear.

“To the world.”

“This is not a very good idea. In fact, it’s a really, really bad one.”

“We’ll see.”

Rudi keeps dragging Maria. She drags her right through the bathroom door.

“Maria!” howls the principal from nearby.

“Oh-oh,” Maria mumbles.

“What?” Rudi mumbles back.

“What are you doing with that makeup?” the principal demands.

“Nothing, Daddy,” Maria replies.

“*Daddy?*” Rudi utters.

All Maria can do is shrug.

“Miss Weiss,” growls the principal, “is there anything in this school you haven’t corrupted?”

“Just you,” she tells him.

“Detention!” he screams, while pointing the way.

“On what charge?” she screams back.

“For your own protection! So I don’t strangle you!”

Chapter 29

In the late afternoon sun Rudi bursts out of the school. Though she comes to a sharp stop when she sees Darlene, who's been waiting for her and who says, "I saw Tommy Saturday."

Rudi tries to appear apathetic, but her face betrays her. Still, as she continues past Darlene, she continues her charade by saying as matter-of-factly as possible, "So how is he?"

"Fine," Darlene says. "He'll be back after Thanksgiving."

"You must be excited."

"He broke up with me."

Again, Rudi stops. This time both surprised and excited, even if she doesn't want either. She also doesn't want Darlene to see her expressing these things, so she doesn't turn around. She just growls, "Why are you telling me this?"

Darlene answers by grabbing Rudi's shoulder and by spinning her around, and she cries out, "Because I know what you're up to, and you're not getting away with it!"

Returning Darlene's anger and then some, Rudi takes a threatening step toward her, causing her to jump back. Which is just before Rudi says, "I gave you a pass on Friday. But

don't push it."

"I saw how you were looking at him during the game!" Darlene hollers. "Everyone did!"

Without saying a word, Rudi turns from Darlene and hurries off. Then, once a safe distance away, she yells, "Leave me alone! And tell Tommy to leave me alone, too!"

It's soon after this Rudi reaches the corner of Parker and Valley, and at a red light she shakes her fists and howls: "Everyone, leave me the fuck alone!"

One person in particular doesn't heed this: Deke, who pulls up in his Porsche singing along with the Buzzcocks' "What Do I Get?" Which Deke only thinks he chose at random. It's a song that expresses the same unreciprocated feelings he feels toward Rudi, which he has no problem expressing because he's so wired.

Rudi doesn't recognize any of this. The only thing she recognizes is that Darlene is likely still behind her. So, when Deke stops singing and lowers the music, she points down Parker and shouts: "Yeah, Maplewood Avenue is just a couple of blocks that way."

Deke nods, even if he's not too happy about it. Rudi can see this in his bloodshot eyes. Still, he speeds down Valley, and Rudi continues down Parker. She also glances back and sees Darlene glaring at her from across Valley. But she's not following, and when Rudi reaches Maplewood Avenue Darlene is well out of sight.

But the Porsche isn't. It again pulls in front of her and its passenger door swing opens.

Right away Rudi jumps inside, and the car speeds off.

"What was that all about?" Deke barks.

"A nosy bitch," Rudi barks back. "That's what it was about."

"So," Deke tells her, with a twisted little smile, "are we still in business?"

"I just can't do it right now," she tells him back. "There are way too many eyes on me."

“No problem. There’s this motel I’ve been liking of late on 22. Real classy. Been taking all my girls there.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Rudi says this just before the car comes to a screeching halt in the middle of the road. Deke then whips out a gun from his waist and points it at Rudi’s head. “What did you say?” he demands.

Rudi doesn’t answer. But she does shake, fearing Deke’s both crazy enough and loaded enough to pull the trigger, and Deke likes this. He enjoys the fear on her face. He even feeds off it as he cocks back the hammer of his gun and utters, “What-did-you-say?”

“All right,” she mumbles.

“I can’t fucking hear you!”

“All right!”

“All right what?” he yells.

“We’re still in business!” she yells back.

Deke grins at this, even though he was hoping for a different answer, and he puts back his gun. He afterward yanks out a large plastic bag of joints from inside his jacket. Which he offers to Rudi while saying, “We’ll start out small and work our way up to the big time.”

Though Rudi makes no move toward the bag. She just sits there, trying to come up with some escape.

“Well?” he growls.

She still doesn’t move. So he again reaches for his gun. Which is when she grabs the bag.

Chapter 30

Dan Reese peers into the mess that was once his stepdaughter's bedroom, with a frosty can of Schaefer in his paw.

He seems angry, but soon a small smile creeps across his face, and he's smiling mostly at himself. He's smiling because he misses his stepdaughter. He misses her almost as much as he misses her mother.

In truth, he's always known that he cares about Rudi some, but he's just never realized just how much this some was until now. A now in which he starts moving inside the room for a reason he doesn't quite know. For this same reason, he kneels in front of her records and tapes, and after putting his beer down, he sifts through them and the images on their covers. One of these images is of a golden Jesus crucified on a dollar bill, and another has the Capitol building zapped and destroyed by lightning, and both these images shock him. But they also make him recall when he was Rudi's age, and how the bands he listened to shocked his parents in much the same way. Which causes his smile to return.

"She's not such a bad kid," he says, with a shake of his head. "Just a little fucked-up.

Like her mom. And stepdad.”

He says this and suddenly feels something strange. He feels something is wrong. This causes him to rise, and it also causes him to make his way into the kitchen. Which is where he sees his old rotary phone on the counter, and he lumbers toward it. Then, after putting on a pair of reading glasses, he reads a handwritten scrap of paper next to the phone and dials a number.

Soon, it rings. It rings and rings and rings, and he wants to hang up. He wants to do this so badly. But he just can’t.

“Hello?” Rudi gasps into the device, having just returned home and still shaking from her encounter with Deke.

“Hi,” Mr. Reese says, not recognizing Rudi’s voice in its current state. “Is, is this the Cross family?”

Rudi pauses. She does this while recognizing her stepfather’s voice all too well, and she mutters, “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” he tells her, before dropping the receiver.

Chapter 31

In the morning Rudi opens her locker wearing a plain Ramones T-shirt underneath her overcoat. Then, after glancing around, she reaches inside her seabag and yanks out the bag of joints, and while handling it as if it were on fire, she tosses it inside her locker and covers it with lots of junk. On top of which she throws her coat, and she stares at all of it.

Deke, she knows, will be coming soon, and he'll be expecting money or something else. Preferably something else. Which means she has to start selling, despite not wanting to sell anything ever again.

Not wanting to think about this, she slams the locker door closed. She also turns around, and she sees Maria nervously grinning at her, causing her to jump.

"Sorry about that," Maria mumbles.

"It's all right," Rudi tells her, and the two start down the hallway together.

"So?" Maria utters.

"So?" Rudi utters back.

"So you must hate me."

“Why would I hate you?”

“I got you in trouble.”

“Believe me,” Rudi says, “that’s not trouble where I’m from.”

“Still,” Maria says back, “I should’ve told you who my dad was.”

“You know, I figured you’d be on Devil’s Island by now.”

“He’s really not that bad. I just got grounded . . . for the next 10 weekends. Not that it actually matters, as I never go anywhere anyway.”

It’s then that the two reach Rudi’s homeroom, and they stop at the threshold.

“What’s your dad’s problem anyway?” Rudi asks. “Why is he so uptight?”

“I don’t know,” Maria answers. “He, he’s just from a different generation. He means well, I think.”

“And what’s with all this Gonthalez?”

“Oh, that,” says Maria with a smirk. “Well, you see, that’s how they supposedly say it in Spain. My dad, in fact, is always telling me how we can trace our lineage there all the way back to the Visigoths.” Maria then pauses, and she glances around, before leaning toward Rudi and whispering, “And that may all be true, but we came to America via *Mehico*.”

“So what’s the big deal?” Rudi growls.

“He thinks people will look down on us if we’re Mexican,” Maria growls back. “And he’s probably right.”

Rudi shrugs at this. She also says, “Yeah, well, I guess I shouldn’t talk. My real name is Gertrude.”

This causes Maria’s expression to turn to one mixed equally of shock and humor, and with her hand covering her mouth she mutters, “*Gertrude?*”

“Say it one more time,” Rudi barks, while mimicking the principal’s voice, “just say it one more time. I’ve kicked people in the head for less than that!”

Having heard her father say things like that more than once, Maria giggles. She further utters, “So?”

“So?” Rudi utters back.

“So you got any plans for after school?”

“Well, there’s a good chance I’ll be in detention. So far I’m batting a thousand.”

“But if you’re not . . .”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I just thought maybe we could, you know, do something.”

This surprises Rudi. It surprises her not only that Maria would want to hang out with her, but that the idea isn’t completely unpleasant to her. Still, she asks, “Do you want to be grounded till the twenty-first century?”

“I told you,” Maria insists, “he’s not that bad.”

Rudi thinks it over. She does this before saying, “What kind of music do you like?”

Chapter 32

Rudi carries her tray of starchy vegetables toward the back of the cafeteria, where her three friends are eating at their usual table.

But Rudi doesn't notice them. She notices something else. She notices Owen nearby sitting alone with his head down, with lots of paper balls flying at him from the surrounding tables.

She wants to ignore this — not only because she doesn't like Owen, but because she knows there's likely some justice in what's happening to him. She further tells herself that it's not her fault if he's down on himself. But she stops beside him anyway, and she calls for a stop to the aerial assault, which happens at once.

"You're just gonna let them get away with that?" she asks Owen, whose head is still down.

"What's the point?" he tells her. "My rep's shot. I got beat up by a girl. Twice."

Rudi smirks at this, and she sits across from Owen. She also says to him: "You just need better karma."

“I don’t even know what that means,” he says back.

“It means . . . it means ‘fuck not, lest ye be fucked.’”

Owen doesn’t react.

“Come on,” she tells him, “lift that chin up.”

“So you can punch it?” he asks.

“See, that would be bad karma. ’Cause I don’t have any reason to punch you.”

Slowly, Owen lifts his head, and he mumbles, “Oh.”

“So you get it?”

“No.”

He says this, but a small smile makes its way onto his face anyway.

Chapter 33

Stephen steps inside his house, and he hears “Blitzkrieg Bop” blasting from above.

He frowns at this, and he marches to the staircase and up it. He also marches toward Rudi’s open door, where he freezes. He freezes when he sees his foster daughter jumping up and down on her way-too-soft bed with the daughter of his boss, though this isn’t all they’re doing. They’re also screaming with the music and shaking their fists, with the biggest of smiles on their faces.

Rudi has long loved this song, but never has she enjoyed it as much as with Maria — a girl she would’ve never glanced at a week earlier. That afternoon the two discovered that, while they don’t have much in common, they complement each other perfectly, and they’ve been having fun together. They’ve actually been laughing ever since leaving school, which has helped Rudi forget all her problems.

Watching them, Stephen has trouble believing it’s really Maria. Gone is the girl he’s known for more than three years, who never seemed to raise her eyes, and in her place is this bouncing and bubbling young woman, who’s clearly excited about being alive.

Soon, Stephen regains his senses, and he marches over to the boombox on the floor and shuts it off. Which causes both girls to stop their jumping and singing, and they spin toward him.

“What’s your problem?” Rudi howls.

“Rudi,” Stephen howls back, “are you trying to get me fired?”

“What?”

“Do you know who her father is?” he screeches, while pointing at Maria.

Grinning, Rudi jumps off the bed, and she leads Stephen out of her room. She does this while saying, “You want me to be normal, right? Well, this is what normal girls do.”

“But . . .”

Stephen can’t finish his thought, because Rudi pushes him out of the room and says, “Just let us know when dinner’s ready.”

“It’s always ready at six,” he says back.

“Then let us know when it’s six.”

Rudi says this, and she slams the door in Stephen’s face, and she turns back to Maria, who’s standing behind her. At once, the two start giggling, and they shuffle back toward the bed.

“It must be really weird having a guidance counselor as a dad,” Maria says.

“A foster dad,” Rudi insists.

“Still . . .”

“It can’t be any weirder than having a principal as a dad.”

“True.”

It’s then the two reach Rudi’s bed, and Rudi takes a deep breath before plunging back onto its softness. Maria joins her, and she says, “How do you sleep on this?”

“Tell me about it,” Rudi tells her, while staring at the ceiling and daydreaming about a

certain something.

Noticing this dreamy look, Maria grins, and she utters, “So?”

“So?” Rudi utters back, while still lost in her daydream.

“So what’s going on with you and Tommy Goodwin?”

Right away Rudi returns from her dream, and she rises to her waist and growls, “*Et tu, Brute?*”

“Everybody saw you guys at the game,” Maria cries out. “And everybody’s talking about it. *Everybody.*”

“Everybody needs to mind their own business.”

“Just about every girl in school is in love with him.”

“Not me,” Rudi insists, but she has to do this insisting while averting her eyes.

Again, Maria grins, and she murmurs, “Methinks the lady doth protest too much.”

With a bit of a grin of her own, Rudi turns back to Maria, and she says, “You like Shakespeare, too?”

“Love him,” answers Maria. “But don’t change the subject.”

“There is no subject.”

“That’s not what we all saw Friday night.”

Rudi blushes a bit, and she again averts her eyes. She also mutters, “It’s crazy. I mean, I’m no . . . I’m no . . .” She then turns to Maria and adds, “I’m no fucking cheerleader.”

“You’re better,” Maria insists, and she puts her hand on Rudi’s wrist and adds, “And prettier.”

“You need glasses.”

“Maybe it’s you who needs them.”

“So what about you?” Rudi asks.

“What about me?” Maria asks back.

“You going with someone?”

Maria shakes her head, and does so bashfully.

“It must be pretty tough with your dad around,” Rudi says.

Maria shrugs.

“But you must at least be hot for someone,” Rudi goes on.

Once again, Maria shrugs. Though this time with a smile. So Rudi gives her a playful punch on the shoulder, and she cries out, “All right — spill it!”

But Maria won’t spill anything. She just turns away, knowing they’re heading into dangerous territory. She actually hopes Rudi will forget all about it. But Rudi won’t forget about it, so Maria decides to lie, or half-lie. She says, “There is this someone in my Math class.” Which is actually true.

“Yeah?” Rudi says back, in a tone of voice suggesting that she wants to hear more — a lot more.

“Yeah,” Maria goes on. “We’re always smiling at each other and stuff.” Which is also true.

“What’s his name?” Rudi asks.

Maria doesn’t answer. She doesn’t because she can’t come up with a name.

“Come on,” Rudi pleads. “I’ll keep quiet. What’s his name?”

Still, Maria doesn’t answer. But she soon realizes that a lie is so easy, and she tells Rudi: “Sam.”

“Sam?” Rudi utters with her head tilted, while thinking she might know the boy. “Sam

who?”

Maria doesn't know how to reply. So she looks into Rudi's eyes. Eyes she finds so strong and fearless. Eyes she wishes she had. Then, as she keeps staring into them, she decides to confess something she didn't even want to confess to herself, and she says, “Sam . . . antha.”

“His name is Sam *Antha*?” Rudi says back. Which is just before it hits her, and when it does, she's unable to hide her shock. She can't even come up with something to say. Which is quite unusual for her. Though she finally mutters, “Oh.”

The two afterward stare at each other, and Maria starts feeling ashamed of herself, and she's certain Rudi feels the same. These feelings only increase, and it doesn't take long before they become overwhelming, and Maria stands up and mumbles, “Perhaps I should go.”

But Rudi won't let her. She grabs Maria's shoulder and flings her back onto the softness of her bed, and she asks, “Where you going?”

“You must hate me,” Maria tells her.

“Why would I hate you?”

“Because I'm a . . .”

“A lesbian?”

Maria nods.

“I actually think it's pretty cool,” Rudi tells her, without an ounce of phoniness.

“You do?” Maria tells her back, with lots of surprise.

“Sure, and just think — you'll never have to give a blowjob.”

Maria grimaces at this, and she cries out, “*Eewwww*. Even if I were straight that'd be disgusting.”

“It's not so bad. You get used to it.”

“Really?”

“Sure,” Rudi replies, while once more averting her eyes. Though she soon glances at Maria and adds, “But don’t change the subject.”

“There is no subject,” Maria insists.

“Have you talked to this, this Samantha?”

“God, no.”

“So you two are just gonna smile at each other until you’re retired?”

“Well . . .”

“Talk to her!”

“My dad would kill me. I’m not even allowed to talk to boys, which fortunately isn’t such a problem.”

“So you’re just gonna live your whole life for your dad?”

Maria shrugs.

“You’re gonna marry some guy and have babies,” Rudi goes on, “just for dear old dad?”

Again, Maria shrugs, and she adds, “Maybe?”

“Maria, to thine own self be true!” Rudi shouts.

There’s no response to this, so Rudi wags her finger at Maria and says, “Listen to me: tomorrow after Math class you’re gonna walk right up to this Samantha and say something. Anything.”

“I can’t,” Maria pleads, while shaking her head over and over.

“You better. Because if you don’t talk to her, I won’t talk to you. I won’t be friends with a coward.”

Chapter 34

Thanksgiving comes and Rudi spends all morning on the phone with Maria, much like she spent the previous night, in which Maria described her first conversation with Samantha. A conversation punctuated with lots of ahs and uhs and you-knows.

But early in the afternoon Maria leaves for her aunt's house, and this leaves Rudi stuck with many of her foster parents' extended family, as well as their friends and coworkers. Quickly, the house becomes full of people, especially young screaming people. The latter sends Rudi outside into the cool air, where she sits on the front step while watching the sun set behind all those trees, with her mind somewhere just beyond them.

She only returns home when the door behind her swings open and Pam steps out. "A little too noisy for you?" Pam asks.

"A little," Rudi says.

"The turkeys are almost ready."

Rudi nods, without much excitement.

"But we've got stuffing, too," Pam adds. "You can eat stuffing, can't you?"

"I guess," Rudi tells her.

"And we have yams."

"The truth is I'm not that hungry."

"It seems you haven't been hungry pretty much since you got here."

"Yeah."

"Well, I certainly know how that is."

"What do you mean?"

"I was exactly like that with Stephen."

Still not understanding what Pam means, Rudi turns to the woman, who not only sits next to her but who also puts her arm around her. Which Rudi eyes warily. Though she makes no move to break an embrace that feels surprisingly good.

"I had a crush on Stephen all through school," Pam goes on. "I'm talking from South Mountain Elementary on up. He was *the* guy. Hell, even some of the white girls were throwing themselves at him. But he was also a couple of years older than me, so he never saw me. Not for a second. And it used to make me so mad. I used to just lie around in that soft bed and cry. And I got really, really thin.

"Then, then Stephen went off to Vietnam, and when he came back he was no longer *the* guy. And nobody was throwing themselves at him anymore. He was just sad and lonely all the time. And, and he had lots of other problems, too. But you wanna know what? Somehow I found him even more attractive than before."

"So you threw yourself at him?" Rudi asks.

"You bet I did," Pam answers, with a grin.

"Just like Helena."

“Who?”

“It doesn’t matter. So, so you think I should throw myself at . . .”

“I don’t think you have to, honey. What’s more, I think you already know this.”

Without thinking, Rudi lowers her head onto Pam’s shoulder, which feels better than good, and she says, “You know, you’re okay.”

“So are you,” Pam says back, with a big happy smile.

Chapter 35

Thanksgiving at Tommy's house is far quieter than at Rudi's. With her son having just come home from the hospital the day before, Mrs. Goodwin doesn't invite anyone over or accept any invitations. It's just she and her son, with the modest dinner Elizabeth prepared for them warming in the oven.

Still feeling weak, Tommy spends most of the holiday in bed, staring out the window like he did in the hospital, with his mind like the stuck needle of a record player, playing the same beautiful tune over and over again. But eventually he gives the needle a rest, and he gets up. Then, with some difficulty, he steps outside and watches the sun set, much like Rudi. But, unlike her, it gets a little cold for him, and he returns inside the house.

There he finds his mother sitting in the living room, watching *Miracle on 34th Street* on the television. She's watching the part in which Kris speaks to the little orphan girl in Dutch and watching it with tears in her eyes.

Tommy smiles at this, and he mutters, "Hey."

Startled, the woman jumps a bit. She also wipes her eyes and replies in kind. At the same

time, her son comes striding up to her, and she takes his hand and asks him how he's feeling.

"All right," he tells her.

"We can have dinner whenever you want," she tells him back.

"All right."

"I know, why don't you call Darlene. Maybe she can have coffee with us later."

"*Mom.*"

"What?"

"It's over."

"But why?" his mother asks. "Why won't you tell me what happened?"

"Nothing happened," he says. "That was the whole problem."

"She's beautiful. Gorgeous, actually."

"Maybe."

"She's also smart and sweet and caring, too. What else could you possibly want?"

"Maybe I want someone more like you."

"I'm not sure if I should be taking that as a compliment."

"It was."

"Well, there's no one like me, thank heavens."

"Don't be so sure."

Chapter 36

Monday morning Rudi opens her locker, and she notices the bag of joints underneath all the junk. Which she hasn't noticed since throwing them there the week before, and which she wishes she'd never notice again.

"Tom-me!" a crowd of people begin to chant from the front passageway.

Against her will, Rudi turns her head, and she sees Tommy in his blue-and-white football jacket, meekly passing through a crowd of admirers, who are slapping his hands and patting his shoulders. It's then Tommy spots Rudi, and he stops and stares at her. Which causes her to slam her locker closed and hustle toward her homeroom.

"You getting tired yet?" he calls out. But she just hustles faster. Then, as soon as the first bell rings out, she hustles to English class. She hustles there so fast that she's the first one there apart from Mr. Krasner, who's sitting behind his desk reading a book, with a big stack of papers in front of him. This includes her thick one, which is way on the bottom.

"Hi," she utters.

"Hello," he utters back, without looking at her.

As she sits down, she knows what this likely means: he didn't like her paper, and she tries to pretend that it doesn't matter. "So he failed me," she tells herself. "He doesn't like me. What'd you expect? I would've probably done the same."

Soon, Tommy steps inside the classroom. He does this while wincing in pain, and Rudi spins away from him, and he staggers over to his normal seat. Darlene, too, marches to her normal seat when she comes a short time later. Though she does so while feigning anger, and she doesn't say a word to Tommy as the next bell rings.

Mr. Krasner afterward waits for a few stragglers to arrive, and when they do he rises to his feet and picks up the stack of documents. He further tells the class: "Some very solid work here."

Ignoring this, Rudi crosses her arms and looks down.

"It seems we have a lot of admirers of the Danish Prince," the teacher continues, as he starts handing back the papers. "Almost all of you, in fact."

Eventually, the teacher has delivered everything but Rudi's tome. Which he slowly walks over to her while saying, "Of course, there were a few substandard papers."

It's not long before he's standing in front of Rudi, and he drops her paper onto the table, much as he did with the novel on her first day. He also says, "But this wasn't one of those substandard ones."

Surprised, Rudi looks up at him, and she sees his smile. She glances, too, at the stack of pages on the table, and with even more surprise she sees an A+ written on top of it.

"You know," he tells her, "I was a TA at Harvard for many classes, but yet never have I read anything quite like this before. And believe me, I didn't want to like it. To tell the truth, it's too bad Salinger's such a recluse. Because he'd be flattered by this, especially coming from such

a *detractor*.”

Mr. Krasner says this and waddles to the front of the room while telling the class: “Today we’re gonna start Carson McCullers’ *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*.”

Like in the hallway before school, Rudi can’t help turn to Tommy. This time because she’s so happy and has this strange desire to share it with someone. But when she sees this someone smiling at her so proudly, acting on instinct alone she flips him her middle finger. Though this only makes him smile more.

Chapter 37

The moment Calculus class ends Rudi sprints out of the room and to her locker. There she tosses her books onto her English paper, just as a boy with long blond hair stops nearby, with his back against the wall.

This boy glances around, before whispering to Rudi: “I hear you got some shit.”

These words cause Rudi to freeze, and to glance at the bag of joints underneath all her junk. She also glances at the boy, and she can tell by his clothes that he’s got money.

She tells herself that this is her chance — that maybe she can even sell the whole load at once. But she can’t quite convince herself of this. Something’s stopping her, even if she doesn’t know what it is.

“Well,” he mumbles.

“You heard wrong,” she tells him, even if this isn’t what she wants to say.

“But —”

“— Get out of here.”

She says this, but the boy doesn’t move.

"I'm not gonna ask you twice," she tells him, and he hurries off while she silently curses herself. She also grabs her coat and slams her locker door closed, and she turns around. Which is when she sees Tommy staggering toward her.

"What do you want?" she barks.

"I was wondering if I could borrow your English notes from last week," he says.

"Why don't you just borrow the *cheerleader's*?"

"She's not exactly talking to me. And I need your Calculus notes, too."

Rudi sighs, but she hands him her notebook.

"I also need your help," he goes on, and she shoots him a dirty look. "I'm serious," he insists, before pointing down the hall at their classroom and adding, "That stuff she was doing with conics today went right over my head."

"So it is true," Rudi says.

"What's true?" he says back.

"Boys really are bad at math."

"Come on. Can't you spare an hour?"

"Where?"

"My house. I'll copy the notes on my dad's copier and you can explain this hyperbola shit. Then I'll drive you home."

"You think I'm stupid or something?" she growls. "That I don't know what this is all about?"

"But you're not running anymore," he tells her.

She wants to tell him off. She really does. But the two start toward the front passageway together. They do so watched by Owen, who's down the hall and heading to his usual afternoon

destination.

For many days now, Owen has been wondering about karma. He even looked up the word in a dictionary, which wasn't so easy as he thought it began with a C, like his friend Carmen. Then, even after he found the word, he was still kind of confused by it. So, as he watches Rudi and Tommy leave the school, he again wonders about karma. He wonders how he can get himself some — the good kind. He wonders hard.

Meanwhile, Rudi and Tommy slowly make their way outside and into the parking lot, and they stop in front of Tommy's Harley, which surprises Rudi.

"You drive a motorcycle?" she asks.

"What'd you expect?" he asks back.

"A Rolls perhaps."

"Unfortunately," he says to her with a grin, "it's in the shop. Along with the chauffeur." He then climbs onto the bike and utters, "Come on."

"Where?" she utters back.

"To my house!"

"I mean, where am I supposed to sit?"

"Sit behind me," he tells her. But the thought of being so close to Tommy makes Rudi uneasy. It makes her so uneasy that she turns back to the school and says, "We can do all this in the library: the photocopies, the conics . . ."

"It's been tough enough climbing up and down those stairs all day."

"Then we can do it out here. I'll run up and make some copies and then —"

"— "You think I'm stupid or something?" he interrupts. "That I don't know what this is all about?"

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says.

“Yes you do. Come on already. We have a lot to talk about.”

“What about helmets?”

“I like to live dangerously.”

“I bet.”

She’s still hesitant, but she sits behind him anyway. Though she’s careful not to let any of her body touch his.

“I suggest you put your arms around me,” he tells her, with a big grin. “Unless you want to fly out onto the street.”

Rudi sighs, but she puts her arms around Tommy, and she discovers that even touching him through clothes feels good. It feels so good that, without even realizing it, she caresses her cheek against his back. Which feels good to him, too. It feels so good that it makes him blush.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” she mutters.

“You have no idea,” he mutters back. He also speeds off, out of the parking lot and down Valley, and because Rudi has her back to traffic she doesn’t see the passing Porsche. Nor does Deke see her.

The two drive on, and Tommy glides his bike down South Orange Avenue, and he soon approaches Ridgewood Avenue and the same intersection he sped through less than two weeks earlier. But this time when the light turns yellow he doesn’t even maintain his speed, despite knowing he could’ve easily made it. This time he slows and comes to a gentle stop. He further looks back at Rudi, and he sees her resting against him with her eyes closed. Like in the hospital, she looks like an angel to him. Only this time he’s the one doing the hovering, and he wants to never stop.

Though, when the light turns green, the drivers behind him want something else, and a few honk their horns. But Tommy just smiles at them. He smiles and waves, before riding his angel up the mountain.

Chapter 38

Tommy parks the bike by the curb in front of his house, and Rudi opens her eyes. She opens them to the world of Newstead. Previously, she had only seen such houses in pictures or on TV, or in distant passing, and seeing one for real and up close makes her feel not only uncomfortable and out of place, but also a bit frightened. Which only increases as the two approach the house's front door, and this puts her in a foul mood.

"Funny," she utters while glancing at the towering home, "I thought the Taj Mahal was in India."

"That is funny," he utters back, as he unlocks the door and lets her inside.

"Seriously," she goes on, "you must have more money than my whole hometown put together."

"What hometown is that?" he asks, while following her into the foyer.

"Irvington," she tells him, before tossing her seabag by the door.

"I actually go there a lot."

"What, when you're slumming it?"

“Actually, there’s this really great record store on Springfield Avenue.”

“You’re not talking about Vintage Vinyl.”

“As a matter of fact, I am.”

“Get out of here!” she cries out.

“I go there lots,” he insists. “They get lots of great old Yardbirds records.”

“I’ve never seen you there, and I go there like all the time. At least I used to.”

“Ask Butch if you don’t believe me.”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore,” she says, before taking off her coat, which she tosses on top of her bag.

“I can hang that up for you,” he tells her, while pointing at the coat, which has slipped onto the floor.

“I’m not gonna be staying that long.”

He smiles at this, which just makes her madder. He also takes off his own jacket and hangs it in a nearby closet. Which itself is near a bowl of chocolate bars. “You want one?” he asks, after picking up a bar for himself.

She looks at what he’s holding and grimaces, and she bellows, “White chocolate?”

“It’s my favorite,” he says.

“It’s disgusting.”

“You want something to drink?”

Instead of answering, Rudi glances around, and she spots the big wooden staircase and the ornate white railing, and she shuffles off in its direction while saying, “I want to see the rest of this palace.” She soon reaches the steps and starts up them, and she tells Tommy: “Man, this is just like the staircase Scarlett O’Hara had.”

“Not quite,” Tommy insists, as he starts following her, with both difficulty and pain. He follows her just as she begins singing “Happy House.” She even bounces to the music much the way Siouxsie had in her video. She does this until she’s a short distance from the top step, which is when she stops and spins back to Tommy, and she says to him: “Some people say I look a little like her.”

“Who?” he asks.

“*Siouxsie*,” Rudi answers, as if he had just asked the dumbest question in the world.

“Susie who?” Tommy says.

Part of Rudi wants to laugh at this. But the other part is annoyed, and this part wins out, and it growls, “What music do you listen to? I mean, other than the Yardbirds.”

“Lots.”

“For instance?”

“Springsteen, for instance.”

“Oh, my God! I’m gonna chuck! I don’t even think I’ll make it to the bathroom.” Rudi not only says this, but she also starts making a gagging sound while gripping her stomach.

“What’s wrong with Springsteen?” Tommy growls.

“He’s got nothing to say,” Rudi growls back — “that’s what’s wrong with him. That’s the only reason they put him on the radio.”

“You’re wrong,” Tommy insists. “He does have something to say. He says something to me.”

Rudi doesn’t know how to respond to this. So she just stands there and stewes.

“Can we go back downstairs now?” Tommy adds, suddenly feeling as uncomfortable as her.

“After you show me the rest of the estate,” she tells him. She further spins around and shoots up the rest of the stairs, before coming to a sharp stop at the top. Which is where she glares at a framed picture hanging on the wall. She glares at it in horror. “Now, I’m really gonna chuck,” she cries out.

“Now what?” he cries back, before stopping behind her.

She nods, toward an autographed photo of Ronald Reagan, and she says, “What a surprise — you’re a Reagan fuck.”

“My dad actually knew him,” Tommy tells her, while pointing to a picture nearby, of a smiling and handsome middle-aged man in a yellow Izod shirt.

“You don’t say?” she gasps, as irreverently as possible.

“They weren’t big friends or anything, but when my dad died he called my mom. He spoke to her for twenty minutes — the president of the United States. He could’ve just sent a card. Nobody would’ve blamed him. So, yeah, I’m a Reagan fuck.”

Tommy’s revelation about his father makes Rudi think about her own parents, or lack of them, and her expression not only softens but she also lowers her eyes. She does this and murmurs, “When did he die, your dad?”

“Over the summer,” he tells her, while glancing down at her eyes.

“Sorry,” she mumbles.

“You never get over it.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Once more feeling uncomfortable, Rudi turns around, and she marches down the big hallway. She further points to a door at the end of it and says, “Whose room is that?”

“My parents’,” he says back, while trying to keep up with her. “I mean, my mother’s.”

A few steps later, Rudi stops in front of the door, and she puts her hand on the knob and says to Tommy: "You should see the shit in my foster parents' bedroom. It would make the Marquis de Sade blush." She says this and opens the door, and she takes a step inside the room.

"Don't go in there," Tommy begs. But she continues inside anyway, before coming to a halting stop. She does because the place is something out of a fairy tale, with an antique king-sized bed and a crystal chandelier, and all sorts of expensive artwork and furniture.

"Man," she mutters, "your mom must be the Queen of Navarre."

"Not even close," he growls. "Can we go now?"

"Why?"

"My mother wouldn't like it."

"*My mother wouldn't like it*," she retorts in falsetto, before stepping back into the room, followed by Tommy. "You a momma's boy?" she barks.

"No," he barks back.

"You always do what she says?"

"No."

"Tell me one time you didn't. Just one."

"I . . . I don't know. It's not like she's fucking Joan Crawford. What am I supposed to do, rebel for no good reason like you?"

"Those sound like fighting words, Tommy!"

"Fuck you!"

"I'm not making you uncomfortable, am I?"

He doesn't reply to this. He just keeps following her, with his face reddening with every step.

“You know,” she goes on, “you get a big kick out of making me uncomfortable. You do it all the time. But you don’t like it when it’s done to you.”

“I was never trying to make you uncomfortable.”

Rudi can’t respond to this. She can’t because she backs into a long closet door, and she reacts by spinning toward it, and she starts to open it. But Tommy grabs her arm. He grabs it and says, “Don’t.”

“Why — are there dead bodies inside?” She says this and shakes off his hand, and she thrusts open the closet. Which exposes countless dresses and at least that many pairs of shoes.

“Wow,” she whispers. “I’ll never have this many clothes in a lifetime.” She then starts walking along the length of the closet while caressing the materials.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Tommy tells her.

“Sure,” she tells him back, “coming from someone who has everything.”

Rudi continues on until she reaches one dress in particular: a white-lace wedding gown with a long train, which is wrapped in plastic. She stops and gazes at this dress while pretending she doesn’t find it beautiful and breathtaking. Like the room, it’s something out of a fairy tale.

“They should make these things in stripes,” she utters.

“Stripes?” he utters back.

“Prison stripes.”

“I see.”

“You certainly won’t see me wearing one,” she says, but she actually does see it. She sees herself wearing this same dress, posing with a big smile on her face, and this horrifies her.

“Is something wrong?” he asks.

“What?” she asks back, before turning to him.

“Can we please go now?”

“Where? Out of this room, or out of this house?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you see how wrong we are together? How I don’t fit in your world? How I’d embarrass the shit out of you?”

“I’m not embarrassed!” he hollers.

“You’re not embarrassed?” she cries out. “You look like you want to spit in my face!”

“It’s you who’s doing all the spitting! What’s gotten into you? One minute you’re normal and the next you’re fucking Sid Vicious!”

“I’ve never been normal in my whole life! And I never will be!”

Tommy lowers his eyes in response. He also turns from Rudi. He does all this because he’s beginning to think she’s right — that they are just ridiculous together. Which makes him look both sad and vulnerable. Something she finds attractive. She finds it so attractive that without thinking she takes his hand.

At this same moment, everything flies out of Tommy’s head, especially his doubts about her, as all he can think about is her hand on top of his and how good it feels — how it makes him feel indomitable.

Rudi feels this, too. She feels it but ignores it, and she tells him: “I don’t want to hurt you, but I will. It’s just my nature, like the scorpion in that fable. So let’s just call it a day, shall we?”

It’s then she releases his hand. She does this both slowly and reluctantly. Which is how she starts out of the room, too. But she doesn’t get very far, as he grabs her hand.

“Let go of me,” she orders.

“No,” he tells her.

“Are you fucking crazy? Don’t you realize I can kill you?”

“Believe me, I know,” he says with a smile. “But I have just one more thing to say to you.”

“What’s that?”

He answers by spinning her into his arms, and he kisses her, which causes them both to shut their eyes. At the same time, he feels himself ignite. She feels it, too, but tries to will it away. She even feigns resistance. Though she doesn’t feign much, and before long she doesn’t even do that, as her whole body is on fire, with the flames raising her off the ground. Then she feels his fingers and hands — on her back and spine, smothering them and sending her even higher. Now acting on instinct alone, she claws his shoulders, ripping them apart. She further wraps her legs around his waist as they shoot past everywhere.

This is when the music begins. The same music she heard in her bedroom, with the same gentle but steady trombone whose beat matches her heart. Which causes her eyes to open, and she sees that she’s back in her dream. She’s back in the large and dusty old hall, amid dozens of shabbily dressed dancers. The orchestra is there, too, led by the same tall bespectacled man with the trombone. Also, like in her dream, her arms are desperately clinging to someone she’s dancing with but can’t see, as his cheek is pressed against hers.

“Tommy?” Rudi mumbles. “Do you see what I see?”

Right away Tommy opens his eyes, and he sees the hall that he dreamed, too, and he mutters, “I . . .”

“What’s happening to us?” she asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Are we really crazy?”

“Yeah,” he murmurs, with a smile that replicates on her face. “A good crazy maybe.”

“What is this place?” she gasps.

“It looks, it looks like a dance hall, I think. My grandparents used to go to places like this. Yours, too, probably. And that music, it’s called ‘Moonlight Serenade’ by Glenn Miller. My grandma used to listen to this all day long, on one of those old 78 players. I remember how she always kept it on repeat. I also remember as a kid just sitting outside her room listening to it, over and over, and never once getting tired of it.”

Glancing around the hall, Tommy spots the orchestra, and the tall bespectacled man, and he points at him while whispering, “I could almost swear that’s really Glenn Miller.”

“You wanna know what’s crazier?” Rudi whispers back.

“What?”

“I had a dream about this place. Only it, it wasn’t a dream. It was like a daydream or something. Like when I saw you on that football field. I mean, everything was in the dream: the song, the dance hall, . . .”

“Me?”

“Maybe. Oh, Tommy, I must be losing my mind!”

“Yeah.”

“It’s not funny!”

“It’s something way better.”

“Tommy, what is all this?”

“I just told you.”

“No, I mean, what is it really?”

“I think some people call it . . .”

“I don’t believe it. I don’t even believe in God. I don’t believe in anything.”

“I’m not sure what I believe. So I’m just gonna feel from now on.”

Slowly, they pull back their heads, and they look into each other’s eyes. Then, while closing these eyes, they kiss again. This time much sweeter than before. Though this gets interrupted, by the sound of someone clearing their throat.

At once, they break their kiss and open their eyes, and they find themselves back in Mrs. Goodwin’s bedroom. But that isn’t the only thing they find. They also find Mrs. Goodwin, who’s glaring at them with her hands on her hips.

Rudi reacts to this by releasing her arms and legs from around Tommy, and she crashes to the floor, with her face redder than a beet. Tommy’s face is this shade, too, and while straightening himself up his mind fumbles for an excuse.

“Sorry to disturb you,” Mrs. Goodwin growls through her clenched teeth, as she watches Rudi climb to her feet. She also shakes her head and grimaces — at Rudi’s hair and makeup, and her clothes.

“Sorry about all this, Mom,” Tommy says, with his eyes averted.

“Well,” his mother says to him, “it’s just fortunate for all of us that I didn’t come about ten minutes later.”

“It’s not like that, Mom, really.”

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to, to your friend?”

“This is Rudi, my girl —”

“— His friend,” Rudi interrupts, before timidly reaching out her hand toward Mrs. Goodwin. “I’m his friend. Sorta.”

Reluctantly, Mrs. Goodwin takes hold of Rudi’s fingers for just a second, with the look of

someone picking up after a dog. “Will Rudi be staying for dinner?” she then asks.

“No,” Rudi answers. But Tommy answers “Yes” much louder, which causes Rudi to turn to him and glare.

“Yes, by all means stay for dinner, Rudi,” Mrs. Goodwin insists. “I’m just dying to know more about you.”

Chapter 39

Mrs. Goodwin can't wait until dinner to find out more about her son's new "friend," as Rudi's incongruence is just overwhelming her.

This leads her into the hallway, where she spots the two teens far off in the living room with their backs to her, and she tiptoes to the foyer and to Rudi's white seabag. Which was the first thing she saw when she got home and which piqued her interest even then. But now it's more than just piquing it, so after checking to see if she's alone she kneels beside it. Then, with just a bit of reluctance, she opens the bag and sifts through its contents. She does this while keeping an eye in the direction of the living room.

At first, she finds nothing unusual: just a notepad and pens, along with some cassette tapes and makeup. But she keeps on sifting, and she digs, too, and when she gets to the bottom of the bag she finally finds something interesting: a key chain stuck in the stitching of the bag, with the letters "NA" printed on it.

Meanwhile, Rudi anxiously sits next to Tommy on the living room couch, with his big white calculus book sitting on the coffee table in front of them. She's anxious for lots of reasons,

and not just because the incident in the bedroom is making her believe that she's losing her mind.

"This is not a good idea," she tells Tommy.

"What's not?" he asks.

"Staying for dinner."

"Why not?"

"Your mother doesn't like me. And if I were her, I wouldn't like me, either."

"What are you talking about? She invited you to dinner."

"I'm going home."

"Have you forgotten that you just called Mrs. Cross?"

"So?"

"So didn't you tell me that they always eat at six?"

"So?"

"So you'll miss dinner."

"I'm not hungry!"

"What about Calculus?"

"Fuck Calculus!"

It's then the two hear footsteps, and they turn toward them, and they see Mrs. Goodwin passing on her way from the foyer. They also see the woman glaring at Rudi.

"She hates me," Rudi whispers.

"She doesn't hate you," Tommy insists. "It's just that you remind her of someone real close."

"It's hard to believe that there's someone like me."

"You'd be surprised."

“Listen, Tommy, we had . . . whatever the fuck that was. Man, I’ve tripped out on just about everything, but nothing was ever like that.”

“Yeah,” he says, with a big smile on his face.

“It was beautiful,” she says back, with a reluctant smile of her own. “I’ll admit it. But it doesn’t change anything.”

“How about some TV?” he asks, while picking up a remote from the coffee table.

“I hate TV,” she growls, before crossing her arms and turning away from both him and the set.

Ignoring this, he flips on the TV. While he has many channels to choose from, including HBO and a new one all his friends have been watching called MTV, he turns the television to a little show on a little UHF station. This show features a little man in a bow tie, who’s also wearing a checkered suit and a fedora, and who’s talking to a puppet about how Squeeze will be performing later in the show.

Surprised, Rudi lowers her arms and turns toward the screen, and she utters, “Except this.”

“What?” he mumbles, and she glances at him and says, “You really watch Uncle Floyd?”

He doesn’t answer, so glued is he to the screen, and the two continue watching. Suddenly, they break out into laughter, at the same time and with the same intensity. Which causes them to slowly turn to each other.

“It doesn’t change anything,” she insists.

“What about this?” he asks, as he brushes the back of his fingers against her cheek. Which drives her back into flight.

“Dinner is almost ready!” Mrs. Goodwin calls out from down the hall.

Right away Rudi jumps to her feet, happy that the woman has saved her. She also hustles toward the dining room, followed by Tommy. There the three sit at the table a short distance from each other, in front of a formal table setting that mystifies Rudi.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many utensils,” she mumbles.

“We don’t usually eat so formally,” Tommy says from the head of the table, while glaring at his mother, fully understanding her intentions of making Rudi as uncomfortable as possible.

“I thought it would be a nice change,” Mrs. Goodwin insists.

Not believing her, Tommy keeps up his glare, and he says to Rudi: “It’s real simple. As the courses come, just use the utensils farthest from you.”

“Why don’t we just use the same utensils?” Rudi says. “What’s the big deal?”

Mrs. Goodwin laughs at this, and does so derisively, before saying, “You eat any which way you want, my dear. I mean, if I were to invite a leopard into my house, I certainly wouldn’t expect it to change its spots on my account.”

Rudi responds to this, by biting her tongue, and so does Tommy, who’s beginning to boil, knowing that his mother was making his already difficult task even harder. “Why don’t we just go to Reservoir,” he utters.

“What’s Reservoir?” Rudi utters back.

“The best restaurant in the world.”

“Hardly,” Mrs. Goodwin interjects, with a bit of a sneer. “Besides, Elizabeth has prepared a big meal.”

“Who’s Elizabeth?” Rudi asks.

Seemingly in reply, Elizabeth steps inside the room from the kitchen, carrying a tray of

pipin-hot parsley soup. Which makes Rudi dizzy from the smell. Having grown up mostly with TV dinners and fast food, the aroma coming toward her is something unrecognizable. But being served by someone also discomforts her, and she tries to hide this with a joke: “Now I know where they got the idea for *Upstairs Downstairs*.”

This causes Elizabeth to smile. Which she hides when she sees Mrs. Goodwin glaring at Rudi.

“Thank you, Elizabeth,” Mrs. Goodwin utters through her clenched teeth, right before the woman finishes serving and returns to the kitchen. Which is when Mrs. Goodwin notices Rudi staring at her soup, and she tells her: “I should warn you, Rudi, my son’s been on a weird fad of late, which I’ve unfortunately humored.”

“What are you talking about?” Rudi says, after lifting her eyes toward the woman.

“He doesn’t eat meat.”

More than surprised by this, Rudi spins toward Tommy. She does this because she’s known almost no one who doesn’t eat meat, and she never expected Tommy to be one of them. “You’re a vegetarian?” she mutters.

“Yeah,” he tells her. “Crazy, isn’t it? Me, a big bad football player.”

Rudi just shrugs, and she turns from him.

“If you want,” Tommy goes on, “we can have Elizabeth make you something. I mean, it doesn’t bother me that other people eat meat. It’s just a personal thing.”

“I’m fine,” Rudi insists, hoping to change the subject, as it’s just one more contradiction spoiling her perfect fantasy about how she and Tommy are so different.

“So, Tommy,” says Mrs. Goodwin, “tell me: where did you meet this, this friend of yours?”

“We have English together,” Tommy answers.

“Really?” the woman utters, unable to hide her surprise. “I thought you were taking AP English.”

“I am. Rudi’s actually the smartest person in the class.”

“That’s not true,” Rudi growls, while watching Tommy and his mother pick up their soup spoons. Which is just before she picks up hers.

“Krasner gave her an A+ today,” Tommy goes on, with lots of pride. “He’s never given me or anyone else in class anything higher than a B. And you should’ve seen the size of her paper. It was bigger than a boat.”

“*Tommy*,” Rudi mutters, with lots of embarrassment.

“She’s also in my Calculus class,” he continues. “She’s the smartest one there, too. Her first day the teacher put up this differential equation on the board that she said took her twenty minutes to solve. Rudi solved it in like five seconds.”

“You’re exaggerating,” Rudi insists.

“Okay, so maybe it was more like ten seconds.”

“Well,” says Mrs. Goodwin, “I guess it’s true what they say: looks can be deceiving. Speaking of which, Rudi, do you actually pay someone to do that to your hair?”

Rudi wants to sneer at this. She wants to sneer so badly. But instead she forces a smile and whispers to Tommy: “I really think I should go. Before I say something . . .”

She can’t finish her thought. She can’t because Tommy puts his hand on her wrist, and she can’t think of anything other than this.

“Never mind my mom,” he tells her, while again glaring at his mother. “This is just her way of kidding around. Just like how you kid around with me.”

“Who’s kidding?” she tells him back, after jerking away her hand.

“I didn’t catch your last name, Rudi,” Mrs. Goodwin utters.

Rudi tells her, and the answer surprises Mrs. Goodwin. It surprises her so much that she’s speechless for a moment, and when this finally passes, she blurts out, “You’re Jewish?”

“Why would you think I was Jewish?” answers Rudi, with lots of confusion.

“Are you?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t think so.”

“How can you not know?”

“She doesn’t have a family,” Tommy murmurs. “She’s staying with Mr. Cross.”

“I see,” continues his mother, with a knowing nod. “I’ve heard all about him and the children he takes in. It’s quite admirable. But, Rudi, I’m completely serious. Weiss is a Jewish name.”

“It is?” Rudi asks. “I thought it was German for ‘white.’”

“It’s also a very common Jewish name. There are a number of Weisses, in fact, at our temple.”

“You know,” Tommy says to Rudi, “I have heard you say ‘*Oy vey*.’”

“That’s Jewish?” Rudi says back.

“It’s Yiddish,” Mrs. Goodwin tells her.

“Really? I don’t even know where I picked that up from. So maybe I am Jewish. Does it matter?”

Rudi says this, and she takes a sip of the soup, and she slurps it a bit, too, and she sees Mrs. Goodwin staring at her.

“Sorry,” she mumbles.

But it isn't the noise that's got Mrs. Goodwin's attention. It's the realization that Rudi isn't just some joke Tommy is bemusing himself with. She's anything but a joke. Which to her means that she could be a threat. Maybe even a dangerous one, and she feels compelled to squash it.

"Tommy," she says with a forced smile, "you'll never guess who I saw at the Short Hills Mall the other day: Darlene. Talk about flawless. So unlike . . . anything else."

These last words and the way the woman sneers at Rudi as she says them cause Rudi's simmering insecurities to begin to surface. Which both Mrs. Goodwin and Tommy notice. They notice her avert her eyes, and they notice her drop her spoon.

"Stop it," Tommy growls at his mother.

"Just telling it like I see it," his mother insists. "I'm sure Rudi sees it, too. Don't you?"

This time Rudi does sneer at the woman. Which is the only thing keeping her together, and she tells Tommy: "I'm sorry, but I'm feeling very uncomfortable."

"Me, too," he tells her back.

"And this is just a small taste of what we'd get if we went together."

"*Went together?*" Mrs. Goodwin gasps.

"You think my friends would like you any more than she likes me?" Rudi goes on.

"Well," Mrs. Goodwin interrupts, "I certainly hope I didn't give you the impression that I don't like you, Rudi. It's just —"

"— Look, Mrs. Goodwin," Rudi interrupts back, while desperately trying to remain in one piece, "despite what you saw earlier, and despite what Tommy thinks he feels, there's really nothing serious going on between us."

"Nothing but Glenn Miller," Tommy interjects.

“Glenn Miller?” Mrs. Goodwin utters.

“But that’s nothing serious,” Tommy goes on, with something of a snarl. “Just because we share the same music and the same dreams, and think and feel alike. I mean, it’s not like anything happens when I take her hand.”

To prove this, he snatches Rudi’s hand and he feels her tremble, and she feels him do the same, and this upsets her much more than anything Mrs. Goodwin has said. It makes her feel powerless. To fight this, with her voice breaking she mumbles, “Next week, Tommy, next week you’ll find another cheerleader. Or, or some Reagan fuck.”

“Excuse me?” Mrs. Goodwin howls.

“I’m not talking to you!” Rudi howls back, while pointing her finger at the woman.

“Why —” Mrs. Goodwin begins.

“— Just look at me, Tommy!” Rudi cries out. “And not just at my hair or my makeup or my clothes. Look at who I am. I’ll never be the girlfriend of someone like you. Let’s not kid ourselves, I, I’ll never be the girlfriend of anyone!”

Feeling herself coming apart, Rudi jumps up, and she rushes off.

Tommy jumps up, too.

“Let her go,” Mrs. Goodwin orders.

“Shut up!” he screams, before running after Rudi, with his mother watching in shock.

He catches up with Rudi by the front door, where he sees her fighting back tears as she hurriedly throws on her overcoat, and wanting to somehow make things right, he takes hold of her arms.

“Let go of me!” she hollers, before pushing him away and grabbing her bag.

“I’ll drive you home,” he tells her.

“Just let me be!” she screams, after wiping her eyes. “Why can’t you just let me be? I was doing just fine until I met you. I never used to get so emotional, and now look at me — I’m all fucked up!”

She says this and rushes out the door into the emptiness of the night, watched by Tommy, who watches her until she’s out of sight, and even then he can’t stop watching.

Chapter 40

Tommy's fuming when he returns to the dining room and to his mother, even after waiting some time to cool off. Never has he felt such anger.

"Really, Tommy," Mrs. Goodwin says, while ignoring this anger. "I certainly understand about rebelling. I did a lot of it when I was your age. Perhaps worse than this. Yes, absolutely worse. But this, this . . ."

"I'm not rebelling," he howls. "And she's not a 'this.'"

"She's a drug addict!"

"How, how'd you know that?"

"I . . . it doesn't matter."

"It does!"

"I found one of her key chains, from Narcotics Anonymous. The same kind my cousin Mickey used to have."

"Found it where?"

"It doesn't matter."

“Where-did-you-find-it?” Tommy screams.

“In her bag!” his mother screams back.

“You went through her bag?”

“I’d do worse to protect my son! Much worse!”

“You don’t understand,” he mumbles, while shaking his head.

“I blame myself actually,” she tells him. “I should’ve sent you to Pingry when I had the chance.”

“You don’t understand,” he repeats.

“What don’t I understand?” she growls.

“I love her,” he says, surprising even himself with these words, as he’s never used them before, not even in his thoughts.

“*Love?*” his mother utters with a sneer. “What do you know about love? You’re not even 18.”

“How old was Romeo?”

“That’s just a stupid play! I’m talking about the real world here, Tommy — and it’s about time for you to grow up and join it. She’s totally wrong for you, in every possible way. Now, Darlene —”

“— Fuck Darlene!”

“Where did you get this language all of a sudden? From that, that . . .”

“Her name’s Rudi!”

“I don’t care what her name is!” the woman yells, in the same harsh accent that came out of her in the hospital when she was upset.

“I love her, Mom. Can’t you understand that? Sure you can. I know you loved Dad. It

wasn't about his money or material things or anything like that. You *loved* him."

"That was different! I wasn't 17! And your father was someone! He was someone special!"

"So's she! She's so fucking special! She's the first thing I've ever cared about. The first thing that's ever made me care!"

"There will be others."

"Will there be others for you?"

"That's different!"

"Next time she's here," he says, while pointing his finger at his mother, "you're gonna treat her with some respect!"

"There won't be a next time!" Mrs. Goodwin hollers, before pounding her fist onto the table and rising. "She's never setting foot in this house again!"

"Fine, then I'll go to her house!"

"No, you won't!"

"You can't stop me!"

"I've been far too lenient with you, obviously. But no more! You're not gonna see her again!"

"You can't tell me what to do!"

"I can, as long as you're in my house!"

"Fine."

He says this and walks off.

"Where you going?" she demands. But there's no answer. So she follows him. She follows him to his room, and in the doorway she looks inside and sees him packing a large

backpack. Watching this makes her think back to when someone else she loved left her, which causes her to begin falling apart. Though she tries hard not to show this.

“Running away?” she gasps.

He doesn’t answer.

“You haven’t done that since you were 12,” she goes on.

“I’m not 12 anymore,” he tells her.

“You could’ve fooled me.”

“I’ll be at Barry’s.”

“I don’t understand what’s gotten into you,” she utters, while shaking her head.

“Yeah, you do,” he utters back. “My guess is that you must’ve felt the same exact thing once. And you probably would’ve done just what I’m doing.”

“You’d do this to me after what just happened to your father?” she cries out, with her voice cracking. “You’d leave me by myself alone?”

“I didn’t do anything,” he says, before putting on the backpack and walking toward her.

“You leave now and you’re never coming back!” she tells him.

He doesn’t say anything in reply. But he does stop in front of her.

“I’ll cut you off from me for good!” she adds.

“If you weren’t so pigheaded,” he tells her, “you’d realize just how much you and Rudi are alike.”

“How could you say such a thing!” she screeches, with an expression of disgust.

He doesn’t reply to this. He just steps past her. Though he soon again stops, and he whispers, “It’s true. She is a lot like you. I’m talking about the real you, underneath the expensive clothes and affected language. I’m talking about the person you’re always trying to

forget. I mean, come on, Mom, why do you think I'm so damn attracted to her?"

There's no answer, and Tommy starts off.

"I mean it!" Mrs. Goodwin yells. "Don't even think of coming back after she spits you out!"

This causes Tommy to once again come to a stop, right by the ornate staircase, and he says to her: "I love you, Mom. I don't always like you, but I'll always love you."

Chapter 41

Rudi is hustling down a dark and quiet side street when she realizes that she doesn't know where she is.

Because her eyes had been closed the entire way to Tommy's house, she's now lost, and as this fully hits her she comes to a stop and spins in a circle, looking for something that might indicate where she is. But in the moonless night she sees nothing. She's not even sure if she could retrace her steps back to the house.

It's then she hears sounds behind her. The sound of a dog collar along with the sound of footsteps. So she turns toward these sounds, and she sees a little old woman walking a little old dog, and she sprints toward them. Which sends the woman into fright, because of Rudi's hair and makeup. But when she sees the girl's teary face, another instinct kicks in — a much stronger one, and she murmurs, "Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"I'm lost," Rudi says, knowing right then that the words have more than one meaning.

"Where do you want to go?" asks the woman.

"Where am I exactly?"

“South Orange.”

“I need to be in Maplewood.”

“Where in Maplewood?”

“Lewis Drive. It’s right above Wyoming.”

“Oh, that’s easy. Just walk down this road until the very end. That’ll be South Orange Avenue. Then, make a left. Yes, a left. And at the first light you see take a right. That’s Wyoming. And after you go down that road a bit you’ll be in Maplewood.”

“Thank you so much!” Rudi cries out, and she almost hugs the woman. But she stops herself at the last second and scurries off, with the woman staring at her while trying to make some sense of the enigma that had just been in front of her.

What’s in front of Rudi is a long walk, which is accompanied by the Slits. But no matter how often she listens to “Love Und Romance” — or how loudly she sings it — she can’t regain her cynicism. Which is when she knows that she’s really lost — that there’s no help for her at all. The only consolation is that she also knows that she’s alive — more so than she’s ever been. She feels as if she’s about to explode out of her skin.

Eventually, she’s in front of her house, and she steps inside and finds the entire family in the living room, gazing at *Monday Night Football* as if in a trance. So they don’t notice her, and she tiptoes inside the kitchen — and feeling the need to talk with someone — she picks up the phone and calls Maria.

But Mr. Gonzalez answers, and she hangs up. Though she still needs to talk to someone. So she dials another number without thinking.

“Hello?” her stepfather says on the other end of the line.

Rudi doesn’t reply.

“Is someone there?” he asks, and a moment later there isn’t.

Chapter 42

With sleepless eyes Rudi approaches the school in the morning, and she sees Tommy in the parking lot leaning against his Harley, with his arms crossed and his head down.

Still, he sees her. But he doesn't react other than to cough a bit. He knows he'll have to be both patient and hopeful, and he's willing to be both, because she's worth it.

Rudi ignores him. She ignores him in the parking lot and she ignores him in English class, where she avoids looking in his direction. Then later on, when she shuffles through the center aisle of the cafeteria with her tray of starchy vegetables, she refuses to look in the direction of the table where he always sits. Though she knows his eyes are on her. She can feel them.

Darlene's eyes are also on her, from a few seats over, and they are loaded with hate. But Rudi doesn't see this, either. Instead, she sits with her three friends in the back of the lunchroom.

"You okay?" Philip asks her.

"Sure," she says, while picking at her food.

"You don't look okay," Doug says back.

"We're not gonna go through this again, are we?" she growls.

“Hey,” comes a nervous voice from nearby.

Surprised, Rudi turns and looks up, and she sees Maria standing there, with a smile even more nervous than her voice. She’s also carrying a tray of food, next to a tall red-haired girl who’s got her lunch, too.

“Hey,” Rudi utters.

“This, this is Samantha,” Maria mumbles, while pointing to the redhead.

“Oh, hey,” Rudi tells the girl.

“Hey,” Samantha mutters, while looking as nervous as Maria, if not more so.

“Well, what are you two standing around for?” Rudi says to them.

Both girls smile at this, and they sit next to Rudi.

Meanwhile, Darlene turns her eyes from Rudi and toward the same well dressed blond boy who had been at Rudi’s locker the day before, who’s near the tray collection area with his back against the wall.

“I’ll be right back,” she says, to no one in particular, as she picks up her tray and struts off to the collection area, where she puts her tray down. Though afterward she doesn’t move. She just stands there facing forward, a short distance from the blond boy.

“Well?” she whispers.

“No deal,” he whispers back.

“Shit.”

“But I’m pretty sure I saw weed in her locker.”

“Pretty sure?”

“I’m sure. A big bag of joints.”

“All right.”

“And my payment?” he asks.

“You’ll get it,” she tells him. “Right after she’s busted.”

The boy smiles at this, and he shakes his fist before skipping off, and he isn’t the only one excited. Darlene’s excited, too, and as she struts back to her table, she can see how good she’ll look with Tommy at the prom, and afterward, too.

From just behind her, the cafeteria doors swing open, and Mr. Gonzalez steps inside. Right away he sees Maria sitting with Rudi. Which causes a fury to shoot through him, along with a determination to end his daughter’s budding friendship now and for good. To this end, he marches toward them.

Then, something happens. Something that causes him to stop in shock. He sees his daughter laugh, and it’s not just an ordinary laugh. It’s a wild and crazy laugh. A happy laugh. A laugh that just amazes him.

When Maria was little, she laughed all the time, and her father could never get enough of it. He would often sit somewhere nearby and just watch it. It was something so remarkable to him — a miracle he somehow helped create. But as the years went on, there was less and less of this miracle, and then it was gone. He thought forever. But there it is once more, just a short distance away, and he can’t help enjoy it. He even begins to smile.

Chapter 43

Rudi pushes her way through the front doors of the school, along with Maria and Samantha, but the three come to a stop when they see Tommy in the parking lot. Like that morning, he's leaning against his bike with his arms crossed and his head down, and he's again coughing a bit.

"So?" Maria utters.

"So?" Rudi utters back.

"So are you gonna talk to him or what?"

"The plan right now is to ignore him. After all, it's only a few hundred days until graduation."

"Hmmm, I seem to recall someone talking to me about cowardice."

"*Oy vey*," Rudi mutters, while shaking her head. "That's really playing dirty."

"Yeah," Maria mutters back, with a big grin.

"Some friend you are," Rudi adds, after sighing and before slithering toward Tommy.

"I'll call you tonight," Maria calls out, with her grin still on her face. Which only gets

bigger when she turns to Samantha.

Also turning is Owen, who's sitting in his usual after-school hangout. He turns toward Darlene, who steps into the detention room. They then both glance at each other, right before Darlene stops at Mr. Thompson's desk.

"Can I help you?" he asks.

"Can I speak to you for a second?" she whispers, while again glancing at Owen. She further nods toward the door and adds, "Out there?"

The teacher gives her a skeptical look, but he rises anyway, and the two walk out the room.

Watching them, Owen feels a strange curiosity, and this curiosity is strong enough to send him tiptoeing across the room to the edge of the doorway, where he waits with his back against the wall.

"What is it?" Mr. Thompson softly asks Darlene in the hallway.

"Let's say I knew someone at school was dealing drugs . . ." Darlene softly begins.

"Who?"

"I'm not sure I should say."

"Darlene, if you don't tell me, you're just as guilty."

"It's Rudi. Rudi Weiss."

"I can't say that it's much of a surprise."

"She's got a whole bunch of weed in her locker."

"Come with me."

"But . . ."

"Just come with me!"

Hearing footsteps heading away from him, Owen peeks his head out the doorway, and he sees Mr. Thompson dragging Darlene by the arm toward the school offices. He sees this, but he's not sure what to do about it. Part of him wants to shrug and mind his own business, but the other part — recalling a certain Sanskrit word — leads him to the windows by the side of the classroom, where he sees Rudi approaching Tommy in the parking lot.

This is when Mr. Thompson drags Darlene inside the school offices to the front desk, and he says to the secretary: "I need to speak to Mr. Gonthalez. It's important."

"He just went to Ralph's to get a soda," the woman tells him.

"This can't wait. Call the police."

"The police?"

"Now!"

Hesitantly, the woman reaches for the phone, just as Rudi stops in front of Tommy, who still has his arms crossed and who still has his head down. He's also still coughing a bit.

"Hey," she mutters.

"Hey," he mutters back, without looking up or uncrossing his arms.

"I guess you must be in the doghouse because of me."

"Actually, I got thrown out of the doghouse."

"What?" Rudi utters, with lots of surprise and some concern, too.

"Or perhaps I just left the doghouse," Tommy continues. "I'm not sure which. And I'm not sure it really matters."

"What happened?"

"It's all right. I'm staying with my uncle in Short Hills."

These words send an image into Rudi's head, of a town as wealthy as Newstead. So she

can't help smirk and say, "Now you're really slumming it."

Tommy smirks, too, and he finally looks up at her. He even uncrosses his arms.

"Can we be friends?" she asks. Something that makes Tommy cringe. She also cringes, right before adding, "Ugghhh, that sounded really bad."

Tommy shrugs.

"I didn't mean it like that," she insists. "I mean for now. You see, I don't know, it's just I'm feeling totally overwhelmed. And not just by all our differences or by your mother, or those crazy dreams, or whatever they are. This is really new to me."

"What is?" he asks.

"Getting close," she mumbles, while averting her eyes.

"I don't understand."

"Everyone thinks, because of the way I look and act and talk, that I must've done everything. And that's almost true. But what's really true is that I've worked really hard at not letting anyone get close. I'm not sure, but I think it's because of my mom and all. I just don't want to get hurt."

"I would never hurt you," he tells her.

"You can't know that for sure," she tells him back.

"I can."

"You're not making this any easier on me."

"Rudi —"

"— I want you to be my friend for right now. My special friend."

These words brighten Tommy up a little, and he says, "What exactly does that mean?"

"I have no idea," she says back, with something of a grin. "We're just gonna have to

wing it.”

Tommy grins, too, and he’s in such a state that he doesn’t notice Owen waving his arms while trying to get his attention from the detention room window. Though Owen then notices the three boys, who have just come out of the school, and he opens the window.

“Hey, guys!” he quietly shouts.

This causes the three to stop, and they turn to Owen, with lots of fear.

“Get Rudi for me,” Owen continues, while pointing at her.

Uncertain what to do, the boys turn to each other.

“It’s important,” Owen insists. “Come on, hurry up!”

The three think it over, just as a smiling Tommy climbs onto his Harley, with an equally smiling Rudi watching him.

“You want a lift home?” he asks.

“Sure,” she says to him, before jumping onto the back of his bike. She further drapes her arms around him, and her face glows as he revs the engine.

“Rudi!” Philip cries out, from just behind her.

Tommy reacts to this by cutting the engine, and the three boys, who are equally out of breath, stop in front of them.

“What’s wrong?” Rudi asks.

Doug answers, by pointing toward the window of the detention room and blurting out, “Owen wants to speak to you.”

“He says it’s important,” Eliot adds.

Rudi pauses in thought, before getting off the bike.

“It’s gotta be some kind of trap,” Tommy says to her.

“Nah,” she says back. “Not even he is that stupid.”

“You want me to go with you?”

“Just go home,” she tells him, and she starts toward the school, with Tommy watching her. Part of him wants to jump off the Harley and run after her. But the other part is wiser. It knows this would only be counterproductive. Though he isn’t about to go anywhere, either.

Slowly, Rudi approaches the detention room, still a good distance from Owen, who’s frantically waving her toward him. Then, as she passes the front doors of the school, a police car pulls up in front of the building, and Rudi turns toward it, and she sees two policeman rush out of the vehicle and burst into the school.

“Come on, hurry up!” Owen cries out.

Feeling a sudden burst of fright, Rudi spins to Owen, and she runs up to him and asks him what’s wrong.

“That Darlene girl,” he whispers, after glancing back at the classroom door, “she just narced you.”

“Shit!” Rudi howls. She further looks back at the police car and adds another invective, right before sprinting toward the school doors. Which she does while yelling out to Owen: “I owe you big time!”

“Is this the good karma?” he yells back.

Rudi doesn’t answer. She just slams her hands into the one of the front doors and runs down the short passageway leading to the long corridor, where she stops and turns to her left. There she sees standing by her locker Darlene, along with Mr. Thompson, the two cops, and dozens of students.

“That’s the one,” Mr. Thompson says to one of the cops while pointing to Rudi’s locker

with an index card, and the cop steps up to the locker and asks, “What’s the combination?”

“Wait!” Rudi howls from behind them, and everyone turns toward her, and they watch her jump in front of her locker with her arms spread out. They also hear her add, “You can’t do this!”

“Why not?” the cop barks.

“Because there’s something called a Constitution!” she barks back. “And the Fourth fucking Amendment!”

“Who are you?”

“That’s Weiss,” interjects Mr. Thompson, and the cop pushes Rudi from the locker and says to her: “Get out of my way before I arrest you for obstruction of justice.” He then asks the teacher once again for the combination to the locker.

“21-36-18,” the man says, while reading from the index card, and the cop repeats these numbers and turns the lock’s dial.

In response all Rudi can do is lower her eyes while thinking of all the consequences of what’s about to happen. She further closes these eyes just before the cop yanks the locker’s handle.

But it doesn’t open. Which causes Rudi’s eyes to reopen.

“What’s that combination again?” growls the cop.

“21-36-18,” the teacher says. “After the first number, you have to go around one full revolution.”

“Why don’t you just open it yourself?”

“I don’t have the authority.”

“Who does?”

“What the hell’s going on here?” a voice howls from behind them, and everyone turns toward Mr. Gonzalez, and they see him standing by the front passageway in an overcoat, with a Styrofoam soda cup in his hand.

“Weiss has drugs in her locker,” Mr. Thompson calls out.

“Drugs?” Gonzalez utters, before turning to Rudi, who’s averting her eyes — not just from him, but from everything.

This is his chance, he knows. His chance to get rid of Rudi for good. It’s so easy. Perhaps too easy. Which makes him think about his daughter, and her laugh, and while he tries to convince himself that Rudi had nothing to do with it, he knows better. He also thinks about all the other things that have happened at the school in the time she’s been there, like the three boys he saw at her table. Boys who no longer traverse the halls like a bunch of frightened chickens. Then, there’s Owen Connors, who was once considered a convict-in-training but who now is an almost upright citizen. All these things by themselves could be written off as a fluke, but together . . .

Slowly, Mr. Gonzalez turns to Mr. Thompson, and while pointing at Rudi he growls, “How do you know she’s got drugs in her locker?”

“Darlene here saw them,” answers Thompson.

“Is that true, Darlene?” the principal asks. “You actually saw drugs in her locker?”

“Not exactly,” Darlene mumbles.

“How exactly?”

“Someone told me.”

This causes Mr. Gonzalez to turn to the cops, and he says to them: “I believe that’s what’s called hearsay, officers.”

"I'd still like to search the locker," insists the cop, who points to Rudi and adds, "We know all about this one. She's got a long record."

"Then I suggest you get a warrant," the principal insists back. "Because there's something called a Constitution, and the . . . what's that amendment I heard you screaming about, Miss Weiss, from all the way out the door?"

"The Fourth?" Rudi mutters.

"That's right, the Fourth — the one that protects us against unreasonable searches."

"I'll get that damn warrant!" screams the cop, before turning to his partner and hollering, "Come on!"

The two cops afterward hurry off, with Rudi looking at Mr. Gonzalez in astonishment.

"In the meantime, Miss Weiss," he says to her, "I suggest you tidy up your locker."

"Yes, sir," she tells him, with lots of reverence.

"*Sir*," he repeats, with joy all over his face. "I like how that sounds. There may be hope for you yet."

She smiles at this and at him, and he smiles back just a little, before turning around and marching toward the school offices, followed closely by Mr. Thompson.

Though they don't get very far. They don't because most of the students in the hallway start clapping, forcing both men to come to a stop. They also both turn around, and the principal sees that the students are cheering him — him, the biggest bastard principal on earth.

This stuns him, and with an expression mixed with both surprise and pride, he nods a couple of times, and he buttons his coat with his free hand before spinning around and strutting toward the offices, again followed by Mr. Thompson.

"Pull another stunt like this," the principal whispers to the man, "and I'll toss you out of

this school myself.”

“But, Mr. Gonthalez . . .” the man screeches.

“The name’s Gonzalez!” the principal howls, before bursting inside the offices.

While trying to process everything that’s just happened, Rudi happens to notice Darlene, who’s glaring at her from nearby. She, in turn, tries to reciprocate. She tries to return the hate. But she just doesn’t have it in her, and this angers Darlene even more, and she storms off. Which is when Rudi steps in front of her locker, still surrounded by all the students, who are all staring at her.

“Can you give me some space, guys?” she asks. “You heard the man. I have to tidy up this locker.”

The students respond to this with smiles, and they quickly disperse while Rudi takes a long deep breath. Most of these students then leave the school, outside of which paces Tommy, who only knows that Rudi’s in trouble.

“I can’t believe what I just saw!” a girl cries out to another, as they pass Tommy with big grins on their faces.

This sends Tommy toward the doors. But Rudi steps out of them first, and when she sees how frightened he looks, she has to fight the urge to jump into his arms.

“What’s going on?” he asks, in a tone of voice that makes it sound more like a plead.

“Let’s just go,” she tells him.

“Where?”

“Anywhere.”

She says this and struts off, with him following her and once again coughing a bit. He follows her to his bike, and they speed out of the parking lot, with Rudi draped all over him.

Then, like the day before, they speed out onto Valley and down it, and like the day before, they pass someone in a red Porsche.

Only this time Deke sees them.

Chapter 44

Tommy's Harley rises up South Orange Avenue, toward the endless trees ahead.

"You're not taking me back to your mom's house, are you?" Rudi jokes.

"I can't even take myself back," Tommy tells her.

"Then where we going?"

"You said you wanted to go 'anywhere,' so I'm taking you to the best anywhere there is."

Tommy says this and makes a left at Crest Drive, which cuts through the beginnings of the reservation and acts pretty much like a long parking lot. Tommy then comes to a stop in front of a narrow path leading into the woods.

"This is your best anywhere?" Rudi utters. "I live just down that hill. It isn't the best anything. It's boring."

"That's only because you haven't really looked," he insists. He further nods down the road and adds, "Some of my earliest memories are of this place. There used to be a deer paddock over there. I can still remember feeding them Cracker Jack from the palm of my hand."

"That must've done wonders for their teeth," Rudi remarks.

Tommy chuckles at this, and he climbs off his bike, and in the same motion he takes Rudi's hand and helps her off. Which makes her smile, for many reasons. Though this smile fades when he starts leading her down the path.

"Now where we going?" she growls.

"To that special anywhere," he answers, with neither of them seeing the shiny red Porsche that quietly enters the road behind them. Nor do they see it park next to the Harley.

There Deke gazes at the pair, with an expression mixed of inquisitiveness and anger, and jealousy. But they are soon out of his view, and soon after that they begin to hear the sound of rushing water, which piques Rudi's interest.

"Where we going?" she cries out.

"We're almost there," he says.

"Almost where?"

"You'll see."

"Look, if you haven't noticed, I'm not exactly a Camp Fire Girl."

"Trust me."

Veering off the path, Tommy leads Rudi deeper into the reservation. He further leads her into a clearing, where below them stands a beautiful waterfall. Which surprises her.

"My God," she mumbles.

"Yeah," he mumbles back.

"I didn't know this was here."

"Not many people know about it, or where it is. Some people think it's just a legend."

He says this as dark clouds approach in the distance, and he sits on a rock overlooking the falls and stares into the roaring white water below. "I actually come here a lot," he tells Rudi as

she sits next to him. “It somehow helps me forget the things I wanna forget. When my dad was in the hospital, I came here almost every day.”

Rudi reacts to this, by putting her arm around Tommy, and he does the same to her. Something that feels natural to both of them.

“This kinda reminds me of somewhere,” Rudi tells him.

“Yeah?” he says.

“When I was little, after my mom left I went to the library like all the time. I read every single fairy tale they had. That’s actually how I learned how to read. There was no one to read them to me.”

It’s now Tommy’s turn to react, and he does so by holding her tighter while wishing he could take her pain away. He’d take all of it if he could.

“Anyway,” she goes on, “there was this one story I really loved. I read it all the time. It was about this girl from a small village. Her mother dies and her uncle takes away her house, and she’s got nowhere to go. So she just walks into the woods. A woods just like this. Deeper and deeper she goes, with no intention of ever coming out. And there was a waterfall there just like this one.”

“Then what happens?” Tommy asks.

“In the woods she meets this young and handsome prince, who’s lost and scared. So she comforts him, and she leads him back home, and he’s so grateful that he makes her his princess. Pretty stupid, eh?”

“I don’t think so.”

On the verge of tears, Rudi lays her head on Tommy’s shoulder. Something that also feels natural to both of them. “You were right,” she murmurs.

“About what?” he murmurs back.

“This is the best anywhere.”

“You’re the best anywhere.”

Rudi smiles at this. She smiles at how he can say something so corny and yet make it sound beautiful and honest, and she knows right then that she is his, and that there’s nothing more she can do about it, and this doesn’t bother her at all.

But something is bothering Tommy. He wants to tell her something else — the words he told his mother the night before. But he’s scared that it might frighten her off, so he keeps quiet. But this doesn’t stop him from thinking about those three wonderful words. Words he desperately wants to say.

At the same time, Rudi reaches inside her seabag, for the bag of joints, which she tosses as far as she can into the water below.

“What was that?” he asks.

“My past,” she answers.

“Your what?”

“You hungry?”

Chapter 45

With lightning illuminating the darkening skies, in the window of Reservoir sit a girl and boy.

“You know, I meant it yesterday,” Tommy says to Rudi.

“What?” she says, while eyeing the menu.

“You can order meat if you want. It won’t bother me.”

“The truth is, the truth is I’m a vegetarian, too.”

“You are?” he utters with a grin. Which she reluctantly returns, before demanding, “What’s so funny?”

“We just have nothing in common,” he answers, as a waiter approaches them with a couple of sodas, which he places on the table while saying, “You guys ready?”

“Pizza?” Tommy asks Rudi.

“I’m not really a pizza person,” she tells him.

“But this is the best pizza in the world.”

“That’s what everyone says.”

“I was right about the falls, wasn’t I?”

“All right,” she says.

“One pizza,” Tommy says to the waiter. Then, while gazing at Rudi, he adds, “With peppers and mushrooms?”

Rudi nods, and the waiter takes the menus and shuffles off.

“Tommy!” a deep and accented voice calls out from not far away, and Tommy turns toward both the voice and the stout aging man approaching them, who’s wearing a suit that last properly fit him at the end of the sixties. He’s also got the hugest of smiles. Tommy smiles, too, and he offers his hand while saying, “Mr. Agnellino.”

The two then shake hands, with the man almost tearing the boy’s arm off, which is just before he says to him: “How are you? And how come I don’t see your beautiful mother here anymore?”

“Well, you know,” Tommy replies, after lowering his eyes a bit, “too many memories.”

“I understand,” Mr. Agnellino replies back, a bit glumly. “I understand perfectly.” He afterward turns to Rudi, and he looks at her askance, not quite understanding anything about her or how Tommy could be with such a person. He can’t even think of anything to say. Though he eventually mutters, “Who’s this?”

“This,” Tommy answers, “this is my . . . my special friend.”

Rudi grins in response while thinking she wouldn’t’ve minded if he had called her his girlfriend. She wouldn’t’ve minded at all.

“What,” Mr. Agnellino mumbles, “are you going to a costume party later?”

“Something like that,” Rudi tells him, while trying not to smirk.

“Well, enjoy your meal.”

Mr. Agnellino says this, and he staggers off while shaking his head.

“Sorry about that,” Tommy says to Rudi.

“I’ve heard worse,” she says back. “Much worse.”

“Hey, Tommy!” comes another voice, from the other end of the restaurant.

Both of them turn toward the sound, and they see another waiter smiling and waving at Tommy, who smiles and waves back.

“Everyone knows you here,” Rudi remarks.

“My family’s been coming to this place since the thirties,” Tommy remarks back. “From the time it was up in Newark. That’s how it got its name. It used to be by the reservoir over there. Do you know, do you know my dad only bought a house in South Orange because they moved here?”

“It’s kinda nice,” she tells him, while glancing around.

“We used to eat here like once-a-week at least,” he goes on, “even though it isn’t exactly my mother’s style.”

These words cause Rudi to look at the table setting, and she says, “Yeah, they only have one set of utensils.”

“She’s really not that bad,” Tommy insists.

Rudi shrugs.

“It’s just you remind her of herself,” Tommy says.

“Oh, come on,” Rudi growls, “what could we possibly have in common?”

“Not everything, that’s for sure. But all the important things.”

It’s then the waiter brings the two a large thin-crust pizza.

“Thanks, Sal,” Tommy says.

“You betcha, Tommy,” Sal says back, after slapping him on the back. “You need anything, just holler.”

The man afterward leaves, and Rudi pulls out a slice, and she blows on it a bit, with Tommy staring at her with a big smile.

“What?” she mutters.

“Nothing,” he mutters back. Which is when she takes a small bite. She further chews, and she can’t help look surprised, as she can’t believe how good it is, especially the tangy cheese and the crust that’s exploding in her mouth.

“This is the best pizza ever,” she utters.

“Everyone says that,” he utters back.

Chapter 46

It's raining when Rudi and Tommy step out of the restaurant.

"Maybe my uncle can drive us," he says to her. But she's feeling so giddy and wants nothing to get in the way of this. So she struts out into the downpour and jumps onto the Harley, before turning to Tommy and saying, "I thought you like to live dangerously."

Tommy grins at this, and he jumps onto the bike himself, and he speeds off with Rudi draped over him and smiling. She's smiling in spite of the rain, or maybe because of it, which gets harder and harder, until it's pounding upon them. Until they can barely see.

Like during the kiss in Mrs. Goodwin's bedroom, Rudi finds herself rising, and she realizes that it wasn't the kiss that made her rise but the person behind it, who's taking her to a place she never thought she'd go.

"Yes!" she yells out, to the whole fucking world. For the first time in her life she's unafraid. She's unscared of everything, and she wants this feeling to never end.

It continues even after the rain ends, and her smile remains on her face, too. It remains there as they park outside her house.

Tommy is also smiling as he walks her by the hand to her front lawn. He's smiling to himself.

"What?" she asks, as soon as she notices it.

"Nothing," he says back.

"Come on, I told you about my fairy tales."

"It's just that, after my dad died, I really thought that life was about nothing more than waiting to die. But I was wrong."

Rudi responds, by squeezing his hand, and it's then he notices something, and he points down the street and says, "Do you know that Dionne Warwick used to live right over there?"

"Really?" she says back.

"In that tiny little house on the corner, even though she had more money than the whole town put together. One of her sons and I were actually friends. Which was really cool because — even though he was younger than me — he knew everything about the world, especially girls. He taught me everything I know."

"I'll have to thank him one day."

Tommy smiles at this, and he glances at Rudi's house, and he nods toward one of the windows while telling her: "We have an audience."

Looking in the direction of his nod, Rudi sees Pam and Stephen standing in the window with their arms around each other, grinning at Rudi like the doting parents they truly are. Though Pam soon drags Stephen away, and Tommy and Rudi turn to one another and gaze.

"Well . . ." he whispers.

"Well . . ." she whispers back.

"How do special friends say goodnight?"

Right away she falls into his arms, and they hug each other cheek-to-cheek, just as they did in that dream of theirs, or whatever it was. Tommy also closes his eyes, with bliss covering his face, and like the day before he caresses Rudi's cheek with the back of his fingers, transferring his bliss to her.

"You know," she mumbles, "you're okay."

Once again, he wants to tell her what he told his mother. He wants to do this so badly, and the words even begin to form on his lips. But he just stops himself.

Chapter 47

Rudi floats inside her house, feeling nothing but possibility. Which is when she sees Stephen sitting on the living room couch, looking as if he's just eaten a large handful of proverbial canaries.

"Don't say a word," she threatens, though she has to make this threat through a smile.

He also smiles, as Rudi floats toward the stairs. Which is just before the phone rings in the kitchen.

"Yeah," Stephen says while Rudi floats upward, "before you know it, we'll be shopping for your prom dress."

These words cause Rudi to stop and turn to Stephen, and she forces a grimace.

"Rudi, phone call!" Pam calls out.

Thinking it's Maria, Rudi skips down the stairs and rushes into the kitchen, and she yells out into the phone: "Hey."

But no one answers. Though she can hear traffic in the background, as if the call were being made from a pay phone. "Maria?" she utters.

“I’ve been called lots of things before,” Deke utters back with a chuckle, “but never that.”

“What do you want?” Rudi mutters, with all the possibility flying right out of her.

“Let’s see, what do I want? What could I possibly want?”

“I don’t have it right now.”

“Maybe I can get it from your boyfriend.”

“What, what boyfriend?”

“That preppy shit I saw you with today. Or is he a JAP shit? Me, I ain’t prejudice, so I really can’t tell the difference. All I can say is that it was pretty damn romantic fucking him in the woods.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Three years I’ve known you, just about. And after all I’ve done for you — after I made you into a man — better than a man — what do I have to show for it? What did I get? Not even a fucking feel. But in just a couple of weeks you’re already ripping off your panties for this *GQ* prick!”

“You’re wrong! We’re just friends!”

“Don’t lie to me! Remember, I’m the one who taught you how! I taught you everything!”

“Look,” she tells him, “I gotta go.”

“Fine,” he tells her back, “just let me know when and where I can pick it up.”

“I just told you — I don’t have it!”

“But I’m pretty sure your boyfriend does. Maybe I’ll have a little talk with him. Maybe I’ll even fuck him a bit, just to see what all the excitement’s about.”

“You —”

“— Or maybe I’ll do something worse!”

“Leave him the fuck alone!”

“Then get me my money! Or something better! And tomorrow, you bitch!”

At once the line goes dead, and Rudi feels both a panic and a shaking setting in. Both of which she knows can only be tamed chemically. But this isn't something available to her. So in a daze she stumbles out of the kitchen and up the stairs, and she doesn't even hear her foster parents say goodnight.

She further stumbles into her room, and she hides under the covers of her way-too-soft bed. There, while clutching her pillow, she goes through all her available options, and well into the night she continues going through them, even though each time she does she can only come up with one.

Perhaps if she didn't care about Tommy she could've figured a way out, or at least she could've made a run for it. But as she now learns, with caring comes responsibility, so she knows that there's only that one option. She'll have to give Deke what he wants — what he really wants.

Chapter 48

The next morning Rudi returns to school with eyes even more sleepless than the day before, and she tries pretending that nothing is wrong. But she's not real good at pretending, and Tommy notices there's a problem right away when he sits next to her in English. He notices how cool she is toward him.

Thinking he's crossed some line in their "special friendship," he moves to his normal seat, feeling not only down but also sick. The latter he attributes to the drive through the rain the night before, even though he knows he was coughing well before then. He's coughing now, too. Only worse. Much worse.

But Rudi doesn't notice this. She didn't notice him sitting next to her or notice him get up. She's in another place, in which she's trying to convince herself that the nightmare to come isn't so terrible — that there are worse things, even if she can't think of any.

She doesn't come out of this other place until lunch, when by the entrance of the cafeteria she sees a strange collection of people sitting at the back table. Not only are the three boys there with Maria and Samantha, but so is Owen Connors, and a certain football player, too. Even

stranger, all seven are laughing and telling jokes, and they're acting as if they'd been best friends since birth instead of only being friends because of one crazy-looking girl from Irvington.

Though this girl recoils from all of them, and she turns around and rushes off, and she keeps rushing until she reaches the library. There, in a far-off corner, she sits on the floor with her back against the wall. She actually looks much as she had in the holding cell weeks earlier, only now she has her music with her. Which is doing nothing at all for her, even when she sings along with it.

Eventually, she gives up, and she puts her Walkman away, and she begins a long sleepwalk. Which lasts through all her afternoon classes, right up until the final bell. It's soon afterward she stumbles through the front doors of the school, beside which stands Tommy, whose face is flush and sweating.

"What's going on?" he asks, in between coughs.

Without thinking, she stops, and her mind briefly comes out of its sleep-like state. But she doesn't turn around or reply. She just continues on.

"Rudi!" he cries out.

"Nothing!" she cries back. "Nothing is going on!"

But he rushes up to her anyway, and from right behind her he says, "You've been avoiding me all day. What did I do now?"

"This has nothing to do with you."

"Come on."

"Listen," she growls, "the world doesn't revolve around you."

"I never said it did," he growls back. "Or implied it. And you know it!"

She responds to this by stopping again. She also takes a long deep breath and turns to him,

and while desperately trying to look unafraid she mutters, “Nothing is wrong. This has nothing to do with you. I swear. And it has nothing to do with us. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, I promise, but right now I really need for you to go home.”

Without waiting for a response, she takes off again. This time faster.

“Where you going?” he yells.

“I’ve got something to do!” she yells back.

“Rudi —”

“— My God, can’t you just fucking listen for once!”

Moving even faster, Rudi approaches the intersection of Parker and Valley — and again Tommy’s conflicted. Again part of him wants to protect her while the other part — the wiser part — knows that she doesn’t want his protection and that it would only drive her away. But something tells him that — even if it means wrecking all he accomplished the day before — he has to go after her. So he starts running in her direction, and he sees a shiny red Porsche stop in front of her. He further sees the passenger door open and he sees her get inside.

So he stops and runs in the opposite direction, toward his bike.

Chapter 49

The Porsche turns onto Route 22 and heads east within a sea of traffic. So neither person inside it sees the Harley that's following it.

Though Rudi wouldn't see Tommy even if he pulled up beside her. That's because she's not really there. She's back at the waterfall, trying to forget. But no matter how hard she stares into the roaring white water below, it just won't work. Still, she keeps trying. She tries until the Porsche swerves off the highway and speeds onto the lot of a crumbling and empty motel, before coming to a screeching halt in front of the office. Which is when Rudi tries something else. She tries to convey apathy.

But as the car's engine cuts off, she gives up on this apathy and lowers her eyes. She also crosses her arms while wishing she were somewhere else. Anywhere else. But there isn't anywhere else.

"You'll keep your promise?" she mumbles.

Deke doesn't answer. He just checks the gun underneath his waistband and jumps out of the car, and he struts inside the motel office.

Watching this, Tommy parks behind the Porsche, and while trying to both control his coughing and ignore the fever that's burning him up, he rushes up to Rudi's window and raps on it with his knuckles.

Surprised, Rudi raises her eyes, and she spins toward Tommy, and with rising anger she rolls down her window and growls, "What are you doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?" he growls back.

"I told you — this has nothing to do with you!"

"It has everything to do with me!"

It's then Deke steps out of the office, and with a big smirk on his face he quips, "You here to watch?"

"Let's just get this over with," Rudi barks, and she bursts out of the car and runs toward Deke, who swaggers in the direction of a nearby room.

"What are you doing?" Tommy cries out, with his flushed face now bleached with fear.

"I told you," Rudi cries back, with her face as bleached as his, "I don't live in your world! I live in a totally fucking different one!"

"But —"

"— I'm trash! Just go home already! Go home and forget me!"

Tommy thinks about doing just this as Rudi storms inside the room. He even climbs onto his bike and starts it.

As he does, Deke enters the room and slams the door closed, and he turns the deadbolt. He also turns himself and slithers toward Rudi, who's standing by the bed shivering, contradicting a face that again is trying to express apathy.

Having long waited for this, Deke slows and slows, allowing her fear and horror to

escalate. Still, he's soon in front of her. "You want some coke?" he murmurs. "Or ludes?"

Rudi doesn't reply. She doesn't because she's thinking not only of her oncoming nightmare but also of how she's just lost the only person she's ever loved.

"Well?" Deke growls.

"Give it to me!" she growls back, knowing there's an escape, even if it's only a partial and temporary one.

"The coke or the ludes?"

"The ludes! Just give me the fucking ludes!"

With a bit of a grin, Deke yanks some white tablets from his Sasson jeans, which she grabs with her shaking hand. It's shaking so much that she drops a few onto the floor before stuffing the rest into her mouth. Which she swallows while wishing they'd kill her. She wishes they'd kill her right then.

"Do it already!" she screams when they don't.

Deke grins again, and he unzips his jacket. At the same time, Rudi realizes that she can't go through with it. She realizes that there's nothing worse than this, not even death. So she swings her leg toward his groin, much as she had once done with Owen. But unlike with Owen, Deke catches her leg, and he says, "I guess you forgot who taught you." He further flings her leg into the air, sending her backward onto the thin and heavily stained carpeted floor.

"I thought you were smart," he hollers. "But you're nothing but a dumb fucking bitch!" He hollers this and continues removing his jacket, just as she sweeps her leg across his ankles — which sends him to the floor, too. She then rises and slams her heel into his chest, cracking a pair of his ribs, and she flings herself and her fist toward his face.

But they never get there. Deke blocks both, and he throws his own punch, which hits her

chin and knocks her backward. He afterward straddles her waist, and he pummels her face over and over. “You fucking cunt!” he howls. “I would’ve given you everything! Fucking everything!”

Now defenseless, all Rudi can do is scream and cry out for help, as her toughness is long gone, leaving only the frightened little girl. Which excites Deke. It excites him so much that he stops punching and throws off his jacket, just as the door to the room breaks open.

Screaming, Tommy bursts inside, and he grabs Deke, and he tosses him into a wall, causing Deke’s gun to fall to the floor, not far from both the bed and Rudi. But Tommy only notices her, and he kneels beside her, and he clutches her hand. He also sees her bloody face. “Rudi!” he screeches. “I have to tell you —”

But he can’t tell her anything. He can’t because Deke has jumped up and slugged him in the kidney. He further grabs Tommy’s ears and flings him onto the floor, and after slamming the partially unhinged door closed, he straddles him. He does this much like how he straddled Rudi, and he punches him much like how he punched her. Only harder. Much harder. Over and over his fists fly, and they continue doing so long after the boy is past resistance.

Watching this, a semi-conscious Rudi notices the gun, and she reaches for it. But it’s just beyond her grasp.

Finally, Deke stops his punches, and he spits in the boy’s eyes. Eyes that are barely registering. “I’d kill you, kike-boy,” he says with a grin, “but I want you to watch me fuck your girl!”

While still grinning, Deke jumps to his feet, and he spins toward Rudi. He also whips off both his shirt and belt, and as he rips open his Sasson jeans he tells her: “It’s showtime, babe!”

Rudi responds, by lunging forward, and she reaches for the gun. Which she just grabs,

and she points it at Deke's head while muttering, "It's showtime."

Chapter 50

Rudi is having a strange and uncomfortable dream. She's stumbling through a hospital corridor in terrible pain. Every step hurts all over. She also feels weightless and without strength.

In this state, she wanders the halls while glancing into rooms that are without exception empty. Which causes her to feel something worse than pain: loneliness. She feels this intensely as she comes upon the door to a supply closet, which she throws open. She further steps inside the closet and sees a glass cabinet filled with all sorts of pill bottles. The cabinet is locked, but she smashes the glass with her fist, and she grabs a bottle at random and tears off its top.

It's empty, so she flings it onto the floor and grabs another bottle. But it, too, is empty, and so is the next one and the one after that. They're all empty, and she screams in frustration and shakes her bloody fist, with her pain and loneliness even worse.

She then knocks over the cabinet and rushes back into the hallway, and she continues searching through the empty rooms. Not long after this she comes to the end of the corridor, and there's but one room left to check, and she looks inside it and sees Tommy lying on a bed, with his face badly battered. Also there is Darlene, who's sitting on the bed holding Tommy's hand

while lovingly looking down at him, and he's looking up at her just as lovingly. Mrs. Goodwin is in the room, too. She's sitting in a chair nearby and smiling at the two. Though suddenly she turns toward Rudi, and she glares at her and yells, "What do you want here?"

"Tommy?" Rudi utters. "I'm sorry."

Like his mother, Tommy glares at Rudi, and he growls, "Why don't you just go away. I don't want you anymore."

"No!" Rudi calls out, before rushing to his bed, where she falls to her knees. She further takes his free hand and pleads, "Don't do this — please don't!"

But he yanks his hand away and says, "This is all your fault. You put me here. You! I wouldn't've even been here before if it wasn't for you!"

This is when Darlene starts to laugh, and she tells Rudi: "What a joke you are, thinking you could have someone like Tommy. Trash like you. You're nothing but a druggie whore from Irvington!"

"That's not true!" Rudi insists.

"You think you're like Helena," Mrs. Goodwin interjects, "but you're nothing like her! You're just a piece of filth! Now, get out! Get out and never come back!"

"No!" Rudi shouts.

"Get out!" all of them shout back, and they start chanting this, over and over.

Get out! Get out! Get out!

"Nooooooooooooo!" Rudi screams.

Then, she awakes, in a darkened hospital room, and she looks up at the ceiling. She also feels her hand being swallowed by something enormous. So she turns her battered face, and she sees her stepfather hovering over her. He's further holding her hand and looking as if he were

about to cry.

“Dad?” she mumbles, with lots of surprise.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles back.

“For what?”

“What am I not sorry about?”

Rudi reacts to this, by pulling her hand away, and her eyes, too.

“I don’t blame you for hating me,” he goes on.

“I don’t hate you,” she tells him. “I’m not really sure what I feel.”

“I know how you feel,” he tells her back, before he grimaces and adds, “That sounded like a really bad pun.”

“Yeah,” she says with a slight smile, which causes her lots of pain.

“You look so much like your mom,” he continues. “Apart from the bruises, I mean.”

“I don’t even remember what she looked like.”

“I guess it didn’t help that I burned all her pictures.”

“I guess not.”

“I loved her. I loved her so much. But it just wasn’t enough. Of course, you probably don’t remember when she left, but I was really depressed. The only thing that kept me going was that I had someone just like her living with me. But, at the same time, I saw you growing up just like her. And I mean not only the way you look but everything else as well. And part of me just hated you. And I can never make up for that.”

“I used to really hate her,” Rudi mutters. “And I hated you, too. I hated you because I made myself believe that she only left because of you. But I always knew she left because of me.”

“That’s not true,” Mr. Reese insists. “Don’t think that for a second. She had lots of problems. Big ones. But you were never one of them. You were the only good thing she ever did. And that, that includes marrying me.”

Slowly, Rudi turns to her stepfather, and she smiles again. Again with lots of pain. She also takes his big paw in her hand.

“Your records are in good shape,” he remarks.

“That’s good,” she remarks back.

“I didn’t want you to kick my ass.”

Rudi chuckles at this, and she winces, too, before uttering, “Oh, that hurt.”

“Sorry,” he says. “Hey, I even bought a rack for them.”

“My records?” she asks.

He nods, and adds, “I also talked to Mr. Cross. Actually, I talked to both of them. They seem real nice.”

“They are,” she tells him.

“They said it wouldn’t be a problem if you came home for dinner now and then. Of course, it’s up to you.”

“I wouldn’t mind.”

“Of course, I’m not much of a cook.”

“I know a great pizza place.”

“That sounds great,” he says with a gentle smile. “Well, I better let you get some rest. You got concussed pretty badly. The good news is that the doctor says you’ll be here for just another day or two. So, if it’s okay with you, I could drop by tomorrow after work.”

“It’s okay with me,” she tells him, and he starts out. But as he reaches the divider

separating Rudi from another patient, he stops and turns back to her. He further points toward the darkened corridor with his thumb and whispers, “This is probably none of my business, but there’s a boy sitting outside your room on the floor.”

“A boy?” she whispers back.

“Yeah, and by the looks of him, I’d say he was hit by the very same train.”

Chapter 51

Tommy has lost track of how long he's been sitting outside Rudi's room. All he knows for sure is that when he first got there it was dark outside, which he could tell by looking through the window of the room across the hall, and now a faint glimmer of light is rising behind the night.

He isn't even certain how long he's been in the hospital. He can remember the gunshot, and that's about it. The next moment — the very next moment it seemed — he was in a hospital bed, and the moment after that he was by the nurses station asking for Rudi. Then he was sitting by her door in his gown, trying to think of what he was going to say to her. Which hasn't been easy, as his head's throbbing and he keeps losing his train of thought.

To make matters worse, he's feeling even sicker than before, and he's having trouble breathing, too. Which Mr. Reese hears when he steps out of the room. It's then their eyes meet, and the large man forces a smile before heading down the hallway. At the same time, Tommy hears shoeless footsteps coming toward him from inside the room.

Soon, Rudi stops in the doorway. She does this and looks at Tommy — at his lowered

eyes and his battered face. She looks with an expression caked with guilt, and she almost wishes he weren't there. She almost wishes her dream had been true.

"It must be long past visiting hours," she tells him.

"I've never been real good at following rules," he tells her back.

"Since when?"

"Since I met you."

He's right then interrupted, by his hacking cough, and Rudi checks her gown before sliding down the wall and sitting next to him. Though he doesn't react to this. He just keeps staring at the floor, and she eventually blurts out, "Now you must finally hate me."

He shakes his head.

"What do I have to do then?" she demands.

Again, he shakes his head.

"Look at yourself, Tommy," she goes on, with her voice reaching the breaking point.

"Just look at how I've fucked you up."

But he keeps shaking his head over and over, and he utters, "It's not true."

"You probably wouldn't've even lost your spleen if you weren't trying to show off for me," she insists.

"No," he insists back, with yet another shake of his head.

"You're such a stupid motherfucker," she quietly hollers, while trying to keep herself from crying.

"You know," he says to her, "I was really scared back in that motel."

"Yeah, well, so was I."

"No, I was scared that I was gonna die before . . ."

“Before what?”

“Before I could tell you that I love you.”

Right away Rudi turns from him, as these are words she never expected to hear. Words that knock her backward and make her gasp, “You love me?”

“You were right the other day,” he tells her, “when you called me a momma’s boy. I even told her that I loved you. But I didn’t have the courage to say it to you. And I almost didn’t get the chance. But I’m not afraid anymore. I’m not afraid of nothing. And I love you.”

“Yeah, well,” she murmurs, “I love you, too.”

These words shock Tommy. They shock him so much that he isn’t sure if he’s heard them right. So he looks at her, and he sees something he never expected to see. He sees himself in her watery eyes.

“I didn’t want to love you,” she goes on. “I didn’t want to love anyone, not even myself. But you’re the most magnificent person I’ve ever met, or will ever meet. You somehow make this whole fucked-up world seem worth it.” She then turns to him, and with tears running down her cheeks she adds, “You, you’re my fairy tale.”

No longer feeling pain or sickness or hurt, Tommy takes Rudi’s hand, and he flies toward the heavens with her, and when they finally get there, they lean toward each other. Soon, their foreheads meet and their noses touch, and they do so painfully, causing both of them to wince. Which is when she whispers, “Just don’t expect me to wear a dress.”

He smiles at this, and he gently kisses her, with his lips barely touching hers, and she kisses him back just as gently. Back and forth they go until “Moonlight Serenade” plays in both their heads, and this is when Tommy opens his eyes and finds himself back in the dance hall.

“Do you see what I see?” he asks.

“It would only be weird if I didn’t,” she tells him, before wrapping her arms around his shoulders and stretching her legs over his hips while hoping the music will never end.

Chapter 52

Rudi rushes down the hospital corridor while wiping her tears, which have mixed with her makeup, giving her a nightmarish look. She does this while trying to understand how her life could have fallen apart so quickly, and she recalls how just a few weeks earlier she'd been in this same corridor kissing Tommy, and she wills herself there.

The hospital corridor lights then come on fully, and a small group of nurses break up the kissing couple, and they send them to their rooms. Though neither can sleep or stop smiling, which is the last thing Rudi's foster parents expected to see when they visit.

"You okay?" Pam asks.

"I'm better than okay," Rudi says. "I didn't even know it was possible to be this better."

"They must've drugged her," Stephen tells his wife.

"There isn't a drug in the world that does this," Rudi insists. "Believe me, I would know."

With a knowing smile, Pam rushes over to Rudi, and she takes her hand.

"Am I the only person here who doesn't know what's going on?" Stephen remarks.

“It’s a girl thing,” Pam remarks back.

“Yeah,” Rudi utters. She then glances at Stephen and feels herself deflating a bit, and she says to him: “I guess I’m in trouble.”

“Why?” he says back.

“I killed someone . . . didn’t I?”

Stephen nods, but adds, “It was clearly self-defense. The police, they’ll be by today to take your statement, and Tommy’s, too, but my brother says there’s not a chance they’ll prosecute you for this. Hell, after what Paul told me about this Deke, they should give you a big gold medal.”

“Still . . .”

“To be honest, Judge Vinson wasn’t too pleased to hear about all this, to say the least. But then he heard some other things. Things that have really impressed him.”

“Yeah?” Rudi says, with some surprise.

“Not only did he get a report from me, but he also got a glowing one from the principal of all people.”

“He’s been out of sorts of late.”

“And your English teacher also had nice things to say about you. You know, the one who hates you so much. Anyway, after speaking with your stepdad, the judge has agreed to let you return home. Though he’d like you to remain at Columbia.”

“Oh,” Rudi mutters.

“I know your stepfather would love to have you back,” Stephen goes on. “I’ve been talking to him about it.”

“And I’m sure you guys wouldn’t mind,” Rudi says. “After all, I must be the worst . . .”

“Actually,” Stephen interrupts, before turning to his wife, who adds, “You’re the best we’ve ever had.”

“Maybe you guys need to check into a hospital, too,” remarks Rudi. “A different type of hospital.”

“We didn’t say the easiest,” Stephen continues. “We said the best. The reason we became foster parents was because of kids like you.”

“Well, you’re not so bad, either,” Rudi tells them.

“Really?” Pam utters.

“Sure,” answers Rudi. “So I wouldn’t mind staying a little longer.”

“That’s wonderful!” Pam cries out.

“But I’m thinking,” Rudi goes on, “with all these glowing reports, perhaps my curfew could be lifted.”

“Not a chance,” Stephen tells her.

Rudi grins at this, and Stephen says to her: “I gotta get to school.”

“Can I speak to Pam for a second?” Rudi asks.

Stephen nods and leaves the room, and Rudi says to Pam: “You think you could find out what room Tommy is in?”

Chapter 53

Rudi sneaks into Tommy's private room, where she sees him staring out the window. She also hears him sneeze.

"Bless you," she says from behind him, and he turns toward her and smiles, and she sits on his bed and gently kisses him while caressing his red hot face.

"You're burning up," she tells him. "You know, we just might have to get you to a hospital."

"Funny," he tells her back.

"Seriously, you don't look too good."

"No worse than you."

"Fuck you."

"The truth is," he utters, "I'm flying."

"Yeah," she utters back with a grin, "you must've caught that from me."

"I must've."

Again, she kisses him, and then kisses him some more.

“You’re gonna get sick,” he warns.

“It’s just a hazard of the work,” she says as a nurse rolls in a medicine cart. This woman is from the same group that broke the two up earlier, and she orders Rudi back to her room. But Rudi refuses. Then, after lots of arguing, they come to a compromise, with Rudi sitting next to Tommy on a chair by the bed and holding his hand.

This is how they spend the rest of the morning, only interrupted by the police, who take both their statements at once. Afterward, and well into the afternoon, they talk, despite Tommy getting sicker and despite his coughing getting worse. Both of which Rudi pretends not to notice while they talk about everything and nothing. They especially talk about music and books and politics — none of which they agree on. But because they have the same interests they never run out of things not to agree on. Which they do so loudly that it isn’t long before everyone in the hospital knows where Rudi is. They even bring her lunch and medicine to Tommy’s room, and this is how Maria is able to find her when she visits after school.

When Maria first heard what happened to them, she was horrified, and she’s even more horrified when she sees their battered faces from the threshold of the room. But when she sees how happy Rudi looks, she can’t help crack a joke: “Now you look really punk.”

Right away Rudi spins toward Maria, and she smiles. She further jumps up and rushes over to the girl, and she hugs her while whispering, “Thanks for coming.”

“Next time you’re in trouble,” Maria whispers back, “maybe you let your best friend know.”

Rudi responds, by hugging Maria even harder.

Watching them is a balding middle-aged man, who’s standing in the doorway with a big frown on his face.

“Hey, Barry,” Tommy calls out.

“Hey, kid,” Barry says, while still frowning.

“This is my uncle,” Tommy tells Rudi.

“Oh, hi,” Rudi utters.

“And this is Rudi,” Tommy adds, while pointing at her.

“Nice to meet you,” Barry tells her, in a tone of voice suggesting that it’s anything but true. Sensing this, Rudi takes Maria’s hand and says to her: “Why don’t we take a walk.”

The two then leave, and Barry hustles up to Tommy’s bed and growls, “Jesus, Tommy, what are you still doing with that chick?”

“What do you mean?” Tommy asks, not understanding why his uncle is so upset.

“Look at what she’s gotten you into. And I’m not just talking about your face. This whole thing with your mother, too.”

“She didn’t get me into anything,” Tommy insists. “None of this was her fault.”

“I don’t care whose fault it is. She’s garbage.”

“She’s not!”

“She is! I talked to the cops. She’s got a long record. She’s from a broken home, too. Who knows what shit she’s into.”

“Quiet, she could hear you.”

“I don’t care! You need to end this. You need to end it right now.”

“No.”

Barry sighs. He also shakes his head and tells Tommy: “I’m sorry, kid, but if you don’t break it off, I can’t let you back into my house.”

“What?” Tommy gasps.

“I’ve got my own family to look out for. They can’t be involved in this kind of crap.”

“I understand.”

“Tommy, don’t be stupid — she’s just a girl.”

“She’s not.”

“You think that now, but wait till you get to college. I’m talking from experience. A good-looking kid like you with dough, you’ll be golden.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I guess not, bud. But just think about it. It’ll solve all your problems, especially with your mother. I talked to her this morning. All she wants is an apology.”

“Never.”

“Fine, you’re on your own. Hopefully, this will be the very worst thing that’ll happen to you.”

Barry says this and leaves, and Rudi returns by herself, and she sees Tommy again staring out the window. She also hears his labored breathing. “I guess it didn’t go so well,” she murmurs.

He shrugs, and adds, “You think Mr. Cross has room for one more?”

This causes Rudi to drop her eyes. She also sits next to Tommy on the bed and asks, “What about your mom?”

“What about her?” he asks back.

“Still no word?”

Tommy doesn’t answer. He just keeps staring.

“Maybe,” she goes on, with her eyes still downcast, “maybe we should just lay low awhile.”

Feeling a sudden burst of anger, Tommy spins toward Rudi and utters, “What?”

“I don’t know,” she says, “maybe we could cool it for now. Just until everything else has cooled down.”

“You’re always looking for reasons to keep us apart.”

“That’s not true!”

“It is! It’s like you want to be unhappy and miserable!”

“I just don’t want to be the cause of your whole family hating you!”

“You’re not the cause! They are!”

It’s then Rudi takes Tommy’s hand, and this makes both of them feel a little better. But not enough.

“I love you,” she says.

“I love hearing you say that,” he says back. “It’s even better than saying it myself.”

“I’m just scared. It’s like I’m always waiting for something bad to happen. Because that’s the only thing I know.”

“I love you,” he tells her.

“I love hearing you say that,” she tells him back, just as he starts coughing. He coughs much worse than before, and she no longer can pretend otherwise, and she checks his sweating forehead and finds it way hotter than earlier.

“I’m getting a nurse,” she utters, before jumping off the bed.

“I’m fine!” he insists.

But his coughing tells a much different story.

Chapter 54

Rudi drags a nurse into Tommy's room, and she eventually gives him some medication, and he soon after drifts off to sleep. This same nurse tells Rudi that it's just the flu and that he'll be all right, and Rudi believes her, in spite of rarely believing anyone. She believes her because she desperately wants to believe.

Still, she has yet another sleepless night, and the next morning she rushes to Tommy's room only to find he's gone. So she hustles up to the nurses station and demands to know what happened.

"Calm down," a nurse there tells her.

"I'm not gonna calm down!" Rudi hollers.

"He's in ICU."

"ICU?" Rudi utters in shock.

"It's just a precaution. He's got a real bad case of the flu."

"They put people in ICU for the flu?"

"Listen, he's gonna be all right."

“That’s what they said last night.”

“And it’s still true.”

“I want to see him.”

“Are you a family member?”

“I’m his . . . his . . .”

Rudi doesn’t know what exactly she is, but she knows she isn’t a family member. So she just slithers off, without even seeming to touch the ground. She tells herself that she’s heading to ICU and that she’ll see Tommy, rules or no rules. But instead she goes back to her room and hides under the covers. She does because she’s frightened, of what she might discover. She also can’t help think back to when her mother left her.

Her fears only get worse when she returns home, as they mix with the fear of the unknown and increase every day and night. Not only does she stop sleeping, but she stops eating, too. She even stops listening to music. She’s a mess in every way.

Then one Sunday afternoon Stephen comes to her open bedroom door, and he sees her clutching her pillow while staring into space.

“I know you don’t want to hear this,” Stephen says to her, “but there’s an NA meeting tonight at seven.”

“I can’t,” she says back, while shaking her head.

“It can help.”

“It never helps. And I should know. I’ve been going to them like forever. They never help nothing.”

“Perhaps the group here will be different.”

“It won’t be.”

“I’m sorry, but you have no choice.”

“But —”

“— You’re expected to go to these meetings, Rudi, and you know it. I should’ve never let you talk your way out. But if you don’t show up tonight, I’m going to have to tell my brother.”

“Fine,” she utters, with lots of rage. “I’ll go.”

“Great, we’ll leave —”

“— I can get there myself,” she barks.

“All right,” he tells her. “But I’ll know if you don’t.”

Stephen says this and walks off, and Rudi climbs out of bed and gets dressed. She further leaves the house, with her bag stuffed with every cassette she has and no intention at all of showing up at the meeting. Then, during the rest of the afternoon and into the early evening, she wanders the streets while listening to her music. Music that again is doing nothing for her, even when she sings along with it. Eventually, she gives up and finds herself in front of the South Orange Recreation Center, where she sees a light coming from a room on the second floor.

With a long drawn-out sigh, she steps inside the building, and she climbs up the stairs and approaches the lit room, from which a small group of people are reciting the Serenity Prayer:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

The courage to change the things I can,

And wisdom to know the difference.

Rudi has heard this prayer a thousand times, as they recite it at every NA meeting. But this is the first time she actually listens to it — the first time she actually hears the words, and as

the prayer comes to an end she stops at the door and wishes God really had the power to grant those things. Because she needs all three.

It's then she peeks inside the room, and she sees about a dozen people sitting there, including Stephen. Seeing him makes her angry, thinking that he's checking up on her, and Stephen right away sees this anger. He even smiles at it before turning toward the aging man leading the group upfront, who's sitting behind a table covered in key chains of various colors.

This man asks if anyone wants to share something, and Stephen raises his hand. Which surprises Rudi. But she really becomes surprised when her foster dad stands up and steps to the front of the room, where he says to everyone there: "My name is Stephen, and I'm an addict."

"Hello, Stephen," most of the audience says back.

"I've been clean for a while," he goes on. "According to the calendar, more than eleven years. Now, that may seem like a long time to many of you, but to me it was yesterday. It was yesterday I awoke in a house I didn't know, with people I had never met, in a town I had never been. Even now I know I'm no more than a day from returning there. I know this when I'm at work, I know it when I'm at home, I know it when I'm in the arms of my wife. The only difference between now and eleven years ago is that I'm not alone. And that's what I pray for, what I pray for all the time. Not just that I'm not alone, but that I know I'm not alone."

Stephen afterward returns to his seat, and the leader of the group notices Rudi standing by the doorway, and with a gentle smile he says to her: "Can I help you?"

"That's my foster child," Stephen tells him.

"Oh, hello," the man utters, with his smile a bit stronger. "Please come in."

Hesitantly, Rudi staggers into the room, and she takes a seat next to Stephen, without looking at him.

“My name is Frank,” the man continues.

“Hi,” Rudi mutters.

“I know you’re new here, but perhaps you’d like to share something.”

Rudi shrugs, mostly because she’s never shared anything at these meetings before. She’s even mocked the whole idea. But she gets up anyway and makes her way to the front of the room, where with her eyes looking anywhere but straight ahead she mumbles, “My name is Rudi.”

“Hello, Rudi,” everyone says to her.

“I, I’ve been clean, I don’t know, for about a week or so.”

“That’s fine,” Frank tells her.

“I was doing real good before that,” she says, specifically to him. “Almost a year.”

Frank smiles at her.

“Oh,” she utters, “I forgot to say that I’m an addict.”

“It’s okay,” he whispers.

“I probably didn’t say it,” she tells the rest of the group, “I probably didn’t because I like to pretend I’m not. I like to pretend that I’m strong and in control, and that I’ve licked all my problems. But I’m an addict, and I’ll always be an addict, and I’m not strong, and I’m not in control, and I’m just about to fall apart.”

Wanting to ease her struggle, Frank extends his hand toward her, and she grasps it.

“I’ve always been alone,” she goes on. “I’ve never let anyone near me. Even when I was all fucked-up. Even then I never let anyone close. And now, now that I just let someone . . . someone . . . I don’t even know if he’s alive right now. And I don’t know if I can make it if he’s not.”

Chapter 55

Tommy awakes, and he finds himself in the same strange room he's been coming in and out of consciousness for more than a week. He can also feel all sorts of tubes in his body, including ones in his nose and in his chest, and he can feel the nothingness all around him.

He also feels something else: fear. He feels this intensely, and it only gets worse when a short gray-haired man in a white coat steps inside the room, with a cold expression that makes him look much like Death.

"We need to talk, Tommy," the man says with a deep and dark voice that causes Tommy's heart to skip.

Chapter 56

Rudi comes home from school, and she climbs the stairs to her room, just as the hospital calls her.

Feeling both frightened and curious, she doesn't know what to do. So she doesn't move. But eventually she makes her way down to the kitchen and picks up the phone, and while shaking a little she mumbles, "Hello?"

"Is this Rudi?" a deep and dark voice says. "Rudi Weiss?"

"Yes."

"My name is Dr. Kleiner, over at St. Barnabas. I'm Tommy Goodwin's doctor. I would like to speak with you."

"You're speaking with me."

"In person."

"Why?"

"I understand from the nurses that you have some kind of relationship with Tommy. A close one."

“So?”

“I would like to speak to you in person here at the hospital. With your parents.”

“Why in person?”

“It’s not for over the phone,” he tells her.

“Then it must be bad,” she mumbles.

“I’ll be here late into the evening. Just ask for me at the front desk. Please come.”

Rudi isn’t the only person Dr. Kleiner calls that afternoon. He also calls Mrs. Goodwin.

When he does, the woman is sitting on her living room couch staring out into space, much as she has done for more than a week. Elizabeth then steps inside the room, and she tells the woman about the call.

“Just tell them where to send the bills,” Mrs. Goodwin mutters.

“I already told them that when he first got checked in there,” Elizabeth says. “This doctor, though, he says he wants to speak to you about Tommy’s condition. He says that it’s very important.”

“Really, I don’t want to hear any more of it.”

“But —”

“— Please, Elizabeth.”

With a reluctant nod, Elizabeth scurries off, and Mrs. Goodwin notices a picture of Tommy on the coffee table. A picture of him back in happier days, or at least what she thought were happier days. The woman stares at this picture, and she feels a strong compulsion to rush to the hospital. The same compulsion she felt the night she heard about the incident at the motel. Though, just like then, something stops her. Actually, someone.

“How could he still be with her?” she utters. “How can he treat me like this? How can he

not even call?”

Quickly, an anger builds on her face. It builds and builds, and once it boils over, she knocks over the picture, and she starts crying.

Chapter 57

The hour Rudi has to wait for Stephen to come home from school is never-ending. During this time her eyes, no matter where she places them, constantly drift toward the clock on the kitchen wall. Which is torturing her by moving slower and slower, to the point where it doesn't seem to move at all. This torture is further compounded by her fears, which are not only growing but also ramming the inside of her head, looking for any means of escape.

So she's in a bad state when Stephen finally comes home, and she stays that way as she and her foster parents rush to the hospital in the Volvo. She's even worse when Stephen asks for Dr. Kleiner in the front lobby of St. Barnabas. Again, she must wait, this time for the small man in the white coat, who approaches them much like the clock on the kitchen wall.

Finally, he stops in front of the three. "You're her parents?" he asks Stephen and Pam with some confusion.

"We're her foster parents," Stephen says.

"What's wrong with Tommy?" Rudi demands.

"Why don't you come with me," he says, while looking at Rudi and her appearance

askance.

“Why don’t you just tell me what’s wrong?” she cries out.

Trying to calm her, Stephen grabs her shoulders, and he whispers, “Let’s just do what he says.”

Rudi shakes him off. But she also utters, “All right,” and the doctor leads the three down the hall and into an empty and darkened lounge. There he asks them to sit on a nearby leather couch before grabbing a chair and joining them.

While watching him, Rudi feels as if she’s a defendant in a capital murder trial, waiting for a verdict that’s all too obvious. Still, she holds her breath.

“How’s Tommy?” Stephen asks.

“He’s out of ICU,” the doctor tells him. “And resting.”

This causes Rudi to breathe. She breathes hard.

“But that’s not why I’ve asked you to come,” Dr. Kleiner goes on.

“Why then?” asks Pam.

“Tommy’s very sick,” the man answers.

“But you just said he was out of ICU!” Rudi shouts, with exasperation scratching her voice.

“Yes,” the doctor says. “Why don’t I just start at the beginning. You see, at first we just thought he had an unusually bad case of the flu. But eventually we discovered it was pneumonia. Pneumocystis, to be exact. Which is something that was very rare until very recently.”

“So is he or isn’t he all right?” Rudi screeches.

“We have the pneumonia under control for the moment.”

“For the moment? What the hell does that mean?”

“Rudi, we believe Tommy’s been infected by a virus.”

“A virus?” Rudi utters. “What kind of virus?”

“That’s just it,” he tells her — “we don’t know. We know very little about it. We’ve been calling the disease associated with it GRID: ‘Gay-Related Immune Deficiency.’ But you might know it better, you might know it better as ‘the gay plague.’ A quite unfortunate term.”

This shocks Rudi, and she shakes her head over and over before muttering, “But Tommy isn’t gay.”

“The disease since its naming has been observed in other groups, too, such as Haitian immigrants and intravenous drug users.”

“But Tommy isn’t any of those things, either,” Rudi mumbles, while feeling guilty for a reason she can’t quite understand.

“He may have contracted the virus from the blood transfusions he recently received,” the doctor says to her. “A short time ago a baby girl in California contracted the virus this way.”

“And what happened to her?” Rudi mutters.

The doctor doesn’t reply.

“What happened to her?” Rudi repeats, with panic choking her voice.

“She died, Rudi,” he answers. “She died.”

“He, he’s gonna die?” Rudi gasps, with her body beginning to hollow out, leaving what remains to shake.

“All I can tell you is that there’s no cure,” the doctor tells her. “All we can do is treat the symptoms.”

“He’s gonna die,” she states in a voice not her own, while desperately trying to conjure the image of the waterfall in her mind.

“Rudi,” Dr. Kleiner utters, wanting to change the subject, “we need to run some tests on you.”

“Me?”

“You and any other sexual partners Tommy’s had in the past month. We believe that’s the primary way the virus spreads — through sex, and the transference of bodily fluids.”

Barely listening, Rudi shakes her head, and she keeps shaking it.

“You could be very sick, Rudi,” the doctor insists.

“No,” she insists back, while continuing to shake her head. “I can’t be.”

“You can!”

“We . . . we didn’t have sex.”

“I’m sorry to be blunt, but I’m talking about any type of sexual contact, including oral.”

“We didn’t have sex!” Rudi screams, before turning to Pam. Which is when, while feeling herself coming apart, she adds, “He . . . he just kissed me, and told me he loved me.”

Soon, Rudi is fully apart, and she starts crying, and she hugs her foster mother, who’s on the verge of tears herself. Then, while sobbing on the woman’s shoulder, she cries out, “It’s not fair. Not fucking fair. He just told me he loved me.”

“We still should test you, Rudi,” the doctor says.

“We didn’t have sex!” Rudi hollers. “How many times do I have to fucking tell you? I, I’ve never had sex with anyone.”

“Please,” the doctor says to Stephen and Pam while again trying to change the subject, “do either of you know Tommy’s mother?”

“I know her a little,” Stephen says, with his face beyond bleached.

“It’s very strange,” the doctor tells him. “She hasn’t been here to see her son at all. Nor

will she return my calls. And his uncle hasn't been any help, either."

"I don't know anything about that," utters Stephen.

"They're fighting!" Rudi shrieks, while continuing to cry on Pam's shoulder. "Tommy and his mom. His uncle, too. They're all fighting — because of me! This is all my fault!"

"That's not true," Pam tells her, with tears pouring out of her eyes.

"It is!" Rudi tells her back. "None of this would've happened if I never showed up here. If he never loved me!"

"Perhaps," the doctor whispers to Stephen, "perhaps you could talk to her — his mother."

"I could try," Stephen whispers back, "but she's a pretty tough lady."

"Tommy's going to need all the moral support he can get. His life may depend on it."

"When?" Rudi demands.

"When what?" says the doctor.

"When is he gonna die?"

"I can't tell you that, Rudi. I can't because I don't know. But I can tell you that he'll have to be careful. He's very susceptible to infections, especially after having lost his spleen. I'm trying to arrange for him to stay at a hospice associated with the hospital, where he can be monitored. Unfortunately, they're hesitant to take him. Everyone's frightened —"

"— I want to see him," Rudi interrupts.

"That's not a good idea," Stephen tells her, while shaking his head.

"What do you mean?"

"This is a very contagious disease, Rudi. You need to stay away from him."

"He just said that it's spread through sex!"

"Is that true?" Stephen asks the doctor. "That's the only way you can get it?"

“Anecdotal evidence suggests that the virus cannot be communicated through casual contact,” answers the doctor.

“*Suggests?* You want me to risk the lives of my family on a suggestion?”

“There are no cases of such a transmission. No cases whatsoever.”

“I’m gonna fucking see him!” Rudi howls, after removing her teary face from Pam’s shoulder. “I’m gonna see him now.”

Chapter 58

With his face still showing signs of the beating he took, Tommy glances at the woman taking his temperature. He sees that she's wearing rubber gloves and that she has a surgical mask across her face. She's also looking down at him as if he were a monster — something subhuman — something out to kill her.

Hurriedly, she yanks the thermometer from his mouth and hustles out of the room to read it.

Tommy knows that he should be angered by her. But he isn't. This is because he hates himself more, and while trying to forget this, he looks up at the ceiling. But when he notices how it strangely acts like a mirror, he glares at it, with his anger rising until his hot sweating face is bright red.

You're very sick, Tommy.

He right then hears the doctor's deep and dark voice. He hears it echo inside his head, repeating these words over and over. Words that begin to overlap, creating a cacophony of horror that rattles inside his head and grows.

You're gonna die, Tommy.

These are the next set of words to bounce around his head. Words that aren't the doctor's but his own. Words he said to himself the moment the doctor left. Words he again repeats.

Everything's over, he knows. His life, his feelings, his tomorrow. All that's left is the countdown.

Ten, nine, eight . . .

It's then he realizes that the countdown has already begun and that he just doesn't know the units of measurement. He realizes this just as Rudi comes to his door while wiping her tears, which have mixed with her makeup, giving her a nightmarish look. Which is something he really doesn't need to see at the moment. He actually doesn't want to see her at all, and he wants her to see him even less.

Still, she looks at him, and she sees his pain and anger and hopelessness, and the frightened part of her wants to run from it. But her legs won't move.

"Tommy," she mutters, causing him to spin his head as far from her as possible, toward a window leading into the emptiness of the night, where he sees that everything's as dead as him.

She repeats her muttering.

"What are you doing here?" he growls.

"What do you mean?" she mumbles.

"You didn't come to see me before."

"They wouldn't let me. Only family are allowed in ICU."

"I thought you weren't good at following rules."

"I'm sorry. I —"

"— Do you have it?"

“Have it?”

“Are you sick?”

“No,” she tells him. “I don’t think so. They just took some blood.”

Slowly, she starts toward him.

“Go away,” he orders. But she doesn’t obey. Moving even faster, she rushes up to him and takes his cold hard hand. Though he shakes it from her and howls, “Don’t touch me! Don’t ever touch me again!”

“Tommy . . .” she utters.

“Go away!” he screams. “Are you fucking stupid? I’m infected!”

“You can’t give it to me like that.”

“I don’t want you here. I don’t want you to watch me die.”

“Can, can I watch you live?” she asks, with her voice cracking to the point that it’s barely audible. “Can I?”

“Find someone else.”

“I don’t want anyone else!”

“Someone who can touch you.”

“You can touch me! Didn’t you hear me? You can touch me all you want!”

“You were always looking for an excuse not to be with me. Now you’ve got it. Now you’ve got the best excuse there is. Now you can find someone more your speed. Someone who isn’t a stupid Reagan fuck!”

These words make her angry. They make her so angry that she grabs his hand and hollers, “Stop it! Stop feeling sorry for yourself!”

“Fuck you!” he hollers back, before spinning around and pushing her to the floor.

“You’re not the one who’s gonna die!”

“Tommy . . .”

“You did this to me! You fucking bitch! You did this to me!”

“Tommy!” she cries out, with tears once again pouring out of her. “I’m sorry.”

“Get out! And never come back! I never want to see your fucking face again!”

“Tommy!” she again cries out while shaking all over, and she keeps crying this out until two nurses — both wearing gloves and masks — grab her by the arms and drag her out of the room and down the hall.

“Tommy!” she continues to scream. “I love you!”

Not wanting to hear this, he covers his ears, and he shakes his head while desperately trying to get those three words out. But they just won’t leave.

Chapter 59

Rudi's so upset on the ride home from the hospital that Pam has to hold her down in the back seat.

"I'm coming back tomorrow!" Rudi howls, while trying to forget all the things Tommy said to her. "And the day after that! I don't care how —"

"— No," Stephen interrupts, with fear covering his face. The most that's been there since that morning eleven years earlier.

"What?" Rudi mumbles.

"You're not seeing him again, and that's it! I should've never let you see him just now."

"Fuck you! You couldn't have stopped me if you wanted."

"And we're all gonna get checked — the boys, too."

"You're so fucking stupid! If the virus were that easy to catch, half the fucking world would have it already!"

"Maybe they do! Somewhere, somewhere I heard that it can be in your system for years without you even knowing it."

“Well, if we all have it, what does it matter if I see him?”

“You’re not seeing him!”

Rudi doesn’t reply. She just stew in the back seat until they get home. Which is where Stephen drops her and Pam off before speeding down the road. Rudi then runs into the house and calls her best friend, and she tells her everything, thinking she would understand. But Maria’s so shocked that she can’t say a thing.

“You there?” Rudi hollers.

“I . . .” Maria mutters. “Do you have it, too?”

“No. They’re testing me, but I’m fine.”

“How can you be so sure?” Maria screeches.

“I know!” Rudi screams. “I fucking know!”

“If you have it . . . then I —”

“— You don’t fucking have it! You can’t fucking get it from being around someone — or from touching them!”

“There was some guy on TV who was saying, I don’t know, he was saying you can get it from a toilet seat. Oh, my God, I used your bathroom!”

“Are you listening to me? Are you listening to yourself?”

“Rudi!”

“Calm down!”

“I gotta go. How am I gonna tell my dad?”

“You can’t tell him,” Rudi pleads. “You can’t tell anyone about this, not even Samantha. But you especially can’t tell your dad.”

“But if I’m sick —”

“— You’re not sick! Listen, you gotta fucking promise me you’ll keep quiet.”

Maria promises, but it’s not too convincing, and after she hangs up Rudi’s head starts to spin. It spins while thinking she’s like some character in a bad *Twilight Zone* episode — like she’s the last sane person on earth.

Soon, she collapses against the wall and then onto the floor. She does this feeling alone — more so than ever, and if there were any way to numb this feeling she would certainly take it. But there isn’t. Though when she glances at the phone, she has an idea. It isn’t a particularly good one, but it’s the only one she’s got. So she grabs the device and calls her stepfather. She further tells him everything, not expecting much back, and like Maria he doesn’t say a thing in response. There’s only silence.

“You there?” she utters.

“Do you love him?” he asks.

“Yeah,” she mumbles. “I love him so much.”

“Then don’t let him get away. No matter what. No matter what anyone says or does, you stay with him.”

“Thank you, Daddy!” she cries out into the phone.

“For what?” he says.

“What am I not thankful for?”

Chapter 60

Rudi cuts school the following morning, and she catches a bus on South Orange Avenue heading toward Livingston, which leaves her off at Old Short Hills Road, within walking distance of the hospital.

There she marches toward Tommy's room while telling herself that she doesn't care what he says to her — that she isn't gonna leave him this time. Nor will she allow anyone to drag her away. She also tells herself that she'll wait outside his door all day if she has to, just as he did for her.

But when she gets to his room, it's empty. So she looks around, and she recognizes one of the nurses down the hall, and she hustles toward the woman. This woman recognizes Rudi, too, and recalling the person she had been kissing, she stops in horror, as if Rudi were some kind of goblin. She further rushes off in the opposite direction. Though Rudi easily catches up with her and utters, "Where's Tommy?"

"Leave me alone!" the nurse utters back.

Instead, Rudi grabs the woman, who screams, "Don't touch me!"

This just makes Rudi angrier, and she flings the woman into a wall and hollers, “Where is he?”

“He checked out this morning,” the woman answers, with her hands in front of her face. “Thank God.”

“Where’d he go?”

“As long as it’s not here, I don’t care.”

Not knowing what else to do, Rudi takes the bus back to South Orange. Which passes a diner called Grunnings on the outskirts of the reservation.

Seeing a phone booth outside it, Rudi gets off at the next stop and hikes back up the hill to the restaurant, and she finds Tommy’s address in a phone book. She also gets directions from a waitress inside the diner, and she soon finds herself in front of the house she never expected to see again.

There she rings the doorbell, and Elizabeth opens the door. The woman further averts her eyes and says, “What can I do for you?”

“I guess Tommy’s not here,” Rudi says back.

The woman shakes her head.

“Does Mrs. Goodwin know?” Rudi asks. “Does she know that he’s sick? That he, that he’s . . .”

Elizabeth nods, and she adds, “A Mr. Cross came by last night and told her. The poor woman, she cried herself to sleep.”

“You don’t know where Tommy could be, do you?” Rudi asks.

“He’s got an uncle nearby.”

“I don’t think he’s there.”

“I don’t know what else I can tell you.”

“Could you do me a favor? Could you let me know if you hear about him?”

“I’m sorry, but Mrs. Goodwin —”

“— Please. Tommy’s all alone. And I love him.”

Elizabeth thinks it over. She does this while trying to control her emotions. Then, after glancing inside the house, she whispers, “Give me your number. Quickly.”

Rudi does this, and she next tries the waterfall, and she finds that Tommy’s not there, either. But she stays anyway. She sits on a rock and stares into the roaring white water, hoping it will help her forget.

But it doesn’t. It just makes her remember more. It makes her remember the wonderful afternoon she spent there, when she learned that she no longer belonged to herself. Still, she keeps staring into the water. She keeps hoping to forget. She does this all afternoon despite it being terribly cold, and she continues doing so until well after the sun falls, with her arms wrapped around herself. Arms that are a cruel substitute for someone else’s.

Chapter 61

A taxi pulls in front of a modest home. At least modest for Short Hills.

There Tommy pays the driver and climbs out of the vehicle, and he staggers toward the single-story stucco house while thinking, “Is this what it feels like to die?”

He doesn’t feel much different than before. A little sluggish. A little cold. A little lightheaded. Still, he wonders if this is how he’ll feel when the moment finally comes, or if he’ll feel worse. Much worse. He also wonders if this’ll be the best he’ll ever feel again.

He soon reaches his uncle’s house, where taped to the front door is an envelope with his name on it. Which he takes down and opens, and he reads the letter inside it, which informs him that his backpack and motorcycle are inside the garage. The letter further requests that he drop the house keys in there and not touch anything else.

Tommy smirks at this, before dropping both the letter and the envelope onto the lawn, and he makes his way to the garage and opens it. He further tosses the backpack over his shoulder and climbs onto his motorcycle. Then, he starts driving, with no actual place to go.

He drives all morning. He drives until he finds himself on Route 22 heading east,

approaching the motel where it all happened.

Strangely, it pulls him like a magnet, right into the parking lot, where he notices the door of Deke's room, which still hasn't been repaired. It's then he realizes that the motel is as good as any place, especially as there's a large liquor store right next to it.

Chapter 62

Rudi returns to school the following morning, and she slithers through the front passageway while noticing that everyone is avoiding her. They're actually frightened of her. They're more frightened of her than when she first came to the school.

This fright continues in English class, where no one sits at the back table with her. But she pretends not to notice this. Which is easy, because she's somewhere else — back at the falls. This is also why she doesn't notice that someone's watching her across the hallway, who's both drunk and disheveled.

Tommy right then tries to feel hate toward Rudi. But the only hate he can muster is toward himself, and when he remembers all the things he said to her in the hospital this hate becomes intolerable, and he leaves. He leaves the school and jumps onto his bike, and he flies down Parker Avenue and doesn't stop flying until he reaches the end of it. Which is when he realizes that he's in Irvington and only a short distance from Vintage Vinyl. So he continues on to Springfield Avenue and parks. It's then he finishes his bottle of vodka, and he stumbles toward the small record store — the one that always has more than twice as many good records

as any store more than twice its size. He further steps inside the store, and Butch looks at him and his appearance askance.

“You all right, Tommy?” he mumbles.

Tommy shrugs.

“We just got in a new Yardbirds record,” Butch goes on. “An old one, I mean.”

Tommy nods, and he staggers toward the Y’s. But at the same time he notices something in the B’s. He notices a section dedicated to Black Flag. He doesn’t know the band at all, but he remembers Rudi wearing a T-shirt with their name on it the day they met, and he decides to check them out.

The covers of the first two records he sees seem to confirm what he’s always thought about punk rock. *Nervous Breakdown* and *Jealous Again* have images that suggest violence and rage, just for the sake of both. But then he comes upon something different. He comes upon *Damaged*, which depicts Henry Rollins, with his head shaved and his bloody fist through a mirror.

Tommy stares at this image. He stares at it for a long time, as it not only connects to how he’s feeling right now but also to how he felt long before everything went black.

“This any good?” he asks Butch while showing him the cover.

“It, it’s the best,” Butch mutters, still not acclimated to Tommy’s appearance. “But it ain’t the Yardbirds.”

Tommy thinks it over, and he brings the album up to the counter, and Butch again asks him if he’s all right.

Tommy doesn’t exactly reply. He just takes out some cash and says, “You think you could make me a tape of this?”

Chapter 63

Tommy returns “home,” and he buys a fresh bottle of vodka at the liquor store before going to his room. There he finds his Walkman, and he listens to *Damaged* on his bed while continuing to numb himself up.

Tommy’s never really liked punk rock before or even understood it, and not just because of the violence and rage, but also because of the crude sounds and the garbled lyrics. But he soon discovers that the music from this album is different. It’s speaking to him, on a level he’s never experienced, and the message it’s speaking is personal — horrifyingly so. It’s almost as if Henry Rollins has climbed inside his head and is screaming at him, and only at him — screaming everything Tommy’s been thinking and feeling but somehow couldn’t express.

But Tommy’s fascination with the music doesn’t stop with this, as while the record’s full of anger and rage and self-hatred, most of the songs are underlined by something unexpected: a mad desperation for hope. It isn’t just “life sucks,” but “life sucks and I wanna do something about it!” and Tommy finds this inspiring, even if he doesn’t realize that this is what he’s feeling. He only knows that he feels something and feels it hard.

One song really gets to him. A song called “Room 13.” It’s about someone who’s in pain. Someone though who refuses to give into it. Someone who won’t stop screaming about it.

This song sends Tommy off the bed, and he starts bouncing off the walls, cracking the plaster as he does. He also screams with the music, and when Rollins screams back — when he screams “Keep me alive!” over and over in Tommy’s head, Tommy falls to his knees and shakes his fists with tears in his eyes.

A little after this, the tape ends, and Tommy listens to the whole thing again, and again after that. By the fourth time, all the darkness around him ceases. There’s only the music, and the mad desperation to hope.

It’s this that keeps him going, as whenever he’s not listening to the music, there’s only one thought in his head: suicide. It’s the first thing he thinks about when he wakes and the last thing he thinks of when he passes out. But the music simply won’t let him sink into his self-pity for good. It always gives him just enough motivation to continue. At least until the next day, when the darkness returns anew.

Chapter 64

Tommy once again finds himself at school. This time at lunchtime.

With *Damaged* blasting through the headphones strapped to his ears, he steps inside the cafeteria, and he sees Rudi sitting at the back table by herself, picking at her vegetables. He also sees that she looks even sadder than she had in English days earlier.

She looks this way because Maria broke her promise. This is why she and Samantha aren't eating with her, and why the two are sitting as far from her as possible and won't even look in her direction. The three boys aren't sitting anywhere near Rudi, either. Nor is Owen, and all the tables surrounding her are empty.

Maria's broken promise is also why students flee from Tommy as he slithers forward, and why the cafeteria falls silent. This causes him to stop, and he glances at the table where he used to eat, with all the football players and all the beautiful girls, who are all looking away from him, including the ones who once had his back, and Darlene, too.

Tommy tries to pretend this doesn't matter. He even tries to convince himself that he expected it. He tries and tries and tries. But when this fails, he shrieks. He shrieks along with the

song he's listening to — an alternate version of the title track. He shrieks about someone who's broken, but not nearly as broken as everyone else. He shrieks as loud as he can, and he rushes toward the closest table.

Everyone there runs off, and Tommy knocks the table over, sending the trays to the floor. Then, he knocks the next table over and the one after that, with people desperately trying to flee from him.

"Tommy!" suddenly comes a voice from the back of the room.

Slowly, he turns in the direction of the sound, and he sees Rudi rising from her seat. He also sees the hope on her face. But he doesn't want to see this. He wants nothing to do with it, so he spins around and runs out of the cafeteria.

She runs after him. She runs while screaming out his name, and she again screams this when he runs outside the school into the falling snow. She then follows, and she watches him jump onto his bike and speed off. Which is when she screams his name one last time.

Chapter 65

Rudi spends her days pretending. She pretends she doesn't care that she's a leper at school. She also pretends she doesn't care that all her so-called friends have abandoned her and that she's alone. But one person sees through all this pretending: Owen, who has a pretty good idea what it's like to be her.

This leads him one afternoon to the local library, where he asks a librarian to get him everything they have on this new disease.

"Why?" the woman asks, with some suspicion.

"Ah, it's for a friend," he says, which is strangely true.

"Your friend has this disease?" she asks next, with some fright added to her suspicion.

"No, she, she has a friend who does."

The woman doesn't believe him, but she gets him the materials anyway while careful to prevent any part of her body from touching his.

Owen then reads, in spite of this not being his forte. He reads all afternoon, and he thinks about what he's read well into the night.

He's still thinking about it when he steps into the cafeteria at lunchtime the following day. There he gets some food, and he walks right up to Rudi in the back. Which is when everything gets real quiet.

Owen turns toward this quiet, and he sees lots of people staring at him in surprise, and he smirks at this. He also says to them: "You people think I'm dumb, but you're a whole lot dumber than me." He afterward sits across from Rudi, and he smiles at her, and she smiles right back before mouthing, "Thank you."

He responds to this by reaching out his big hand. Which she clutches.

"This is the good karma, right?" he asks.

"The best," she tells him.

This leads to them both becoming lepers. But they're lepers together so it doesn't matter much. They even hang out together after school. During this time she helps him with his homework, and he in turn teaches her how to ride a motorcycle.

Before long, her old self sort of returns, especially during lunch when the two loudly laugh while telling each other crude jokes and stories. At the same time, Owen comes to think that Rudi is the perfect girl, as she's not only pretty and fun to be with, but unlike everyone else, has no fear of him at all. More importantly, she cares about him and respects him. But he also knows that he has no chance with her, so he tries to hide his feelings. Though this gets more and more difficult, and she eventually sees right through him.

One afternoon, while they're uncomfortably studying in her living room, she says to him: "You know, if it wasn't for Tommy . . ."

"Yeah?" he says back, a bit hopefully.

"Yeah," she tells him, before giving him a playful punch on the shoulder. "You're my

only friend. And you stuck your neck out for me. Twice. After I humiliated you. Twice.”

“I had it coming.”

“Still . . .”

“Just keep me in mind, you know, for the future. I’d be good to you. I’d . . .”

“You deserve more than that,” she says. “A lot more.”

“No one thought I deserved anything until I met you,” he says back, before picking up his things and standing.

“Where you going?” she asks.

“I better go,” he answers, while avoiding her eyes.

“Why?”

“You know.”

“So that’s it,” she utters, before lowering her own eyes.

“Hey, lift up that chin,” he tells her.

“So you can punch it?” she tells him back.

“I’ll see you at lunch tomorrow,” he says, with a big smile.

He keeps his word. The next day, when she gets to the cafeteria, there he is at the back table waiting for her. The three boys are there, too, with three equally guilty expressions. But Rudi makes it easy for them, by acting as if nothing had happened.

Watching all this from across the room is Maria, who can’t believe Rudi could be that forgiving. Like Owen, she’s been reading a lot about Tommy’s disease, and like the boys, she’s been feeling guilty about it. But she didn’t think she could do anything about it. Until now. Which causes her to rise out of her seat.

“Where you going?” Samantha asks.

“Where I should’ve been all along,” Maria tells her, before taking a small step toward Rudi.

“Are you out of your mind?” Samantha quietly howls.

“I was. But not anymore.”

“You go anywhere near her and we’re through.”

This causes Maria to pause. It does because she’s been waiting a long time for someone like Samantha, and she knows someone like her might not come for a long time to come, if ever. Can she really walk away from that? she asks herself. But walk she does, and she doesn’t stop walking until she’s right beside Rudi. Which is when she mumbles, “I’m sorry.”

It’s then Rudi glances at her former friend, and she knows right away that she can’t so easily forgive her. She feels betrayed by Maria in so many ways, and she almost tells the girl off. But this is when she notices something. She notices Samantha glaring at Maria from the cafeteria doors. She also notices the redheaded girl storm out, and she realizes that Maria has given up a lot to make amends. She’s given this up without even knowing she’d be forgiven. She’s risked something for her — something important — and Rudi can’t help open her arms.

At once, Maria falls upon Rudi, and she hugs her, and while weeping she mutters, “You were the best friend I ever had.”

“Sshhh,” Rudi mutters back. “I still am.”

Chapter 66

Tommy slams into someone, and then into someone else, and into someone after that.

With Ism on stage playing their lightning fast cover of “I Think I Love You” — the first song all night Tommy recognizes — he ricochets into punks stuffed inside a room that makes Vintage Vinyl look large. He does this with his head spinning, and with his mind blank, and with him feeling everywhere.

It’s then he feels a man jumping onto him, who just dove off the stage. Tommy follows his lead. He climbs onto the stage and dives onto the crowd, screaming his head off, with sweat glistening off his bare chest and soaking the flag-shaped four bars stitched onto his bicep. In this now he exists, there’s nothing hanging over him. There’s no death or sickness. There’s only now. Which he wills to never end.

At the same time, a wave crests through the crowd, sending it toward the stage. A wave caused by one huge man, with long black hair and keys dangling from his belt. This man is no punk, but is there just to hurt people — to hurt as many people as he can. To this end, he searches out the smallest men there, and he knocks them to the floor.

He's ruining Tommy's now, and Tommy won't have it. He howls, and with a running start he plows into the man, knocking him into a wall and onto the floor.

Seething with anger, the man climbs to his feet, and he throws a punch at Tommy, who barely feels it. He just howls again, and he throws the man to the floor, and he batters him with his fist. Over and over he batters him. He batters him even after he's drenched in the man's blood. Which both cleanses and redeems him.

Chapter 67

Rudi spends Christmas morning moping under the covers of her bed.

Then, as morning turns into afternoon, she has this crazy desire to hear a song. Not the kind she usually listens to, but the one she and Tommy would hear when they kissed.

Unfortunately, she can't remember the music enough to even hum the refrain, and this makes her angry, as it's like not remembering Tommy's name.

"Hey," Pam mutters from the doorway.

"Hey," Rudi mutters back, before lifting her head above the sheets.

"Aren't you gonna see what Santa left you?" asks Pam.

"He didn't bring me what I want," answers Rudi.

"Don't be so sure."

"I am."

"Is there anything I could do?"

Rudi shakes her head, and Pam starts to leave. Which is when Rudi utters, "Wait. Do you know music? I mean, old music."

“How old?” Pam asks.

“I don’t know . . . Glenn Miller?”

“That’s pretty old. Before I was born really. Why?”

“I’m trying to recall this song. I think it’s called ‘Moonlight Serenade.’”

“Oh, I know it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. But it doesn’t seem like your style.”

“It is,” Rudi insists.

“You know,” Pam tells her, “I still have my parents’ record collection downstairs in the basement. Maybe they had a copy.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Who knows, maybe Santa left you a present, after all.”

The two then hurry to the basement and to the collection. Which is immense and without order. So it takes them a long time to comb through it, and while they do find a record by Glenn Miller, there’s no “Moonlight Serenade” on it.

“Sorry, guy,” Pam tells her.

“It’s okay,” Rudi says. “Santa has always disappointed me. Why should he change now?”

With a bit of a sigh, Pam puts her arm around Rudi, and the two make their way toward the stairs, with Pam telling her: “I bet Sam Goody has it. We could go there tomorrow.”

“All right,” Rudi utters, without much enthusiasm.

“Is someone down there?” comes Stephen’s voice from the top of the staircase.

“Just us,” Pam answers, as the two women reach the bottom of the stairs.

“What are you guys doing?” Stephen asks.

“We were looking for a record,” Pam tells him. “‘Moonlight Serenade.’”

“Why would you be looking for that?”

“Rudi wants it.”

“Rudi? Our Rudi?”

“Yes, our Rudi.”

“I’ve got a copy of it in the den.”

“You do?” Pam utters, with some surprise.

“Sure. I love that song.”

He says this and the two women hurry up the stairs, and they hurry into the den, where Pam plays a scratchy rendition of “Moonlight Serenade” on the stereo.

Right away Rudi feels herself returning to that dusty dance hall, and she feels Tommy’s arms desperately clinging to her, and she wraps her own arms around herself in imitation.

Meanwhile, Pam turns around, and she joins Rudi on the couch while watching her become more and more emotional as she listens to that gentle but steady trombone. Though Pam tries not to see this, and she whispers, “You must’ve been a good girl this year.”

“What?” Rudi whispers back.

“Santa granted you your wish.”

Rudi responds with a mild smile, and she rests her head on Pam’s shoulder, before getting even more emotional.

“What’s wrong, honey?” Pam asks.

“This is our song,” answers Rudi, with her smile no longer mild.

“You and Tommy’s?”

“Yeah, we made it together.”

“Oh, baby.”

Chapter 68

A door creaks open, and a figure resembling Tommy slithers out of a motel room awash in empty liquor bottles and stray fast-food wrappers. This figure, though, is without wavy brown hair, which he has shaved to match the look of Henry Rollins. He also looks both emaciated and bloated at the very same time.

Tommy right then lights a cigarette, and he checks the half-empty vodka bottle inside his football jacket before stepping into a hail of whitish flurries. He does this while ignoring his hacking cough and running nose, and he stumbles through the thick and oddly colored slush in the parking lot until he reaches his motorcycle. Which is when he notices something: the holiday decorations everywhere. He also notices how all the stores are closed even though it's the middle of the morning, and this is how he knows it's Christmas.

Despite being Jewish, Tommy's family has always celebrated Christmas. They've always had a big tree and lots of presents, and they've always listened to carols. Especially his mother, who loves the holiday. She loves the spirit of it. A spirit missing from a childhood bleaker than most could imagine.

Tommy likes Christmas, too. But he can't get too excited about it. Instead, he takes out his headphones and puts them on, and he starts playing Black Flag's "Gimmie Gimmie Gimmie" on his Walkman as he guns the bike. Which is just before he speeds out onto Route 22 heading west.

It's then the snow begins falling hard. But Tommy doesn't notice. He doesn't even notice the traffic he's swerving in and out of. All he notices is the music churning inside his head, which he's singing along with.

Tommy is still singing as he speeds through downtown South Orange, where he approaches the light at Ridgewood Road, which is bright red. But he doesn't slow at all, even though the snow's really coming down and visibility is limited. He just drives into traffic, daring the cars to hit him.

One almost does, before coming to a sharp stop inches away. Which is just before the car behind it rearends it. At the same time, a car coming in the opposite direction has to swerve out of Tommy's way on the slippery road, causing it to fishtail into another vehicle.

But Tommy is oblivious to all this. He just continues up South Orange Avenue, and he turns left onto Crest Drive, by the beginnings of the reservation. Then, after parking in front of the narrow path, he staggers into the snow-covered woods. He also takes out his half-empty bottle of vodka, which quickly becomes emptier.

Eventually, he reaches the falls, and he sits in the snow. He also stares into the roaring white water below with the near-empty vodka bottle in his hand, and like when his father was dying, he tries to forget his problems. But neither the water nor the liquor can help him do this. If anything, he remembers more, and this makes him furious. It makes him so furious that he guzzles what's left in the bottle and tosses it below, and he watches it smash against the rocks.

Then, for a reason he doesn't know, he gazes in the opposite direction — toward the sky and what's behind it.

Tommy has never been real religious. He's always believed in God, and he's always gone to synagogue when he was supposed to, but he's never really given it much thought. Until now. Now, a rage builds on his face, and it keeps building and building.

Finally, it explodes, and he howls, "Fuck you! You hear me, you fucking bastard? Fuck you!"

This is when Tommy realizes he's sweating, even though it's near freezing. He also feels lightheaded and short of breath.

"I just need some rest," he tells himself, and he lays his body onto the snow. But what comes is anything but rest.

Chapter 69

An ambulance backs into the darkened road and speeds into the intersection of South Orange Avenue, exposing the Harley Sturgis parked nearby and the small group of hikers who called 911 from the pay phone outside Grunnings.

Inside the vehicle, a couple of paramedics — already angered enough about having to work on Christmas — shake Tommy, trying to get him under control. But Tommy, who's only half conscious and whose football jacket is covered in his own vomit, still is able to sway to the music. Music that is only playing inside his head.

“Keep me alive!” he screams, while flailing his clenched fists. “Keep me
aliiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiive!”

Chapter 70

Stephen shakes Rudi in her sleep, and when this accomplishes nothing, he shakes her again, only harder.

This time she wakes. She also glances at her foster father in confusion while noticing the blizzard roaring in the darkness outside her window.

“What?” she mutters.

“You have a phone call,” Stephen tells her. “Somebody who clearly doesn’t own a watch. Or a calendar.”

“What time is it?”

“5:30.”

“Who . . . who is it?”

“Someone named Elizabeth.”

“Elizabeth?”

“She doesn’t sound like a teenager or anything, but she says it’s important. And it better be.”

“Oh,” Rudi mumbles, as she remembers who the woman is. “I’ll get it.”

She says this and jumps out of bed in her underwear, and she runs out of the room and down the stairs into the kitchen, where she grabs the telephone receiver and cries out into it:

“Hello?”

“Is this Rudi?” whispers Elizabeth.

“Yeah,” Rudi tells her. “You, you’ve found him?”

There’s no answer.

“Is something wrong?” Rudi goes on, with her anxiety rising.

“I just got in,” the woman says, again in a whisper. “And there was a bunch of messages on the answering machine. From the hospital. They . . . they don’t think Tommy’s gonna make it.”

Right away the receiver falls to the floor, and Rudi runs out of the kitchen even faster than she had run into it. She also runs up the stairs much faster than she had run down them. Though in the upstairs hallway she comes to a halting stop when she sees her foster parents standing there in their matching robes. She further sees that Stephen’s arms are crossed and that he’s angry.

“Who was that?” he growls.

“Just a friend,” she mutters.

“It was about Tommy!”

“What?”

“I was listening!”

“Then why are you fucking asking me?”

Not waiting for a reply, Rudi storms toward her door. But Stephen jumps in front of her

and says, “Where do you think you’re going?”

She doesn’t answer. She just pushes him out of the way and bursts into her bedroom, where she hurriedly dresses before grabbing her sea bag.

“You’re not going anywhere!” Stephen yells from her door, before noticing that his two foster sons are peeking their heads out of their room. “Get back inside!” he hollers at them, as Rudi marches into the hallway and down it. Stephen then runs after her, and he grabs her arms while yelling, “You’re not going anywhere!”

“Oh, yes I am!” she yells back, before flipping the muscular ex-Marine over her shoulder and onto the floor. Which is just before she hurries to the stairs and down them.

“You see him,” Stephen calls out from his knees, “and you’re never coming back into this house again!”

Rudi doesn’t reply. She just keeps hurrying, through the hallway and to the front door, where she grabs her overcoat from the rack before flinging herself into the storm. Which is so heavy that she can only see a short distance in front of her. There’s also a foot of whiteness on the ground.

But at least the streets have been plowed, so she doesn’t have much trouble marching down Lewis and Wyoming, apart from becoming caked in white and ice, and a numbing cold. Which she ignores, knowing Tommy had faced much worse when he broke into the motel room after her. She just focuses on one thing: getting to the bus stop.

Though, once there, she isn’t certain whether the buses are running, or how often they’re running. So she decides to climb the handful of miles through the forest, up the steep and slick hill. It’s slow going, even with all her determination, but she steadily moves upward, with the snow blasting onto her face every step of the way.

Eventually, she reaches Old Short Hills Road, and soon after that the hospital. She gets there with her hands and feet and face frozen solid, and her hair and clothes resembling something closer to icicles. But none of this matters to her. All that matters is what she'll say to Tommy, especially as she knows she might never get another chance. Over and over she thinks about this as she staggers down the corridor to his room.

"Rudi," a deep and dark voice calls out from behind her.

Recognizing this voice, she stops, and with lots of fear, she turns toward Dr. Kleiner, who's marching toward her.

"How is he?" she mumbles.

"Not good," he says to her as he comes to a stop. "He's very weak. And even if he somehow makes it through this bout, if he keeps up what he's been doing, he won't make it through the next. That I can almost promise you."

"What can I do?"

"Ever heard of 'tough love'?"

Rudi nods.

"Well," the doctor goes on, "you're the only one I see who can give it to him."

Again, she nods, and she continues on, and she comes to Tommy's door, where she can hear him struggling to breathe. She also sees him, sleeping unpeacefully in a bed, with a breathing tube through his nose. But even with this — even with his shaved head and his bloated and emaciated appearance — to her he's the same. He's the same boy she fell in love with. Nothing can hide this, so she smiles. She smiles big.

But then she remembers what the doctor just told her, and she puts on her apathy face. She also marches up to Tommy and drops her bag, and she takes hold of his hand.

It's cold and lifeless, but it feels just as good as the first time she held it, and she can't help moan a little. Which wakes him.

Groggily, he looks up at the soaking angel in white hovering over him, and he forgets everything that's happened to him. He even murmurs her name. But he eventually remembers. He remembers everything, and he turns from her, and he squirms his hand away while growling, "I told you to leave me alone."

Instead, she grabs his hand again — this time angrily, and while he again tries to squirm it away, this time she holds on. She also tells him: "You can't push me away anymore. I'm stronger."

"Please go," he mumbles. "Please."

"Not until you look at me," she insists.

At first, he doesn't react, but he soon realizes that she means it. So he turns to her, and he looks up into her ferocious brown eyes, which are glowing with fury.

"There's gonna be some changes around here," she barks, while desperately trying to keep herself together. "From now on you're gonna take care of yourself. And you're gonna do what that doctor tells you!" It's then all her ferociousness escapes her, leaving the frightened little girl, who with a breaking voice cries out, "And, and you're gonna fucking love me!"

With these words, she falls apart. She collapses on top of him and clutches his gown, and she weeps while crying out, "Because I fucking love you! God, how I love you!"

Tommy tries to resist her. He tries with everything left in his rotting body. But he simply can't, and this is when he knows he no longer belongs to himself, nor will he ever want to again. So with his cold but no longer lifeless hand, he grasps the back of her neck, and he shivers with joy, and she shivers right back while calling out his name.

“I can’t live without you,” he whispers into her ear. “It’s not a figure of speech or hyperbole, or whatever the right word is. It’s just fact.”

Chapter 71

Rudi is sitting next to Tommy on his bed, wiping his brow with a cold compress while he peacefully sleeps. It's late in the afternoon and he's improved much in the time she's been there. His fever is down and he's breathing a little easier. But he's still weak and tired, and he's been coming in and out of consciousness all day.

It's then Rudi starts softly singing to him. She sings him the chorus to "You Light Up My Life."

This causes Tommy to wake, and to even smirk a bit, and he mutters, "I must be dreaming if you're singing that song."

"Actually," she tells him, "Patti Smith sings that song, and if she can sing it, it just can't be bad."

This last word causes Tommy's smile to fade.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"I said some terrible things to you," he replies.

"What are you talking about?" she replies back.

“The last time I was here.”

“Forget it. I said much worse things to myself.”

“I can’t forget it. I promised you I’d never hurt you, and I did just that.”

“Look, we can’t change what we’ve said or done. So let’s just worry about the future, okay?”

“What future, Rudi?”

“*Ours*. All you gotta do is believe. Can you do that for me?”

He nods, though it’s not entirely convincing, and he soon drifts back asleep. Then a nurse steps into the room, pushing a medicine cart. Like most of the hospital staff who’ve visited Tommy that day, the woman’s wearing a mask and gloves. Which Rudi sneers at.

“What,” she quietly snarls, “were there no decontamination suits available?”

“It’s all right, Rudi,” Tommy mumbles after waking again. “I’m used to it.”

“But I’m not,” she tells him. “And I’m sick of it.”

“Just about everyone wears that shit around me. Except you. And you’re either brave or stupid. Probably a little of both, and maybe a lot of each.”

“Can I please give him his medicine now?” the nurse begs.

Rudi sighs, and she jumps off the bed, just as Pam comes to the door holding a Bamberger’s shopping bag. Which more than surprises Rudi, and she rushes up to the woman.

“How’s he doing?” Pam whispers, while pointing at Tommy.

“Better,” Rudi tells her.

“I’m sorry about this morning.”

“I’m sorry, too. Is Stephen hurt?”

“Only his pride,” Pam says, and she offers the shopping bag to Rudi while adding,

“Here’s the rest of your things. Stephen wanted me to throw them out. Actually, he wanted me to burn them. He doesn’t even know I’m here.”

Rudi takes the bag, and she mutters, “I guess, I guess you’re not gonna wanna go near me either.”

But Pam surprises her again — this time by hugging her, and Rudi hugs her right back.

“He’s just being stupid,” Pam murmurs.

“It’s okay,” Rudi tells her.

“So what are you gonna do now?” Pam asks, once they break their embrace.

“I guess move back in with my stepdad,” Rudi answers.

“Does he know about all this?”

“Yeah, and he was surprisingly cool about it. Let’s just hope he stays that way.”

The nurse right then flies past them out of the room, and Pam says to Rudi: “I better get home.”

“Thanks for coming,” Rudi says back.

“Call me anytime . . . anytime Stephen’s not home.”

“You got it.”

Rudi then returns to Tommy with the shopping bag, which he points at while uttering, “What’s that?”

Rudi sighs.

“*Rudi*,” he pleads.

“My things,” she tells him. “I got thrown out.”

“Because of me,” he growls, before turning away from her and sighing himself.

“Because of them,” she insists.

“Maybe . . . maybe you should just stay away from me for now.”

“You’re always looking for reasons to keep us apart.”

Tommy smiles at this, and he says to her: “So where you gonna live?”

“I gotta call my stepdad,” she tells him. “The judge said I could move back there.”

“You really want to go back there?”

“I don’t have a choice. But what about you?”

“Me?”

“Where have you been staying?” she asks.

“At that motel,” he answers. “On 22.”

“*Tommy.*”

“I’m not gonna stay there anymore.”

“Hey, I know — maybe you can stay with me.”

“What?”

“Sure. My bedroom isn’t too big, but it’s big enough.”

“But your stepdad —”

“— He knows all about you. He won’t mind.”

“And if he does?”

“Then we’ll find some other place. It’ll be great. I can take care of you, and we’ll argue all day long. And later . . .”

“It’ll be torture,” he utters.

“What do you mean?” she utters back.

“You don’t know how badly I want to make love to you.”

“You’re wrong. I do know.”

“It can never happen.”

“That’s not true,” she insists.

“It is true,” he insists back.

“There are only a few things we can’t do, and a million things we can. I’ll show you — it’ll be wonderful. I promise.”

“I don’t know.”

“Just let me do the knowing for both of us. I’m gonna call my dad right now.”

Rudi says this, and she hurries out of the room.

“Where you going?” he cries out.

“To use one of the pay phones downstairs,” she tells him.

“But I got a phone!”

Though she doesn’t want him listening, just in case her stepfather isn’t so cool about it anymore. But she needn’t have worried, as the man can’t hide his excitement over having her home.

“You sure you don’t mind if Tommy stays?” she asks.

“I don’t mind,” he answers, though there’s some hesitation in his voice.

“A lot of people are frightened of his disease.”

“But you’re not.”

“No.”

“Well, I don’t know much about it,” he tells her. “All I know is bits on the news. And some guys at work they, they joke about it and stuff. But you, you’re the smartest person I know. A lot smarter than me. So I’m not frightened, either.”

“Thank you so much, Dad.”

“Thank you for still calling me that.”

The two then make arrangements for him to pick her up, and Rudi returns to Tommy’s room. It’s there she sees a middle-aged man she’s never seen before sitting next to Tommy. This man is tall and well-built and has a kippah on his head, and unlike most who have visited Tommy that day, he isn’t wearing a surgical mask. Nor is he wearing rubber gloves even though he’s holding Tommy’s hand.

“If you need anything, Tommy,” the man says, with a soft gentle voice that belies his appearance, “just let me know.”

“You think,” Tommy replies, “you think you could get me a Bible?”

It’s then Tommy notices Rudi by the door, and he mutters, “Oh, hey.”

The middle-aged man responds to this by turning to Rudi, and he smiles at her, in spite of finding her appearance more than strange.

“This is Rabbi Orenstein,” Tommy goes on, “from my temple.”

Forcing a smile, Rudi steps toward the man, who stands up.

“This,” Tommy then says to the rabbi while pointing at Rudi, “this is my, my . . .”

“His girlfriend,” Rudi states. “I’m his girlfriend — Rudi Weiss.”

Rudi and the rabbi at this moment shake hands, watched by a smiling Tommy .

“It’s nice to meet you,” the rabbi says to Rudi, in a tone of voice suggesting that he means every word.

Rudi says likewise, and she excuses herself while promising Tommy to return in the morning. She further leaves the hospital and finds her stepfather waiting for her outside in his car, and he takes her back to Irvington.

There, in the apartment, she makes her way to her old bedroom, where she become

shocked, as it's all cleaned up, and all the walls have been repaired and painted. The room also has a dresser, on top of which stands her stereo and a rack with all her records, alongside a neat pile of cassette tapes. What's more, the floor has been carpeted and the bed replaced, by a brand new one with an oak frame.

"You like it?" her stepfather murmurs, from right behind her.

Trying to control her emotions, she turns to him and mumbles, "You, you couldn't have just done all this."

"Well," he says, "I've been kinda hoping you might come back one day."

"Oh, Daddy!" she cries out, before hugging him.

"You always have a home here," he tells her, while hugging her as hard as he can.

"Always."

Chapter 72

Tommy is soon well enough to leave the hospital, and Mr. Reese comes by one evening to pick him and Rudi up.

Though Tommy can tell that the man is uncomfortable about the whole situation. Mr. Reese is polite, but it's a cool polite — a barely tolerant polite. He also makes no effort to shake Tommy's hand or come anywhere near him.

But Tommy doesn't say anything about this. Not at the hospital or on the drive to Irvington. He just holds on to Rudi in the back seat of the car and hopes that everything will work out.

He's still hoping this when Rudi helps him inside the apartment. Which is when she says to him: "It's not exactly Newstead. Or even Short Hills."

"It's all right," he tells her back. "It's a whole lot better than that motel. Thank you." He further thanks Mr. Reese, who nods with a forced smile and says, "Should I order food or something?"

"I think we're just gonna go to bed early tonight," Rudi tells him, with just a hint of a

smile. Which Tommy both notices and blushes at.

“All right,” Mr. Reese mutters, with some unease.

“Tomorrow I’ll make a big meal for all of us,” Rudi goes on. “Lunch and dinner.”

“That’ll be terrific. But I guess, I guess I’m not gonna get any meat.”

“I’ll make you some meat. I promise.”

Mr. Reese smiles at this, and Rudi smiles back, before leading Tommy inside her room by the hand. She afterward closes the door and Tommy sees his backpack against a wall, which Rudi and her stepfather picked up the day before. He also sees his copy of *Damaged* next to it.

“That kinda surprised me,” she says to him, while pointing at the record.

“It’s the best,” he tells her. “And I’m not the only one who thinks that.”

“Yeah?”

“Wait till you see my tattoo.”

“You didn’t.”

Tommy just grins, and Rudi says to him: “Your motorcycle’s outside. That is, if someone hasn’t stolen it already.”

This makes Tommy chuckle.

“I’d say it’s fifty-fifty,” she goes on, with a chuckle of her own. “No one even locks their car doors around here, because people would just smash the windows.”

“How’d you get it here?” he asks.

“The bike?” she asks back. “I drove it.”

“You can drive a motorcycle?”

Rudi responds by wrapping her arms around Tommy’s waist, and she says to him: “What do you think?”

“I think I should be well beyond doubting anything about you.”

He says this, and he leans down to kiss her. But he stops himself when he notices a gift-wrapped package on the bed. Which he points at and asks, “What’s that?”

Without even looking, she says, “Just a little housewarming gift.”

“Rudi, I should be the one giving gifts. You’ve already given me too much. Way too much.”

“It’s nothing. Go ahead — open it.”

Together, they make their way to the bed, and there they sit while Tommy gently removes the wrapping so as not to tear it. Which exposes her crumpled drawing of him set inside a plain black frame.

Tommy smirks at this, and he tells her: “You know, I’ve always wanted a picture of Lee Ving.”

Rudi smirks back, and she pushes Tommy onto the bed. She also straddles his waist and grips his chest, and she murmurs, “So are you gonna make love to me or what?”

“I don’t know,” he answers.

“I told you, I’m gonna do the knowing for both of us. And don’t worry, I’ll take it easy on you. For tonight.”

She says this, and she leans down to kiss his neck, and for many minutes they just hold each other and enjoy each other’s warmth.

“I’m scared,” he whispers.

“Me, too,” she whispers back. “It’s a great feeling, isn’t it?”

He squeezes her in response, and she starts undressing him. She unbuttons his wrinkled button-down blue Oxford shirt, and she kisses his bare smooth chest, and she caresses her cheeks

against his torso and arms. Which causes both of them bliss.

Eventually, she rises above him, and he peels off her white T-shirt. Then, for just a moment, they stare at each other before she reaches back to undo her bra. Which she does while saying, “I sure hope you weren’t expecting Dolly Parton.”

He giggles at this, and she giggles right back, just as she lets the fabric drop to the bed. Which makes him smile. He smiles at her beauty. A beauty so unlike anything he’s imagined. To him, it’s as if Michelangelo had carved her out of ivory. She’s perfection and this just awes him and puts him in an hypnotic state.

He only comes out of this state when she takes his hands and places them on her. Which causes them both to moan inaudibly, and they both close their eyes while wishing they could live this fragment of themselves forever.

When it finally does end, Tommy replaces his hands with his cheeks and lips, and he kisses her. At the same time, his fingers and hands find her back and spine, and they mesh with them as he plays his own personal concerto, which only she can hear and which sends her into a rapture that goes on and on. She’s barely conscious now, and it’s instinct alone that removes the rest of their clothes, leaving their bodies to entangle and entwine, with their arms and legs and mouths in perpetual discovery of each other. They even make their song again while returning to that dusty dance hall over and over.

By the time they reach the end of their wondrous night together nothing of them has gone untouched or unkissed or unloved, and while they may not be lovers in a very common sense of the word, they’re now lovers in all other senses. All the important ones.

“I told you we could make love,” she whispers into his ear, with a big smile on her face.

“I think I should be well beyond doubting anything about you,” he whispers back, with

his smile even bigger than hers.

“It’s gonna be like this every night forever,” she insists, “only better.”

She soon falls asleep while desperately clinging to his body, and to him this is the best part of the night. It’s the best part of his whole life — holding her and protecting her and feeling her breathe against him. It feels so good that he never wants to sleep, and this is actually the best motivation he has to keep on living. So that he can keep feeling her body clinging to his.

“I’m never gonna die,” he tells himself as the sun begins to rise through her window, and he keeps telling himself this again and again until he believes it.

Chapter 73

Tommy awakes early in the afternoon, and he notices that Rudi is gone. Which horrifies him, as he thinks she's gone for good.

But he soon regains his senses. He also hears sounds coming from the living room. So he dresses himself and steps out of the bedroom, and he sees Mr. Reese sitting in his faux brown leather easy chair, watching college football on the old black and white television.

"I'm sorry," the big man utters when he notices Tommy. "Is it too loud for you?"

"Not at all," Tommy tells him.

"Rudi went food shopping. She should be back soon."

Tommy nods, and Mr. Reese returns his attention to the TV, and Tommy joins him. He sits on a couch a safe distance away and feels the cool politeness once again.

"Thanks for letting me stay here," he eventually says, after he's unable to come up with anything better.

"No problem," Mr. Reese says back.

"If you want, I could help with the rent."

“That’s okay. It’s not much. This isn’t exactly the Taj Mahal.”

“Still . . .”

“But if you want to help out with food and other stuff, it would be much appreciated.”

“You got it.”

Once again, the conversation falls silent, and Tommy looks around the room, and he sees a bunch of classic rock posters on the walls. One in particular catches his attention, and he utters, “You like Zeppelin?”

“Oh, yeah,” Mr. Reese says to him. “They’re my favorite. Seen them like a dozen times.”

“I’m actually a big Yardbirds fan.”

“Really?” the man says with some surprise. “I just figured you liked the same stuff as Rudi.”

“I like some of it,” Tommy replies. “But the Yardbirds, I don’t know, I’m kinda obsessed with them for some reason.”

“No kidding.”

“I have like every album and bootleg and single. Not long ago I got a ‘best of’ collection just because it had one song I hadn’t heard: ‘Happenings Ten Years Time Ago.’”

“I know that song. I actually saw them play it live, you know, back in the sixties.”

“No way.”

“With Page *and* Beck on guitar together.”

“Get out of here.”

“I shit you not. And you’ll never guess who opened for them.”

“Who?”

“The Velvet Underground.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah,” Mr. Reese utters with a big smile, “when those religious people come up and pester me about Heaven and stuff, I just smile and say, ‘Brother, I’ve already been.’”

Tommy laughs at this, and so does Mr. Reese, who then points at the TV and says, “If you wanna watch something else, it’s okay with me. Or we could just turn it off.”

“I actually like football,” Tommy tells him.

“You do?”

“I played, in fact, at Columbia.”

“Wow, I would’ve never imagined Rudi with a football player.”

“I don’t think she ever imagined it, either.”

“What position did you play?”

“Flanker. I was even all-state last year.”

“No shit. I was an offensive lineman in school.”

“I can see it.”

“Hey, you like the Jets?” Mr. Reese excitedly asks.

“Yeah, I do,” Tommy answers, with a big smile.

“‘Cause the opening round of the playoffs is coming up next week, and, you know, I could get tickets if you want.”

He says this just as the front door opens, and Rudi steps inside carrying a shopping bag. Right away she sees the two smiling, and she smiles, too. Hers is even bigger than theirs.

Chapter 74

In spite of Rudi's care, in the following months Tommy spends as much time in the hospital as in Irvington, and the constant shuffling back and forth wears on everyone, especially Rudi.

Noticing this one morning during his regular hospital rounds, Rabbi Orenstein decides to visit Mrs. Goodwin, and that afternoon they have tea and cookies in her living room. Then, after a little small talk, the rabbi mentions that he's just seen Tommy at St. Barnabas.

"Oh," Mrs. Goodwin utters. She also averts her eyes a little, before adding with feigned disinterest, "How is he?"

"I suppose as good as can be expected."

"Is he still with that . . . that girl?"

"Rudi?"

Mrs. Goodwin nods.

"Yes," the man says. "You know, I've been a rabbi now for many decades, and I see sick people and their families all the time. But yet I've never seen anyone as devoted as that young

lady. And, believe me, there are many things related to Tommy's disease that aren't so pretty."

"She probably feels guilty," growls Mrs. Goodwin.

"Guilty?" the rabbi mutters.

"She's the one who did this to my son, by bringing him down into the gutter with her."

"I don't know anything about that. I do know, though, that everyone makes mistakes. But, unfortunately, not everyone forgives them."

"Can we please change the subject."

"Actually, the reason I'm here is that I wanted to ask you something."

"What's that?"

It's then the rabbi explains the couple's situation, and he asks Mrs. Goodwin if she could possibly rent them an apartment near the hospital. "There's a place across the street," he tells her. "I don't think it's too expensive."

"So that's what this is all about," Mrs. Goodwin remarks, with a knowing nod. "They've sent you here to get money from me."

"Actually, they didn't send me. They don't even know I'm here. And my understanding is that Tommy has access to some of his own money. But I don't think it's possible for a minor to rent an apartment."

Mrs. Goodwin thinks it over, and she says, "I'll make the arrangements. Now, if that's all, Rabbi, I'm not feeling too well right now."

"I understand," the rabbi says back. He further stands up and begins to leave. But at the entrance to the living room he stops and turns back to the woman, and he tells her: "I know Tommy misses you."

"He knows where to find me," she tells him back.

“And now you know where to find him, too.”

Chapter 75

Rudi has mixed feelings about moving to Livingston. Not only doesn't she want to leave her stepfather by himself, but she really doesn't want to accept help from Mrs. Goodwin.

But there's just way too much logic in the move. Even Mr. Reese sees it, and he tells Rudi this while all three discuss it in his living room. He further tells her that she'd be stupid not to accept the offer.

"I don't know," she growls, while shaking her head.

"Well, if I can be totally frank," he says to her, "you guys, you're kinda interfering with my love life."

Rudi chuckles at this.

"Besides," the man adds, with his own chuckle, "this gives me a place to visit now and then."

"It better be more than just 'now and then,'" she insists.

"I can certainly see myself stopping there for dinner once a week or so."

"You'll always be welcome," Tommy tells him. "Any day or night or morning. In the

same way you've welcomed me here. I can never repay you for what you've done for us."

"It was nothing."

"My own family won't come near me. None of them. Friends I've known my entire life treat me like I'm already dead."

"It's their loss."

Mr. Reese says this, and he reaches out his big paw, and Tommy grasps it.

Chapter 76

The summer comes, and Rudi graduates high school. Though she doesn't go to the ceremony knowing Tommy wouldn't be welcomed. Nor does she give any thought to the prom.

What's more, she doesn't feel as if she's sacrificed anything because of all this, but Tommy feels differently. He also feels that he's the only reason she isn't going to an Ivy League school. Instead, she's attending Seton Hall in the fall — a small university on the edge of Newark a short distance away, and she's only doing that because he insisted.

So Tommy really wants to do something special for her upcoming 18th birthday. He thinks about it often and hard, trying to come up with a present that'll really blow her away. But nothing ever comes.

Then one afternoon Mr. Reese has a day off, and he visits Tommy, who's happy for the company, as he spends his days — whether in the apartment or in the hospital — doing nothing more than reading or listening to music. Or sleeping. With the latter being the most common activity.

To make up for all the free meals he's been getting of late and to fatten Tommy up, Mr.

Reese takes Tommy to lunch at a diner he likes in Irvington, where the two spend the afternoon talking about the approaching football season. Afterward, as they're not far from Vintage Vinyl, they go inside the record shop, and Tommy says hello to Butch.

"You're looking much better," Butch tells him.

"You're a liar," Tommy tells him back, with a grin.

"Yeah, maybe," Butch says, with his own grin.

"Rudi's having a birthday soon," Tommy goes on.

"Yeah?"

"And I don't know what to get her."

"Don't look at me. There's a reason why I'm single."

"But you guys like the same stuff."

"Except you."

"Come on, if you were having a birthday and could have anything, what would you want?"

"To see Bad Brains live," Butch says, without any hesitation.

"They're good?" Tommy asks.

"They're good."

"Do they play at that A7 place?" Tommy mutters, not really wanting to return to where he had the bloody encounter.

"They usually play at CBGB," Butch tells him. "I think I have the schedule somewhere."

Butch then searches under the counter, and he finds a set of fliers, but Bad Brains aren't listed on them.

"Anyone else good?" Tommy asks.

“They’re all pretty good,” Butch answers, while looking at the schedule.

Tommy looks, too, and he’s surprised to see a particular performer, who’ll be at the club in a few weeks. Though he keeps quiet about it, and he doesn’t say a word even to Butch, and he plans. Then, on the day of the performance — after Rudi comes home from her job at a local drug counseling center — Tommy leads her outside their apartment door.

“What’s going on?” she demands, with some exasperation, as she’s tired.

“You’ll see,” he insists, and he keeps leading her until they’re outside the building, where waiting for them is a big white limousine. The kind she might’ve ridden if she had gone to her prom.

“What’s going on?” she again demands, though with a lot less exasperation.

“There’s only one way to find out,” he tells her, as he opens one of the back doors.

Reluctantly, she complies. But she keeps asking him their destination all the way to Lower Manhattan, and he keeps refusing to answer. Nor will the driver tell her.

Finally, they reach CBGB and pull up in front, and Rudi glances out the window and says to Tommy: “Why are we stopping here?”

He responds with a smile, and he points to a poster outside the club, which announces that Richard Hell is performing that night.

With lots of surprise, Rudi turns to Tommy, who wishes her an early happy birthday, and in return she won’t stop hugging and kissing him. Though she has to when a police car comes behind them and rings its siren. Which is just before the two jump out of the vehicle and make their way toward the club hand-in-hand.

As she steps inside, Rudi spots a bunch of her old friends by the bar, who are amazed to see her, and she rushes over to them.

“You missed fucking Bad Brains!” howls Leila, who’s a short pale girl with blue hair, who’s just as drunk as she was on the night she called Rudi — the night Rudi found something a little better to do.

Rudi laughs at Leila’s remark, and when Tommy comes up to them, she introduces him to her friends, who look at Tommy much like how Tommy’s friends and family had looked at Rudi — like he doesn’t belong. But Tommy takes no offense at this. He even smiles, before telling Rudi he’ll be sitting in the stage area.

She wants to come with him, but he won’t let her leave her friends. “I’ve got to go to the bathroom first anyway,” he tells her.

She doesn’t believe him, but she lets him go. Though she can’t keep her eyes off him as he does.

“Who is that?” asks Leila, with lots of exasperation.

“I just told you,” Rudi tells her. “His name’s Tommy.”

“Yeah, but *who* is he?”

“The boy I love.”

“The boy you what?”

“You heard me.”

“You know, I once saw a movie about this.”

“Yeah?”

“It was called *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.”

Rudi chuckles at this. But Leila isn’t joking.

Meanwhile, inside the graffiti-covered bathroom Tommy slaps cold water onto his face. He’s burning up, and he’s lightheaded, too. But he also isn’t going to spoil Rudi’s night. So he

forces a smile and steps out of the bathroom, and he takes a seat at a table in the back, where Rudi joins him by jumping onto his lap.

“*Rudi*,” he utters.

“What?” she utters back.

“It’s your birthday. Hang out with your friends.”

“They’re not my friends. Not really. We just like the same music and hate the same things. That doesn’t make you a friend. *You’re* my friend. You’re my friend even though you don’t like the same music or hate the same things. You’re my friend in spite of it.”

She says this and leans forward to kiss him, and she feels his head, right before shaking her own.

“We gotta go home, Tommy,” she insists.

“No,” he insists back.

“You’re sick.”

“I’m fine.”

“Do you wanna go back to the hospital?”

“Look, I’m going back there no matter what. But not tonight. Tonight we’re watching Richard Hell.”

She keeps fighting him, but she eventually realizes that he’s not going anywhere, no matter what she says or does. Still, every few minutes she goes to the bathroom to make cold compresses out of paper towels.

Though he finally stops her. He stops her when the great poet of their generation jumps on stage, and later when he sings his paean to the feelings and thoughts that brought two lost souls together, he glances toward the back and notices the two with their bodies entwined,

staring at him as if he were singing the most beautiful love song ever written.

“I’ve never even had a birthday party,” Rudi whispers to Tommy, who grips her tighter and kisses her forehead. “I used to pretend I didn’t care,” she goes on. “Just like I pretended I didn’t need anyone. But it was all a lie. My whole life was a lie.”

“I wish I could make up for it,” he murmurs to her.

“You have.”

Chapter 77

Through his bedroom window Tommy watches the leaves fall from the trees. He watches them all day while getting more and more depressed.

“What’s wrong?” Rudi asks, when she comes home that night after a day of both school and work and sees him doing the same thing he was doing that morning.

He won’t tell her. He just continues staring. He does this even after she helps him out of his chair and into bed. Which is when she undresses herself and joins him. She further wraps her arms and legs around him and whispers, “Please tell me.”

Finally, he does. He says, “I realized today I’d never see the leaves grow again.”

This makes Rudi want to cry, but she somehow controls herself. She does until she hears him sleeping. She then wipes her eyes and quietly gets out of bed. Just as quietly, she gets dressed, and though she’s tired and has two midterms the following day she leaves their apartment.

Tommy doesn’t notice she’s gone until the following morning, when he wakes to lots of surprise. The surprise comes not from Rudi’s absence but from all the pots in the room. They’re

everywhere, filled with young and green and growing life. The last of these Rudi brings inside the room.

She's right then filthy and exhausted, having spent the entire night hauling the plants from a nursery down the road. But still she smiles. She smiles at the man who makes it all worth it. She also tells him: "It's spring, and it will always be spring."

Chapter 78

Tommy's Harley speeds out of the entrance to Seton Hall.

Rudi then flies down South Orange Avenue on the bike, with her white sea bag across her back and her headphones strapped to her ears. Which are blasting Tommy's *Damaged* tape into her head along with its mad desperation to hope. Which she yells out over.

The year she has spent fighting Tommy's disease has aged her considerably. It has also made her look ceaselessly tired. But not much else has changed about her. Her hair's still jet black and still spiky, though now it's a bit longer and not quite so wild looking. Her makeup, too, is much the same, and her clothes still scream defiance, even if they aren't quite so tattered anymore. Most importantly, her attitude is still there, and her unconquerable will. Which is on display to the whole fucking town that sunny afternoon as she roars through the village center going way past any speed limit.

Though she suddenly slows down, and she parks along the curb, and her attitude and will appear to stay with the bike as she makes her way across the street to Reservoir and then inside it, where a couple of the wait staff glower at her before turning away.

Pretending not to notice this, Rudi steps up to the counter and says, “You got a pizza for Weiss?”

“Just a second,” a man there growls, without looking at her.

Rudi ignores this. She ignores this rudeness just like she ignores the rudeness that greets her whenever she comes there, because she isn’t there for herself. Which she reminds herself while noticing Mr. Agnellino glaring at her from across the room — glaring as if he were trying to send her away with his look alone, which she has seen often in the months she’s been performing this chore.

Turning from him, she sees the rabbi and a few other people sitting at a table a short distance away. He sees her, too, and he smiles at her. He smiles at her with warmth — with so much warmth that it melts the apathy she’s desperately trying to convey, and she so wants to hug the man for this seemingly minor gesture of kindness. A gesture that’s anything but minor to her. Though right then she hears a banging sound, and she turns around, and she sees that the man behind the counter has just plopped down a pizza box, and he, too, is glaring.

Chapter 79

Rudi parks the bike in the lot by her apartment building, and she and the pizza march off. Not to her home, but across the street to the hospital, and to Tommy. She does this knowing that the pizza will make him happy, as it's one of the few things that still connects him with his old life, and with being alive.

She soon reaches the door of his room, and she sees Nurse Templeton checking his breathing tube. This nurse is a young woman, with long curly blonde hair and pale blue eyes, and she's one of the few people in the hospital unafraid of Tommy. So she never wears gloves or masks around him. She also has a smile that makes both Tommy and Rudi feel at ease whenever they see it, much as it's doing right now.

"Thank you, Kim," Rudi tells her, with her own smile, which expresses so many things that can never be said.

Hearing Rudi's voice, Tommy meekly turns to her. Then, when he sees what she's carrying, he smiles, too. He smiles not because of the pizza, as he no longer cares much for that, but because of the person who's brought it. A person who's his gateway to a world he's slowly

leaving.

Seeing Tommy smile brings Rudi joy. It's what keeps her going, through all the rudeness and sadness, and it makes her relish every moment she's alive. She especially loves his smile because she knows he wants to do anything but smile, and that he only smiles for her.

Chapter 80

Rudi says goodbye to Maria, who's calling from her dorm at George Washington University, and she hangs up the phone. She further takes a small bite of pizza before glancing at Tommy, who's staring at her while picking at his food.

No longer is he the handsome and muscular football player she first met. His hair has thinned and is far from wavy, and he's become gaunt, with his graying eyes sunk deep inside his head. But to Rudi, none of this matters. To her, he's more beautiful than ever, and she can't stop admiring his beauty, and she wants the image of him at this very moment to remain locked inside her forever.

It's then she picks up a fresh slice of pie, and she tries to feed it to Tommy. But he turns away.

"Just a few bites," she insists.

"I can't," he insists back.

"You don't want them to put back the feeding tube, do you?"

Feeding tube.

To Tommy, it's bad enough needing a tube to breathe, but having one to eat makes him seem far more machine than human. So these two hideous words are enough for him to turn to Rudi and gobble down as much pizza as he can. But the words aren't hideous enough to keep the food down, and he struggles not to throw it all up, and she struggles with him. She clenches his hand, and she grimaces even more than he does while wishing he could share his pain. She'd take all of it if she could.

Eventually, Tommy's agony eases, and with his hot sweating face he looks at Rudi. He also grins at her and shakes his head, and he mumbles, "I don't know why you go through all this."

"Through what?" she asks.

"You could've just sent me a card," he answers, with his eyes tearing up. "No one would've blamed you."

She responds to this by moving the pizza box from his bed onto the nightstand, above which hangs a framed crumpled drawing of a handsome boy who longs for something he can't even describe. She then sits next to this boy, and she puts her arm around him, and she says to him: "Don't think for a second that I did any of this for you. I did it all for me. I'm the most selfish person alive."

Tommy smiles at this, and he rests his head on her chest while caressing her belly. Which amazes her. It amazes her that even then he's trying to comfort her. It amazes her so much that she kisses him on his forehead, and she cradles him in her arms, and she thinks of what she could possibly do to make him as happy as she is right then.

"What would you think if I changed my look some?" she mumbles. "You know, pretty myself up a bit. I could get a new haircut and clothes. I could be, I don't know, I could be

someone who wouldn't embarrass you."

He doesn't answer her, so she thinks he might've fallen asleep, and she says, "Tommy, did you hear me?"

"I fell in love with a punk rock girl," he tells her. "A girl who's no one but her. Nothing less would ever do."

Now it's Rudi's turn to tear up. She also squeezes Tommy. She squeezes him harder than she's ever squeezed anything before, and she whispers into his ear: "Remember that first time we were by those falls?"

"Yeah," he whispers back.

"You were wrong. *You're* the best anywhere."

"And you're my fairy tale."

Chapter 81

Rudi screeches along with Fear's "Fuck Christmas" as she approaches the Livingston Mall. She then turns off her Walkman and pushes her way through the glass doors while pondering a big question: what do you get someone who's just about to die?

She's been pondering this ever since the night at CBGB, and she's been saving for it almost as long. But now it's Christmas Eve. Which is why she's in a place she loathes.

She's reminded of how much she loathes the mall when she sees everyone staring at her. A department store saleswoman even rushes toward a security guard the moment Rudi steps inside.

Rudi tries to ignore this. She tries to focus on why she's there. Though everything she sees is as unspecial as everything she's seen everywhere else, and after going through dozens of stores she's ready to give up.

Though, on the way out of the mall, she finally spots something: a chocolate shop, and she buys Tommy a bag of white chocolate from a frightened shop clerk, who has a hard time filling the order with his hands shaking so much.

At least it's something, she tells herself as she marches out of the store with the chocolate. Which is when she sees the nearby mall Santa, who's got a bad beard and even worse stuffing.

"Just like everything here," she mumbles, and she storms toward the exits. But as she turns the corner of the corridor leading to the parking lot, something catches her eye: a miniature waterfall in the window of a toy store. She stares at it for a long time, as it reminds her of the falls Tommy loves but can no longer visit. It seems the perfect gift, and she has just enough money to buy it.

"There it is, Mommy!" a child's voice cries out from nearby. "There it is!"

The voice causes Rudi to peek her head around the corner, and she sees a little girl dragging her reluctant mother to another window of the store, where she points to a single Cabbage Patch Doll. Though it isn't the doll the woman notices — it's the price. Rudi notices it, too. She also notices that the woman's searching — searching for the right words. She searches and searches, before glancing at her daughter and muttering, "Maybe, maybe next year sometime."

"It's okay, Mommy," the girl says. "Really."

"How about some hot cocoa?" her mother says, with her voice cracking.

The girl nods, and the two slither off with their heads down.

Rudi tries to ignore this. She tries not to recall all the disappointing Christmases she spent when she was the little girl's age, and she marches into the store. It's there she sees behind the counter a little gray man who looks older than time, who smiles warmly at her before wishing her a Merry Christmas.

Knowing that old people were usually the most appalled by punks like her, Rudi looks around, thinking that the man must be addressing someone else. But there is no one else.

“What can I do for you?” he asks.

Rudi responds by glancing at the waterfall. But she points to the doll.

“You’re very lucky,” he tells her, as he grabs the doll and places it in its box. “This is the last one. I literally couldn’t keep them in stock. Would you like it gift-wrapped?”

Rudi looks out the store window, and she sees the mother and daughter in the food court, sitting down with their drinks. “Can you do it fast?” she asks.

“It won’t take but a minute,” he answers, before pulling out a sheet of fancy gold wrapping paper.

“Could you do me a favor?” she murmurs, while continuing to look through the window.

“What’s that?” he murmurs back.

“You see that woman over there in red. The one sitting next to the little girl in blue. Could you give the doll to her?”

“I don’t understand,” he mutters after glancing at the two.

“Tell her, I don’t know, tell her it’s a store promotion, or a contest. Tell her anything.”

The man still doesn’t understand, so he again looks at the two through the window. It’s then he sees their melancholy, and he understands. He understands everything, and he again smiles warmly at Rudi. He smiles even more warmly than before.

“What about you?” he whispers, as he finishes the wrapping. “Isn’t there something I could get for you to give?”

“I’m fine,” Rudi tells him, before handing him the money for the doll. She does this and rushes off, desperate to get away. But when she gets to the corridor she stops and turns around, and she watches the old man limp toward the woman, with a large shopping bag in his hand. She further watches him offer the woman the bag, and she watches him whisper into her ear.

Right away the woman's face lights up. It lights up like a tree. Which makes Rudi smile. She smiles big.

She keeps smiling until she returns home and sees Tommy struggling to put a gift box under their modest tree. A box wrapped with a big white bow, which took him more than an hour to prepare. He's also singing. He singing along with "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," which is playing on the stereo.

Tommy soon turns to Rudi, and he mumbles, "You've caught me."

"I," she mumbles back, "I don't have a gift for you."

"You've already given me a gift."

He says this with a smile. A smile that makes her blush.

"I do have a little something for you," she says, and she staggers over to him, and she takes off her seabag, and she reaches inside it for the chocolate. But instead she pulls out a small box, which is wrapped with the same fancy gold wrapping the old man used on the doll.

"I don't get it," she gasps, with her head shaking.

"Get what?" Tommy asks.

"He, he must've slipped it into my bag. But how?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know. I really don't."

"Can I open it?"

"I don't even know what it is."

She says this but gives Tommy the package, and he gently unwraps it, as gently as he unwrapped the framed crumpled drawing she gave him a year earlier. He further opens the box, and he looks inside it with shock.

“What is it?” Rudi asks.

“It’s . . .” he mutters, as he finds himself somewhere else — at the waterfall he loves so much. What’s more, it’s a bright summer’s day, and he’s alone, with the box in his hand. Even stranger, he’s no longer sick. He’s also wearing an expensive suit, and an equally expensive attaché case is by his side.

Not understanding what’s happened, he feels around himself, and he fishes out a wallet from his jacket pocket. Inside this he finds his driver’s license, and he sees that he’s older and living on an expensive street in Newstead. He also sees that the wallet’s full not only of credit cards and cash, but of pictures, too. Pictures of a beautiful woman and beautiful kids.

His life seems perfect. Except for one thing: the woman isn’t Rudi. Worse, he can barely remember her. It isn’t just her face and voice he can barely remember. He can barely remember the first time she looked into his eyes and the realization the came with it — that such a thing could mean something. He can also barely remember the first time he felt her hand pressed against his, and how this made him feel indomitable, and he can’t remember their first kiss at all.

Despite all his trying, his memories of Rudi keep fading more and more, and he knows it won’t be long before he’ll forget her completely and forever. This is when he drops the box. He drops it into the roaring water below, and at once he finds himself back in his apartment bedroom and back to the sickness that’s ravaging him. He’s also back preparing the gift he’s spent an hour preparing, with Christmas carols playing on the stereo.

Eventually, he finishes tying the big white bow, and with lots of effort he lifts himself and the box off the bed. Then he struggles — to get out of the bedroom and into the living room, where he sings along with the music while placing the box under the modest Christmas tree. He does this just as Rudi comes home.

He soon turns to her, and he mumbles, “You’ve caught me.”

“I,” she mumbles back, “I don’t have a gift for you.”

“You’ve already given me a gift.”

He says this with a smile. A smile that makes her blush.

“I do have a little something for you,” she says, and she staggers over to him, and she takes off her seabag, and she reaches inside it for the chocolate. Which he enjoys that evening, wrapped in the arms of his gift.

Chapter 82

Tommy stares out the window, at the apartment building across the street. He stares with eyes that express both desire and weary.

As he does this, a middle-aged candy striper stops at his room pushing a cart of decaying books, and she looks at the boy everyone in the hospital has warned her to avoid, for her own safety.

“No Rudi today?” she asks, with a thick Hispanic accent.

Slowly, Tommy turns toward the woman, and he forces a smile. Then, with a barely audible voice, he mutters, “I made her take a day off.”

“That was very nice of you,” the woman says, with her own smile, which is anything but forced.

“Yeah, you know, she’s eighteen and in college. She should be partying and having fun.”

“You just don’t understand women.”

“Yeah?”

“We love in only one gear.”

Tommy smiles at this. This time for real.

“Would you like a book today?” the woman goes on.

“All right,” he answers, even though he really doesn’t want one, and she pushes the cart to him so that he can look at the crusty spines.

He’s never much cared for the books she’s brought, as he’s found them mostly junk, but he’s always taken one just to be nice, especially as she’s always been nice to him. But now he’s too lightheaded to even select a book at random. So he says to her: “Why don’t you just pick something out for me.”

“All right,” she says, and she checks her inventory while mumbling, “I know you like smart books.”

“Sometimes,” he mumbles back.

She soon spots something, and she says, “You might like this.” She then plucks out a thin paperback entitled *Ficciones*, by Jorge Luis Borges, and she shows it to him.

“Is it in English?” he asks.

“This is a translation,” she answers.

“I’ve never heard of him.”

“Some say that he is the best writer in all of South America.”

“Yeah?”

“But not me,” she tells him before brushing the tattered cover with her palm. She afterward hands Tommy the book while adding, “I say he is the best writer in the whole world.”

This piques Tommy’s interest, and he takes the book from her, and he gently turns its cover.

Chapter 83

Rudi parks the motorcycle, and she walks across the street toward Reservoir, and she once again prepares for the rudeness awaiting her.

But she never even gets inside, as the door swings open the moment she reaches it, exposing a dour Mr. Agnellino, who's holding a pizza box.

"Oh, hi," Rudi mutters.

"This is for you," he states, matter-of-factly.

"Let me just get my purse."

"It's not necessary."

"I don't understand."

"This one is on us."

"I still don't understand," she utters, with a shake of her head.

"You know," he tells her, "for a long time now you've come into my restaurant almost every day, and you buy a pizza from me, even though me and everyone else here is unfriendly to you. The truth is that we were trying to send you a message — that you weren't welcome. You

and your crazy hair and clothes, and your makeup. You, the person everyone says such terrible things about.”

Rudi reacts to this, by lowering her eyes.

“But still you come,” he goes on. “And none of us can understand why. I mean, sure — my pizza’s good — better than good. But there are a million places to eat. Then Rabbi Orenstein — God bless his soul — he tells me who the pizzas are for. He also tells me all the wonderful things you’ve done for that poor boy.”

With lots of surprise, Rudi looks up at Mr. Agnellino, who’s barely controlling his emotions, and he says to her: “And, and I’ve never been so ashamed in my life.”

“Forget it,” she tells him.

“I won’t,” he tells her back. “You’re a saint.”

“I’m not. Really.”

“Listen to me, I know a little about these things. *You’re a saint*. They come in all shapes and sizes. And hair styles.”

Rudi smiles at this.

“I want you to know,” Mr. Agnellino continues in a firm voice, “for as long as I own this restaurant — for as long as my children and grandchildren own it — you will be treated like a member of the family whenever you walk inside. This is a promise.”

Now it’s Rudi’s turn to control her emotions, and she can barely blurt out, “Thank you.” She then takes the pizza and starts backing up while saying to him: “I better be going.”

“Tell Tommy we’re all pulling for him!” the old man cries out.

Chapter 84

Rudi approaches Tommy's room with the pizza box in her hands.

It's then a deep and dark voice calls out her name, and she turns around and sees Dr. Kleiner standing a short distance away, with an ominous expression on his face. It's so ominous that she knows what it likely means even before she makes her way toward him.

Though, when she stops in front of him, he can't say a thing. He just stares at her, unable to express the right words.

"What is it?" she asks.

"The pneumonia has gotten worse," he tells her. "Much worse. If . . . if there's anything . . . any special plans . . ."

"When?" she mumbles, while somehow maintaining her apathy.

"I can't say exactly," he tells her. "Maybe he'll make it through the night. Maybe."

"Does he know?"

The doctor nods, and she turns around and staggers off.

"There's something I want to tell you," the man utters, causing her to stop. "This may

seem like little consolation, but you gave that boy a year of life. A year he wouldn't've had otherwise. That's no small thing."

But to Rudi this is exceedingly small, and small is exactly how she feels as she continues to Tommy's room, where he's lying unconscious with the thin paperback clutched in his hand.

Seeing him like this, Rudi wonders if she's too late, and this horrifies her. Part of her doesn't even want to know. But the other part steps up to Tommy and puts the pizza box on the chair by his bed, and this part gently pries the book from his hands. Which causes Tommy to wake. It also causes Rudi to take a long and satisfying breath.

"Hey," he murmurs, with a little smile.

"Hey," she murmurs back, with her own little smile, which is trying to mask her fear. She then lifts up the book and says, "What you reading?"

"The best writer in the world," he tells her, with yet another little smile. "And I'm not the only one who thinks that."

"I've never heard of him," she tells him back, while glancing at the cover.

"Come here. I want to show you something."

She responds by sitting on the bed next to him, and he takes the book from her. He also awkwardly sifts through it while saying, "This is a collection of his short stories."

Before long, Tommy stops at a page in the middle of the book, and with his shaky finger he points to a story called "The Secret Miracle," and he utters, "This one, this is my favorite."

"What's it about?" she asks, even though she doesn't really care, as her thoughts are of far less literary things.

"It's about this playwright during World War II," he answers, while staring happily at the page. "He gets arrested by the Nazis, and he's sentenced to be shot. And he's really upset by

this.”

“I would hope so,” Rudi remarks.

“But,” Tommy insists, “he’s not upset because he’s gonna die. Well, maybe he’s a little upset about that. But he’s really upset because he’ll never get a chance to write his opus — his reason for being. So, the night before his execution, he begs God to give him a one-year reprieve, so he can write his play. And guess what? God grants him his wish.”

“So he doesn’t get shot?”

“Oh, he gets shot, all right — the very next morning.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Just before the bullets are fired, everything freezes. Time freezes. Even the playwright freezes. But he remains conscious, and basically what’s one fraction of a second to everyone else becomes a full year to him. And he gets to write the entire play in his head. And he gets to die happy. Isn’t that wonderful?”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“So I asked God, too,” Tommy mutters.

“Asked Him what?” Rudi mutters back.

“I asked Him if I could have my opus — my reason for being. I asked Him if I could have you.”

“You already have me.”

“I mean not now, but later.”

These words make Rudi want to cry, and she only doesn’t for Tommy’s sake. Instead, she mumbles, “So, so what’d He say?”

“He hasn’t gotten back to me yet,” Tommy replies.

“He must be pretty busy,” she replies back, with a forced smile.

“Yeah, and then there’s, there’s that I cursed Him pretty badly a while back.”

“He must be forgiving about that kind of stuff.”

“I sure hope so,” Tommy whispers, before falling to sleep.

Right away, Rudi takes the book from Tommy, and she wants to toss it into the garbage, as she wants Tommy now and not in what she thinks is just some mythical realm, in spite of all those dance-hall interludes. But strangely she’s drawn to the story, and the harder she fights this, the harder it draws her. So she starts reading it, and it quickly overwhelms her. It overwhelms her with its beauty and its sincerity, and somehow she believes every word.

It’s not a short story, she tells herself after finishing the last sentence. It’s not fiction. It’s truth. She just knows it, and she becomes determined to make Tommy’s wish come true. So, even though he’s asleep, she leans down and whispers into his ear. She whispers, “You have to fight, Tommy — for one more day. You hear me? One more day. That’s all I ask.”

She just knows that he’s heard her. She also knows that he’ll do it, and with the book still clutched in her hand she marches out of the room, and she marches up to the nurses station, where she asks if Dr. Kleiner is around.

“I don’t see him,” a middle-aged nurse growls, without even looking.

“Then get him,” Rudi growls back.

“Excuse me?” the nurse barks, while glaring at Rudi.

“I said fucking get him!”

With a sudden burst of fear, the nurse grabs a phone, and she hurriedly dials a number. At the same time, Rudi sees the rabbi down the hall, and she sprints toward him.

“I need to ask a big favor,” she breathlessly asks, as soon as she’s in front of the man.

Chapter 85

In her apartment that night Rudi spends many hours on the phone, as she has a near infinite number of things to arrange, and almost that many people to call.

Finally, she gets it all done, and she makes one last call, to get a status update on Tommy. Then she speeds out on the motorcycle to the university library, where she collects about a half-dozen books. Which she scans at a table while conducting what she considers the most important research project ever. But it's difficult to do with so many thoughts pounding inside her head at once, mostly relating to all she has to do the following day. Which are so great in number that she just knows she'll forget something. She just hopes it won't be an important something.

In spite of these pressures, when she comes to a page featuring a smiling and blushing young woman, she can't help pause, and smile back. Though she quickly finishes up, and she returns to the hospital, where she holds Tommy's hand all night while doing something she's never really done before: praying. All night she prays, hoping she can exchange all her years of unhappiness for one single day of the opposite.

"Just give me this one thing," she murmurs, over and over.

Eventually, the sun begins to rise, and Tommy does, too. He even has a little more energy than the day before.

“You did hear me yesterday,” she tells him, with both a smile and an intense sense of relief.

“What?” he utters.

“I gotta go somewhere right now, but you have to promise me not to go anywhere.”

“Go?”

“Just promise!”

He thinks it over, and he says to her: “I love you.”

“I love you, too!” she says to him back, as she runs toward the door.

“Where you going?”

“You’ll find out soon!”

Chapter 86

Rudi pulls the motorcycle up to the curb and parks, and she marches up to the big white house she once feared. The house that made her so uncomfortable and out of place.

But this time she's not frightened. This time she's determined, as all her plans depend on having success here. She even tells herself that she's not gonna accept failure. Then she tries to believe it, and then she rings the bell.

Soon, Elizabeth opens the door, and while averting her eyes she mutters, "Oh, hi."

"Is Mrs. Goodwin around?" Rudi asks, in as firm of a voice as she can muster.

Elizabeth shakes her head, which deflates Rudi. But the woman afterward adds, "I'm afraid she won't see you."

"Tell her it's really important," Rudi insists, while inflating once again. "Tell her it's the last time Tommy or I will ever bother her again."

"I'm sorry."

"Please. Tommy's dying. He's dying right now."

Against her will, Elizabeth thinks it over, before nodding her head and saying, "All right.

I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you so much!" Rudi cries out.

"I can't promise anything. But I'll try."

The woman says this and leaves, leaving the door ajar, and Rudi turns from it, and she again prays. This time with her eyes closed and her fists clenched.

Just give me this one thing.

Barely has she said this when she hears yelling coming from inside the house, and she spins back toward the door.

"How dare you talk to me like that!" Mrs. Goodwin screams.

"Someone has to!" Elizabeth screams back. "Just talk to her! For God's sake, talk to her!"

"Tell her to leave!"

"You tell her!"

Right then there's a pause, followed by the marching of footsteps. Which get louder and louder and culminate with Mrs. Goodwin appearing at the door, with her face bright red. "What do you want?" she growls at Rudi.

"Hi," Rudi mutters.

"Look, I don't have time for pleasantries," the woman utters.

"Do you have time for your son?"

"I don't have a son anymore."

Mrs. Goodwin says this and starts inside her house.

"You won't very soon!" Rudi calls out, causing the woman to come to a stop, though without turning around.

“He’s very sick,” Rudi goes on.

“You think I don’t know that?” Mrs. Goodwin barks. “Who do you think has been paying all the hospital bills?”

“Why won’t you see him?”

“He’s made his bed. *Literally*.”

“He got it from contaminated blood!” Rudi howls.

“You must think me a fool!” Mrs. Goodwin howls back.

“Actually, I don’t care what you think. In fact, I don’t care about you, period. I only care about Tommy.”

“What is it you want from me — money?”

“That’s all you rich people ever think about — money, and all the fucking things you can buy with it. Well, maybe if you left this fucking palace once in a while, you’d see there’s a whole fucking world out there!”

This enrages Mrs. Goodwin, and she flings herself toward Rudi with her face redder than red. Then, while speaking with the same strange accent that comes out whenever she’s upset, she hollers, “You fucking bitch! You know nothing about me! You think I was born in this — in this palace? They didn’t even allow Jews in this neighborhood when I was your age!”

Threateningly, the woman takes a step toward Rudi, and then another. Which causes Rudi to step back, in fear of someone for the first time since Deke died, and she finally understands what Tommy meant when he said that she and his mother were alike.

“I was raised in Flatbush,” Mrs. Goodwin continues. “The worst part of Flatbush! You think you’ve had it bad, but you don’t know shit! We had nothing — fucking nothing. No heat, no hot water. Half the time we ate fucking pickles! So don’t you lecture me, you fuck!”

Mrs. Goodwin just stews there for a moment, and she again storms inside her house, and she's just about to slam the door when Rudi tells her: "This is your last chance. Your last chance to say goodbye. Your last chance to make it right. There won't be a tomorrow."

Mrs. Goodwin doesn't reply to this, but she doesn't move either.

"Please, Mrs. Goodwin," Rudi pleads. "Hate me all you want, but don't hate Tommy. He doesn't deserve it."

Mrs. Goodwin responds to this by lowering her head, and she stands deep in thought for a long while. Eventually, she starts shaking her head. But at the same time she turns to Rudi, and she mumbles, "I'll get my coat." She further steps into her house, only to be stopped by Rudi, who says, "I need to ask a big favor."

Chapter 87

Rudi peeks her head inside Tommy's hospital room, and she sees him staring out the window at their apartment building, and with a big smile on her face she utters, "Hey."

Slowly, he turns to her, and he meekly smiles himself before muttering, "Hey."

"Close your eyes," she orders.

"What's going on?" he growls.

"Just do it."

He sighs a bit, but he closes his eyes, and he says, "Well?"

"You can open them now," she tells him.

He does this, and to say he's shocked would be understating it, as standing in front of him is Rudi in a beautiful white-lace wedding gown with a long train. The sight is so incongruent that his mind can't find words.

"Well?" she asks, while striking a pose similar to the image she saw of herself in Mrs. Goodwin's bedroom more than a year earlier.

"You," he gasps, while shaking his head, "you're wearing a dress."

“It’s a one-time thing,” she tells him. “So enjoy it while it lasts.”

“That dress,” he goes on, “it . . . it looks like the one my . . .”

It’s then Mrs. Goodwin steps inside the doorway, and she can’t hide how horrified she is at how emaciated and sickly her son looks. But she’s also amazed at how happy he looks. He’s looks more happy than she’s ever seen, and she knows there can be only one reason for this all-too-obvious contradiction, and she clutches the hand of this reason.

Seeing this, Tommy’s even more shocked than before, and he shakes his head in disbelief over and over. This is when Mrs. Goodwin releases Rudi’s hand, and she takes a single step inside the room and murmurs, “Hi, Tommy.”

Hearing her voice, Tommy finally knows that it’s all real, and he opens his arms and mumbles, “Mom?”

Right away the woman flies at him, and she hugs and kisses him, and he does the same to her.

“I missed you so much,” he whispers.

“I missed you, too,” she whispers back. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I was so stupid. I can never be forgiven.”

“I forgave you long ago — the second I walked out the door.”

Soon, some semblance of sense returns to Tommy, and he asks, “How’d this all happen?”

His mother responds by releasing him, and she turns back to Rudi, who hasn’t moved from the door, and the woman smiles at her before saying, “You were right about her. She is a lot like me. Hopefully, she’ll grow out of it.”

Tommy once more shakes his head in disbelief, unable to understand his mother’s sudden

change of heart about Rudi. But the change really wasn't that sudden.

Chapter 88

When Rudi asks Mrs. Goodwin in the doorway of her home if she can borrow the gown, the woman is aghast. Foremost she's aghast at Rudi wearing anything of hers, let alone her wedding dress. But she's also aghast at her son marrying Rudi, and she's further aghast of his wedding taking place in a hospital, or taking place at all when he's just about to die.

So she refuses the request, and does so as brusquely as she can. But then she sees something that surprises her. She sees that Rudi isn't arguing with her about it. She has simply lowered her eyes, and the warmth in these eyes surprise the woman even more. They surprise her so much that they're bending her will.

Eventually, after much consternation, she agrees to let Rudi use the gown. But she also tells her that she won't have anything to do with such an outrageous event. She's just going to say goodbye to her son and leave.

Rudi quickly agrees to this, and the two women march up the ornate wooden staircase together, watched by Elizabeth, who shakes her head in bewilderment. The odd pair then step inside Mrs. Goodwin's bedroom, and Rudi can't help feel emotion while remembering the

magical kiss that took place there.

Mrs. Goodwin remembers the kiss, too. Though she's once again surprised by the warmth in Rudi's eyes, as in her mind the kiss had been nothing more than a precursor to the couple's tawdry tryst. But she now realizes that the kiss means something else to Rudi. Something more. Still, she pretends otherwise, and she sits on the edge of the bed with her arms and legs crossed, and she impatiently waits while Rudi hurriedly changes into the gown.

However, Mrs. Goodwin's disinterest begins to fade when she notices how well the dress fits Rudi, as it reminds her of her own wedding day more than twenty years earlier. She further realizes that Rudi is almost the very image of her, at least from the neck down, and without thinking she rises from the bed and makes the few minor alterations the gown needs.

"Thank you," Rudi murmurs.

Mrs. Goodwin doesn't respond. She just continues with the dress. Though when she checks the train she starts looking lost — lost in a different time.

"You all right?" Rudi asks.

"Tommy's father," the woman replies, while continuing to stare at the train, "on our first date he took me to see *The Sound of Music* on Broadway. Then later on when we got engaged he said, he said he wanted me to have a dress just like what Mary Martin wore."

With rising emotion, Mrs. Goodwin finishes the dress, and she leads Rudi to a full-length mirror, where Rudi smiles and blushes, just like the young woman in the picture she saw the night before.

Mrs. Goodwin can't help see this, and all the remaining coldness around her heart thaws for good, and she whispers, "You're so beautiful."

"Nah," Rudi utters.

“Don’t argue with your mother-in-law,” Mrs. Goodwin utters back. “At least not until after the honeymoon.”

Mother-in-law.

Rudi’s more than surprised by this word, and it shows when she looks at the woman through the mirror.

“That’s how it was with my mother-in-law,” Mrs. Goodwin goes on.

“Yeah?” Rudi mutters.

“She was all peaches and cream until right after the honeymoon.”

“I guess I won’t have to worry about that.”

“What do you mean?”

“There, there’s not gonna be a honeymoon.”

Rudi says this and starts to cry, and she turns around and hugs Mrs. Goodwin, who hugs her right back while pleading, “Please, don’t. You’ll ruin your makeup.”

“I can’t help it.”

“Oh, well, I guess you can’t ruin it any more than it already is.”

Rudi laughs at this, and so does Mrs. Goodwin. Then the two women smile at each other, and they grip each other’s hands, and Mrs. Goodwin says, “We better hurry. We’ve got a wedding to go to.”

Chapter 89

Rudi takes a step inside Tommy's hospital room, and she slaps her hands onto her hips and growls, "So are you gonna marry me or what?"

"Marry you?" Tommy mumbles. "We, we'd need a . . ."

It's then a smiling Rabbi Orenstein enters the room, and he says to everyone: "I believe that's my cue." He further reaches inside his jacket and fishes out a small juice glass, and he promises to return as soon as he's completed his rounds.

"Well," Mrs. Goodwin utters, "we've got a lot to prepare in a short amount of time."

"Like what?" Tommy asks.

"Like your tux, for one thing."

"My tux?"

"Then there's the caterer and the photographer."

"And the guests will be coming any time," Rudi adds.

"Guests?" Tommy mutters.

"What about music?" Mrs. Goodwin asks Rudi.

“That’s okay,” Rudi tells her, while gazing at her future husband. “We’ll take care of that ourselves.”

First to arrive is Mr. Reese, who was the first person Rudi called with her plans. Still, she’s a little surprised to see him, as it’s the first time she’s seen him in a suit. But this wears off quickly, and she hustles up to him and gives him a big hug. She also thanks him, not only for coming but for all he’s done for her in the past year, and he thanks her right back, for letting him back into her life. He further hugs her back, and while thinking about the day he married Rudi’s mother he starts weeping a bit.

“You’re supposed to do that after the ceremony,” she tells him.

“I’m afraid etiquette’s never been my thing,” he utters. He afterward looks at her gown, and he can’t stop shaking his head, which Rudi reacts to by doing a pirouette.

“Someone must’ve kidnapped my stepdaughter,” he howls. “Who are you?”

“Very funny,” she smilingly growls with a raised fist, and to avoid this fist Mr. Reese rushes up to Tommy and congratulates him. Tommy in turn introduces Mr. Reese to his mother, by saying to her: “Rudi and I would’ve never made it without him.”

“I’m in your debt, sir,” Mrs. Goodwin says, while shaking Mr. Reese’s hand.

“The pleasure’s been all mine,” he tells her, only moments before a tailor arrives with a trio of different-sized tuxedos, and a pair of black dress shoes. Then, while the man fits Tommy under Mrs. Goodwin’s stern direction, Mr. Reese and his future son-in-law do what they usually do when they get together: they talk football.

Next to arrive is Pam, along with Stephen, and both are stunned by Rudi’s gown, and by how beautiful their former foster child looks.

“You still mad at me?” Rudi asks Stephen, with lots of timidity.

“I’m surprised you’d ever want to speak to me again,” he tells her, with lots of timidity, too, “much less want to invite me to your wedding.”

Rudi surprises him again, by giving him a big hug, which he happily returns while whispering to her: “I was scared.”

“Lots of people are,” she whispers back. “Even in this hospital. You have nothing to be ashamed about.”

He doesn’t really believe her, but he nods anyway, and she guides him to Tommy, and the two shake hands.

Watching all this is Mrs. Goodwin, who can’t believe how wrong she was about Rudi. She also feels guilty while remembering how people once judged her, by where she was from and how she talked.

Tommy notices his mother’s gaze, and he signals with his finger that he’s got something to say to her.

“What is it?” the woman whispers, after leaning down to him.

“Take care of her, Mom,” he murmurs. “Please take care of her. She so needs a mother. She won’t say it, but she does.”

Mrs. Goodwin responds by clutching her son’s hand, and by kissing his forehead, and he smiles. He smiles knowing Rudi will be loved.

It’s then Rudi brings Pam up to them, and she says to her, “Do you know my mother-in-law?”

The two women then introduce themselves, just as another visitor arrives: Rudi’s former probation officer, who calls out her name from the doorway.

Right away Rudi rushes up to him. She does this and grabs his hands while saying, “It’s

not exactly my graduation.”

“But it’s just as amazing,” he utters, not quite believing how she’s dressed. “Maybe even more so.” He further hugs her, and he whispers, “Man, I knew I was right about you.”

“No, you didn’t,” she whispers back.

He chuckles at this and adds, “I hoped I was right.”

“Sweet Rudi Brown Eyes!” comes a voice from behind them.

Rudi reacts to this by breaking her embrace with Paul and by hugging Butch, who, like Mr. Reese, looks odd wearing a suit. But this isn’t what she really notices. What she really notices is the record he’s holding, and she points at it while demanding, “What’s that?”

“A gift,” he answers.

“I told you, no gifts.”

“This isn’t for you. It’s for Tommy.”

Butch says this and struts up to the groom, and he hands him *Live Yardbirds: Featuring Jimmy Page*. Which Tommy looks at in surprise, as he’s never heard of it.

“It’s really rare,” Butch tells him. “It was only out for like a week.”

“Yeah?” Tommy utters.

“It’s even got some early Zeppelin songs on it,” Butch adds.

Tommy smiles at this. He also thanks Butch, before handing the album to Mr. Reese and saying, “Will you listen to this for me?”

“Sure thing, Tommy,” Mr. Reese says back, while choking on the words a bit. “I’ll listen to it tonight. I promise.”

Soon, the photographer arrives, and the rabbi returns from his rounds, and even Nurse Templeton shows up, despite it being her day off. After that Maria arrives, in a blue silk gown.

She struts into the room with a short young woman in a yellow dress, who has long auburn hair and dark rimmed glasses, and the look of someone about to meet her in-laws for the first time.

At once, Rudi and Maria scream their heads off, and they hug each other, and afterward, while staring at Rudi's gown, Maria cries out, "Oh, my God — you look so incredible!"

"So do you," Rudi tells her, while clutching her hands. "I'm so glad you made it!"

"We almost didn't," says the auburn-haired woman with a nervous smile. "You should've seen her drive. I don't even remember passing Delaware."

"It's easy to miss," remarks Maria, before introducing the two most important women in her life. "This is Sandra," she tells Rudi.

"It's nice to finally meet you," Rudi says as she shakes the woman's hand. A woman Maria has been raving about during their regular phone conversations. She's pretty much the only thing Maria ever talks about. "Thank you for coming to my wedding," Rudi adds. "And on such short notice."

"Thank you for inviting me," Sandra tells her. "I've never heard of anything so romantic. And you look so totally awesome."

"I hate to be a spoiler," the rabbi interjects, "but I really need to be leaving soon."

"All right," Rudi utters, while glancing around the room. "I think we're ready."

"Wait for us!" screams the voice of someone from just outside the room. Which is just before the three boys hurry inside, all wearing suits.

"My favorite Quincy punks!" Rudi howls.

The three are now seniors and have grown a bit, and they're no longer so geeky. Though it's a far more natural transition than what took place the day after they met Rudi. Just as importantly, the three all now have something of an attitude — something that comes with self-

confidence.

Following them is Owen, who, with Rudi's help, finally graduated high school, and who's working as a mechanic with dreams of one day opening his own shop. Which is just one of his many dreams.

Hurriedly, Rudi hugs all four, and she turns to the rabbi and says, "Okay, let's do this."

With a big smile, the man looks around the crowded hospital room, and he blinks a bit when the photographer's flash goes off. Then, after collecting his thoughts, he says, "Where do I begin? I've certainly never done a wedding quite like this before. We have no *ketubah* or *chuppah*. We don't even have wine. But what we do have are two young people who truly love each other. Something I can fully attest. So hopefully God will give us a pass on the rest. Now, Rudi, to begin the ceremony you're actually supposed to encircle the groom seven times. But, under the circumstances, why don't you just sit next to Tommy."

To this end, Mrs. Goodwin stands up, and Rudi takes her place. At the same time, the rabbi gives Tommy a kippah, and Tommy, who looks as if he's fading, awkwardly places the suede yarmulke on his head.

Just give me this one thing.

Rudi says this to herself while staring at Tommy. She says it over and over.

"So Rudi," the rabbi goes on, "you are Jewish, right?"

"Excuse me?" Rudi mumbles, not quite hearing the question.

"I've always assumed from your last name . . ."

"I could be Jewish," she says, more than a bit bashfully.

"Could be? I, I know this is kind of an un —"

"— She's Jewish," interrupts Mrs. Goodwin, before lovingly grasping Rudi's shoulder.

Just as lovingly, Rudi grasps Mrs. Goodwin's hand, and she smiles at her before saying to the rabbi: "You heard the woman."

But the rabbi is still hesitant.

"Well," Mr. Reese utters, "I can tell you for a fact that Rudi's mother was Jewish."

"Yeah?" Rudi says, with lots of surprise.

"I only wish she was here," he tells her.

Rudi smiles at this, and she reaches out her hand to her father, and he takes it in his big paw while she tells him: "It's okay, Dad. All my real family is here."

This moves the rabbi. It moves him so much that he has to take out his handkerchief and use it. Afterward, he mumbles, "Where was I? . . . Yes, we need the rings."

Rings.

This word hits Rudi like a cliff on top of her head, as it's the one thing she's forgotten. She had planned to pick them up after getting the dress, but she just got so overwhelmed at Mrs. Goodwin's house that they flew out of her thoughts.

"Someone does have the rings?" the rabbi continues.

"We don't have any," Rudi mutters, after lowering her eyes.

"Oh, yes you do," Mrs. Goodwin says, before taking off her gold wedding band. "At least you have one." She further offers the ring to her son, who shakes his head and tells her: "I can't take that, Mom."

"Nonsense," she tells him back, with tears forming in her eyes. "Your dad would've wanted you to have it. He would be so proud of you right now. *I'm* proud of you."

Tommy responds to this, by gently taking his mother's hand, and the ring along with it.

"So Tommy," says the rabbi, "put the ring on Rudi's right index finger and repeat after

me: ‘Behold, you are consecrated to me with this ring according to the law of Moses and Israel.’”

Tommy struggles with the ring. But he eventually gets it on Rudi’s finger. Though repeating the rabbi’s words is a much harder task, as he’s so lightheaded and weak. Still, after a couple of false starts, he gets through it, and the rabbi turns to Rudi and says, “Now —”

“— I know what comes next,” she interrupts. “I looked it up last night in the library.”

Unfortunately, she doesn’t have a ring for Tommy. So instead she wraps her finger around his — a finger she’ll never unwrap as long as he lives, and with swelling emotion she tells her groom: “*Ani l’dodi, ve dodi li*. I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.”

“Well,” says the rabbi, “now we just have to break the glass.”

Once again, he takes the juice glass from his jacket, and he covers it in his handkerchief before placing it on the bed between the post and Tommy’s right shoe. Tommy afterward takes a long deep breath, and he tries to break the glass, without success.

“Perhaps I could find a light bulb,” the rabbi murmurs. “It would be easier.”

“I can do it!” Tommy insists, and he again tries. He tries and tries, but he still can’t break it.

“Is it really that important?” Rudi asks.

“Yes!” Tommy cries out. “It’s that important! It signifies that joy must always be tempered, and no one knows that more than us.”

With her free hand, Rudi grips Tommy’s free hand, and she whispers to him: “You can do it, baby. I know you can.”

Once more, Tommy takes a long deep breath, and he clenches his eyes closed, and with all the strength remaining in his body he pushes. He pushes and pushes and pushes, and there

isn't a single person watching this who isn't crying, including the photographer, who has to stop taking pictures. Soon, a tear also falls down Tommy's cheek, which drops onto his pillow just as the glass cracks.

"*Mazel tov!*" the rabbi yells. Which causes the entire room to erupt in cheers. Which does nothing to subside everyone's tears. This is particularly the case with Mrs. Goodwin, whose face is just bathed. She's so overcome with both joy and sadness that she has to run out of the room and down the hall while crying out for her son.

At the same time, Mr. Agnellino arrives, with a large stack of pizzas, and when he sees all the tears he asks, "Am I too late?"

"You're just in time," Tommy answers, with just about all his energy gone. "Just in time."

"Well," the rabbi says to everyone while wiping his eyes, "what comes next is called the *yichud*, where by Jewish law we're supposed to give the bride and groom twenty minutes of seclusion."

"We can eat downstairs in the lobby," Mr. Agnellino says, with a nod of his head.

Hesitantly, the guests start to leave. They do so while shaking the hands of the newlyweds. This is extra emotional for Tommy, as he knows that he isn't just saying goodbye, but farewell. So he grips each hand as warmly as he can — something he hopes they can remember him by.

Maria's the last to exit. She's been crying since the beginning of the ceremony, and she's still crying when she hugs her best friend and mutters, "I love you so much!"

"I love you, too!" Rudi mutters back.

Reluctantly, Maria backs out of the room, and Rudi tells her: "I'll be down shortly."

Maria nods. She does this and leaves, closing the door behind herself, and Rudi turns to Tommy, who looks barely alive. Yet, he smiles at her. He smiles at her even then, and she smiles back and murmurs, “Just look at us, Tommy. Who would’ve thought?”

“Me,” he says breathlessly.

“Yeah?”

“I think I knew the first time you threatened me.”

“Well, I didn’t. But . . . but all’s well that ends well.”

“So are you gonna kiss the groom or what?”

Awkwardly, the two start moving toward one another, and their lips meet, and they won’t stop kissing. This is when “Moonlight Serenade” begins to play one last time. Though for Tommy it will never end. Right away he finds himself back in that dusty dance hall, surrounded by all those shabbily dressed dancers, with his arms draped around Rudi. What’s more, he’s no longer sick or emaciated. He’s once again handsome and muscular, with wavy brown hair — and he’s indomitable.

This Tommy turns to Glenn Miller, who as usual is leading his orchestra, and the tall bespectacled man puts down his trombone and grins at Tommy, and he gives him a big welcoming wave.

Tommy waves back, and he notices something in a mirrored wall. He notices he’s returned to the moment he first kissed Rudi, and this is when he knows God has granted him his wish.

The End