

COLIN COHEN

**EVEN PUNK
GIRLS BLUSH**

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To my mother,
both the toughest and warmest person I've known

*“People forget the punk thing was really good for women. . . . It
allowed us to be aggressive.”*

—Siouxsie Sioux

Chapter One

RUDI WEISS SAT on the cold floor with her arms crossed and her back against the wall, trying to pretend she wasn't terrified.

Though the other inmates in the holding cell with her—hookers and heroin addicts and hardened criminals—were even more afraid. They were afraid of her, and the fierce predator-like expression on her powder-white face—something that was only complemented by her thick mascara and dark menacing eye shadow, and by her deep red lipstick and spiky peroxide-blond hair. To them, Rudi was something their minds just couldn't comprehend.

But Rudi didn't notice their fear. She actually didn't notice them at all, as what she feared was someone who made the women there seem as benign as preschoolers. This fear made her wish she had her Walkman with her—as she believed her music could get her through almost anything, just as it got her from each day to the next—and to and from each hopelessness. It was also what helped keep away her demons, and was the one thing in which she could escape unscathed.

Unfortunately, the police had confiscated her player, along with just about everything else she had, including her shoelaces—leaving her only with thoughts. Thoughts specifically about the sequence of events that brought her here, and the one big mistake that made it all possible. With these thoughts also came thoughts about how she could now extricate herself from her im-

pending nightmare. These thoughts, however, were going nowhere, and eventually, as the night gave way to the morning, she could think no more, and so out of desperation she strapped a pair of imaginary headphones to her ears. Then, she hit the play button in her head.

Sounds began rattling inside her brain. The sounds of a song called “No Values”—a song that was clear and loud and unrelenting, and with it came strength and power and confidence—and the feeling she was not alone. Which only intensified when the brutal chorus arrived and she yelled out over it.

Instantly, Rudi’s cellmates recoiled—as far from her as possible. At the same time, an almost indiscernible smile crossed Rudi’s face. She smiled because she knew that—as long as everyone else was more scared than her—she had a chance. At least, a little one. So, she sang louder and louder—and when the current song ended, she sang the next one playing on her virtual cassette tape.

As she did, a door opened somewhere unseen—followed by hard footsteps and the clanging of keys, both of which got closer and closer. Soon, the figure of a nondescript heavysset female appeared at the cell door holding a clipboard. The woman, who was covered in dark blue from head to toe, slowly unlocked the door as she read a slip of yellow paper clamped to the clipboard—and, while trying to ignore Rudi’s screeching, she growled, “Weiss?”

But Rudi didn’t hear the woman or even sense she had come, and she just continued belting out the song as the cell door opened.

“I said, Weiss!” howled the woman.

Suddenly, Rudi stopped singing, and she rose her ferocious brown eyes toward the figure and uttered, “Yeah?”

“What, are you fucking deaf?” the figure barked.

“What do you fucking want?” Rudi barked back.

“Your probation officer’s here.”

PAUL CROSS LOWERED his wrinkled gray suit—as well as the tall and lean and well beyond middle-aged frame inside it—onto a creaky wooden chair.

From there he placed a manila folder on top of the equally creaky wooden desk in front of him—along with an open box of Marlboros, and he pulled out one of his last remaining fixes. Which he put between his heavily stained fingers and lit. Then, while nursing on this cruel breakfast, Paul perused the file with his sad and tired eyes—eyes of a man teetering on the afterworld. He also shook his head and questioned why he bothered waking up to take the call—and further questioned why he bothered at all—why he still cared.

She was just another worthless street kid—everyone in his office told him so, including his boss. She was just another in an incessant line of losers—another who’d likely never live to see twenty. All Paul’s facts corroborated this, but yet he still bothered—he still cared, and the reason was soon at the door.

“Yeah?” he bellowed upon hearing a sharp knock, with his half-dead eyes still locked on the contents of the folder.

Through the corners of those same eyes Paul saw a heavysset policewoman enter the tiny office, leading inside a handcuffed and morose seventeen-year-old girl—one perhaps a bit shorter than average, who had a petite but well-toned physique. This girl looked utterly outrageous to Paul—and not just because of her makeup and hair. There was also her tattered and frayed jeans, and

her black T-shirt, which had the word “VALUES” handwritten on it in indelible white ink—a word that was encircled and crossed out in red.

“You can take the cuffs off,” Paul said to the officer as he continued reading Rudi’s police report.

“You sure?” the woman asked, while warily looking at the girl.

The only reply was a blast of gray smoke, and once it mostly dissipated the policewoman shrugged and uncuffed Rudi, before exiting and closing the door—next to which stood Rudi with her hands on her hips, glaring at the man she had long tried to despise. Unfortunately, she could never quite figure Paul out enough to hate him. She couldn’t figure out why he kept trying when everyone else had given up on her, including what passed as her family. She couldn’t figure out his angle—but she was sure he had one. Everyone did, she believed, and for the longest time she just assumed his had to do with sex. Though the problem with this was that he never made the slightest pass at her. So, as she continued her glaring that morning, Rudi tried hard to come up with some kind of answer—or at least the beginnings of one. However, after coming up with nothing, she simply uttered, “If you’re just gonna ignore me, I’ll go back to my cell.”

“Sit down,” he growled at her.

She sighed, but sat in front of him—on another creaky wooden seat, and put her feet on the desk.

“Shoes,” he immediately muttered, while still not looking at her.

Again, she sighed, prior to removing her feet—and Paul finally moved his eyes away from the file and bore them on her.

She bore hers right back, as if answering a dare—and, for a few seconds, the two just glowered at each other.

Then, he took a deep drag of his cigarette and blew smoke in her face, which she responded to with a trio of fake coughs, and an expression of disgust.

“What were you thinking?” he demanded, while trying hard to control his emotions.

“I didn’t do shit,” she replied, with great indignation.

“Is that what you call selling pot to an undercover cop?”

Rudi didn’t quite answer. She just lowered her head and shook it—and, as she had done in the holding cell, she lamented her big mistake. Especially as she almost had enough money to escape—to escape both the city and the state—and a certain someone named Deke as well, and maybe her demons along with them.

With this in mind she’d often go to Penn Station in Newark just to gaze at the trains and buses leaving there, trying at the same time to imagine herself going with them. And though none of the places they went ever seemed to appeal to her—while they never seemed any better than the nowhere in which she already was—she kept dreaming of her exit. It was pretty much all she thought about, and was what caused her to become impatient and take a risk.

Now all her money was gone, along with her supply—something that didn’t actually belong to her. She was now also screwed, in many ways—the police being the very least way.

“Well?” Paul went on. “Explain yourself. I would really like to hear it.”

“That fucking Quincy Punk,” Rudi murmured, while again shaking her lowered head—with the image of the undercover cop searing through her mind—a guy who looked just a little too much like Sid Vicious.

“*Rudi*,” Paul moaned.

"Listen," she shot back, right 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 then what does he do? He and his fucking machine arrest me."

"He didn't mean selling drugs. And you, of all people—how can you keep messing around with this shit after all you've been through?"

"How am I supposed to make money? Working at McDonald's? Or would you rather I sold my body on the streets?"

"Something tells me you wouldn't get very far in that line of work."

"Fuck you."

"No, thank you."

"I suppose if I sold those," continued Rudi while pointing at Paul's pack of cigarettes, "they'd give me a fucking medal. You, you're all a bunch of hypocrites. Hell, you probably already have cancer from that shit—and yet I'm the bad guy."

"Judge Vinson wants to rescind your probation," Paul uttered.

At once, Rudi crossed her arms, much as she had done in the holding cell—and, just like in there, she tried to hide her fear. She tried to hide it with a shrug—though she had to do so while averting her eyes.

"You really want to go back to juvie?" he asked.

"It's no worse than anywhere else," she replied, rather unconvincingly, as just the mention of the dank and foul-smelling place was enough to cause her to shiver. To her, the word itself was almost like nails scratching a chalkboard. Even worse, after this visceral reaction passed, a more ominous one replaced it, because within the confined halls of the detention center there would be danger.

Especially from her demons. Then, once she got out, the worst would be yet to come—as Deke would surely be waiting.

Knowing nothing of this, Paul could no longer hold back his exasperation, and, after emphatically putting out his cigarette in a tin throwaway ashtray, he slammed the folder closed and howled, “Goddammit, Rudi—you could be so much more!”

“I could be what?” she howled back. “You? Judge Vinson? Reagan? Fuck you all!”

“I don’t know why I fucking try!” he hollered, while slamming his fist onto the creaky desk.

She also slammed her fist—much harder than he had—almost causing the folder to fall onto the floor. She hollered, too—much louder than he had—“I don’t know why you try either!”

Paul, though, could see right through her. He could see through both her attire and her attitude—and what he saw was a frightened little girl—one who was desperate for something she never really had: hope. He further saw an indefinable magic emanating from her—a magic she couldn’t diffuse no matter how hard she tried.

“Well?” she demanded. “Are you gonna tell me why?”

“Because you’re fucking special, that’s why!” he screamed at her, while pointing his finger. “That’s why I spent two fucking hours on the phone with the judge to convince him to give you one last chance!”

“I don’t want it!” she screamed back, while again crossing her arms and averting her eyes.

“But you’re gonna get it, you piece of shit! In fact, I just made arrangements for you to stay with my brother Stephen.”

“Your what?” Rudi muttered, after returning her eyes back to her probation officer—this time in surprise.

"He and his wife couldn't have kids," Paul remarked. "So, they're foster parents."

"That's really sweet," Rudi condescendingly remarked back. "But I've already got a, a whatchamacallit—a stepdad." She then paused, before continuing with faux adoration: "Whom I love dearly."

"He already signed-off on this," Paul stated.

"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."

"My guidance counselor? My guidance counselor where?"

"Columbia."

Instantly, an image of a school entered Rudi's head—and it wasn't the university. It was in her mind a horrid-looking place—one surrounded by even more horridness—and she howled, "In fucking Maplewood?"

"Yes, in fucking Maplewood," he replied.

"I can't even stay awake in that fucking town!"

"Well, you're gonna fucking learn!"

"I won't do it!"

"Listen, you either move to fucking Maplewood or spend the next ten and a half months in county lockup—it's your fucking choice!"

Rudi sighed—a long, deep, and thoroughly hopeless sigh—and asked, "Can I think about it?"

"You've got two seconds."

She took both of them—after which a thought occurred to her—one that could've perhaps extricated her from her impending nightmare.

"Well?" Paul uttered. "I'm waiting—what's it gonna

be?”

“Who, who will know I’m in Maplewood?” she inquired.

“Why?” he inquired back. “Are you in some kind of trouble? I mean, some kind of *worse* trouble?”

“Just answer the goddamn 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 for my whereabouts, would they tell them?”

“*Rudi*. What’s going on?”

“Answer the fucking question!”

“No—nobody’s gonna fucking know!”

Suddenly, an almost indiscernible smile crossed Rudi’s face.

Chapter Two

A SET OF automatic doors opened, and Paul and his wrinkled suit stepped out of the dilapidated police station, and he stopped to light his very last fix. He also turned back toward the building and uttered, “Well, you coming or what?”

Just inside the doors stood Rudi, who now on top of her clothes wore an old navy blue overcoat—one that was a few sizes too large and coming apart at the seams. She further had a small and worn white canvas sea bag across her shoulder—a bag that was much lighter than when she arrived, as just about everything of value inside it had been confiscated by the police.

Though at least she got back her Walkman, which she was clutching in her right hand, and which was feeding the Dead Kennedys’ “Police Truck” into her brain through the headphones strapped to her ears.

“Come on, Rudi,” Paul went on, before looking at his watch. “I don’t have all day.”

But Rudi did, and a big part of her wanted to remain exactly where she was—in spite of how she hated everything about cops. Because at least they were a known and predictable danger, and what was outside was anything but.

“Fucking move already!” Paul howled.

Reluctantly, Rudi stepped outside into the cold autumn air of the early afternoon, and, after seeing that a certain automobile wasn’t waiting for her, she took a deep breath and cranked up the volume of her player so loud that Paul could hear the lyrics. Even if he really

didn't want to hear them—especially when she started singing them.

“We'll go get your things,” he told her.

“What?” she replied, clearly not hearing him.

Angrily, he turned off her player—and he repeated his directive.

“Am I still under arrest?” she asked.

“No,” he answered.

“Then I can get my things myself. And I can get there myself, too.”

He sighed, but afterward he took a scrap of paper from his jacket pocket, along with a pen. And, using his palm as a surface, he started writing out his brother's address and phone number—as well as directions on how to get there—while telling her: “Lewis Drive—it's right above Wyoming. By the reservation.”

“Why don't you just keep me *in* the reservation instead?” she remarked. “That's what you really want.”

Pretending not to listen, he finished writing and handed her the paper, and she grudgingly took it and stuffed it inside her coat pocket.

“You need bus fare?” he then inquired, before reaching into his pants pocket for some change.

“I don't need shit,” she growled, “especially from you.”

Paul sneered at this and at her, and, as he wagged his finger, he uttered, “If you're not there by six tonight, you're on your own. I'll give your case to someone who doesn't give a fuck, which is just about everyone.” He subsequently marched down the steps and added, “And I should warn you, my brother Stephen is a former Marine—don't fuck with him!”

Rudi's only response was to flip Paul her middle finger, which he somehow sensed—and he quickly stopped

and spun toward her and saw her smiling and waving at him condescendingly.

“And you’re still expected to attend NA,” he went on. “There’s one that meets over in South Orange. Stephen will get you there.”

“I can hardly wait,” she replied, with as much sarcasm as she could muster.

“I meant it earlier, Rudi,” Paul replied back, with much seriousness and sincerity, “this is your last chance. I, I want to be there for your graduation. Your college one. And your postgraduate one, too. Don’t let me down. Don’t let *you* down.”

Ignoring this—or, at least, trying to ignore it—she turned her Walkman back on and watched Paul leave, with the sounds of the Dead Kennedys fading into that of Fear. She watched him until he got into his blue Oldsmobile sedan and took off. After which—finally feeling free—she took off herself. She ran down the steps and up the street, with her arms flailing about—and only one irrational thought on her mind: to get away. She wanted to get away from the whole world and everything in it. She wanted to disappear right into the air—to become invisible—to cease seeing and feeling and being.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t run fast enough—or far enough. So, by the time she got to Springfield Avenue, she just doubled-over—out of both breath and hope, and even felt like crying. Moreover, she wanted something that would take away this desire. But she refused to allow herself either weakness—or any weakness at all. Instead she straightened herself out and looked around—again for a particular car, and a particular person inside it.

Though there was nothing—nothing but the usual

nothingness and decay of her urban hometown, which made her feel as if the entire city of Irvington were dying in front of her—and she along with it. However—in the almost fresh air—she was at least able to work some things out in her mind, and, as she aimlessly headed down the block, she decided this time she'd be patient. Yes, she told herself—she'd be patient while she hid from Deke—and she'd wait for her opportunity. A hustle was sure to come by—and, when one did, she wouldn't hesitate—she'd fly away for good, regardless of where.

Just then, she saw she was only a short distance from an oasis—an oasis known as Vintage Vinyl. Which caused a mild smile to form on her face—a smile that remained there as she rushed toward the small record shop—one that always seemed to have twice as many good records as any store twice its size. She got there just as the final moments of “I Love Livin’ in the City” blasted through her head—a song blasting so loud that she didn't even hear the sounds of the Circle Jerks pouring out of the store when she swept inside the door. But she did see the little man behind the counter—a man who was shaking his fists and most of his body while screaming along with the music.

His name was Butch, and though he was tiny he was muscular as well—with his pecs and biceps stretching the white Black Flag T-shirt he was wearing to the point of tearing. He was also in his mid-twenties, but his jet-black hair was receding to such an extent that he looked at least ten years older. Which made him seem a little out of place. Though he didn't care—as he was having way too much fun.

Eventually, he saw Rudi, and he smiled and turned off the record player, before extending his raised palm and

crying out, "Sweet Rudi Brown Eyes!"

Smilingly, Rudi turned down her Walkman and slapped Butch's hand, and cried back, "What's up, motherfucker?"

Butch glanced around the store and saw—a short distance away—the only customer: an odd and unkempt teenage boy with wild curly brown hair—a boy who was looking at some records with his back to the pair. He then leaned toward Rudi and whispered, "Whatcha got for me?"

"Nothing," she whispered back, with a sigh. "I got busted."

"Shit, I'm sorry, kid. They get much?"

"Everything," she told him, while shaking her head with a bitter expression. "Stash, loot—fucking everything."

"That really sucks. What about Deke—does he know?"

Deke.

The word to Rudi was much like "juvie"—just the mention of it was enough to make her ill, and scared. And make her long for her demons.

"What's wrong?" Butch asked, with a bit of worry.

"I don't know if Deke knows," Rudi answered. "But he, 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 muttered, with obvious fear in his voice—a fear that further manifested itself in a slow shake of his head. After which he asked, "So, so what

about you?”

“Me?” Rudi asked back.

“Are they sending you back to juvie?”

Rudi didn’t answer.

“Well?” Butch went on.

“Can you keep a secret?” she inquired.

“Of course.”

“You promise not to tell Deke?”

“Come on—I barely know the guy.”

“They’re sending me to live with some fuckhead Marine in Maplewood—out by South Mountain.”

For a few seconds Butch didn’t say anything. Then, he burst out in laughter.

“What’s so funny?” she demanded.

“I think Dante mentioned that place,” he replied.

“And that was without the fuckhead Marine.”

She chuckled at this, albeit reluctantly.

“Me,” he continued, “I would prefer juvie. Or even the chair.”

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

“What about it?” he asked back.

Angrily, Rudi picked up a copy of *Trouser Press* off the counter and shoved the magazine in Butch’s face while howling, “Fucking *Trouser Press* said it was coming out in October.”

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

Rudi sighed, and then from her coat pocket she took out the scrap of paper Paul had given her and told Butch: “I’ll give you my new number. But don’t give it out to anybody—not even Leila. That fucking bitch has got the biggest mouth in town. And call me the second the record comes in. I don’t care if it’s three in the fucking

morning.”

Chapter Three

AFTER LEAVING THE safety of the oasis, Rudi headed over to Stuyvesant Avenue—in the direction of the broken-down tenement where she lived. Or had lived.

But as she approached her street, she suddenly saw it—parked right in front of her home: a bright-red Porsche 944. Which was a car so distinctive—at least in her neighborhood—that it could only belong to one man.

Quickly, she shot around the corner of a building and waited, and waited some more. She waited until she heard the car's distinctive roar—one that was thankfully heading away from her. She also headed that way, and hurriedly entered a crumbling brick structure—one that looked much like its neighbor, and its neighbor's neighbor. It was there, from just inside the door, that she saw a guy behind the staircase shooting up. At the same time, the man looked up at her, with his eyes glazed over. They were so glazed over that she couldn't tell if he really saw her—or saw anything. Though she pretended not to see this. She even pretended not to see him. She pretended for a myriad of reasons, but mostly because she wanted to remain apathetic—not just to this but to all the ugliness around her.

The problem was that she well knew she was anything but apathetic, by definition. She knew it was preppies who were apathetic—as well as JAPs and jocks and just about every other mutation of suburbia. But not punks. That, after all, was the whole point.

Still, she kept pretending, and walked up the stairs.

After which she rambled inside a second-floor unit and saw her stepfather sitting on a brown faux leather easy chair, with a can of Schaefer beer nestled in his paw.

Dan Reese was a large man around forty—and a heavy one, too—who had a face full of whiskers and who was wearing an odd ensemble consisting of a torn and dingy wife-beater T-shirt, a pair of stained striped boxers, and black dress socks. He was also staring at a nearby black and white television—a set so old that it needed warming up, which was blasting a rerun of *The Joker's Wild*—something he watched with eyes almost as glazed over as the addict's downstairs.

"Joker! Joker! Joker!" the announcer on the screen suddenly screamed.

But not even this could lift Mr. Reese from his stupor, which Rudi stared at. She stared at it much like how he was staring at the TV, while trying to muster hatred toward the only family she ever really knew. Though she just couldn't. She couldn't muster anything.

"Hey, Daddy!" she finally called out, in a tone well beyond condescension—with the only response being the sucking in of some beer.

"Thanks for sticking up for me," she continued. "And for helping me out."

At first, it didn't seem as if the man were going to reply. But eventually he blurted out, "Go fuck yourself"—without even a hint of emotion.

"I'd tell you to do the same," she shot back, "but you're gonna do it anyway, right?"

Not waiting for a retort, Rudi rushed off down the hallway to a closed door and thrust it open, and she stepped inside onto the broken linoleum floor, where she found herself facing the filth that was her small bedroom. Clothes were strewn everywhere, along with a disheveled

and torn single mattress on the floor. Also lying there were dozens of records, and even more cassette tapes—all of which were piled up in front of a tiny and cheap stereo.

While staring at all this, Rudi closed the door and dropped her bag by it, before quickly walking over to her records—where, just as quickly, she found her copy of *Fresh Fruit for Rotting Vegetables*. Then, from inside the sleeve she plucked out a handful of bills—not even twenty dollars all together—which was all she had left in the world, and about as useful to her as her old broken-down bed. But she stuffed them into her jeans anyway, along with some spare change she found on the floor. She even picked up the pennies—most of which were covered in dust, before sitting down. She sat there on the cold linoleum and once again crossed her arms, and, as she once again thought about how scared she was, she started falling apart.

Like before, she wanted both to cry and to stop this want. She wanted both equally and badly. But, like before, she told herself that she couldn't have them—and wouldn't. Instead she looked for a particular album—one containing a song that could usually pick her up, no matter what. And when she found it, she put it on the turntable, and, after turning on the player and placing the needle on the vinyl, the Ramones' "Blitzkrieg Bop" filled both the room and her.

The opening chords by themselves were enough to get her jumping about. They were enough to make her forget everything other than that she was alive—and that there was something positive about this. Which only increased when she howled along with the band while dancing on the walls.

At once, loud banging fists came from the unit next

door—along with the voice of her neighbor, who hollered, “Stop that fucking racket!”

Rudi replied by pounding her own fists against the wall, over and over—and she hollered back, “How’s this for a fucking racket?”

Afterward, she picked up the clothes from the floor and brought them over to her white sea bag, from which she dumped all the junk the cops hadn’t confiscated, apart from her makeup. On top of this she placed her meager garments, as well as toiletries from the nearby bathroom, prior to picking up a large and random selection of cassettes, which quickly filled almost all remaining space in the sack. Then, she sat back on the floor and listened to the rest of the album, while trying to pretend the music wouldn’t stop. Perhaps it would go on forever, she thought, and then she would never have to leave her room—and she would never have to go to Maplewood. And, most of all, she would never have to escape from Deke—or from anything else.

Of course, the music did end—and she stood up and reached for the door with her head down. Though as she put her hand on the knob something made her pause, and this same something caused her to walk over to the window and glance outside.

There it was again: the Porsche.

Hurriedly, she jumped away from the glass, hoping Deke hadn’t seen her—and she didn’t dare peek outside again for a near endless amount of time. After which she saw that the car was again gone—and she hustled into the living room with the bag in her arms. Which is when she noticed that her stepfather was still in front of the TV—still watching *The Joker’s Wild*, with still another Schaefer in his big paw—the one beer to have, the television kept telling him, when he was having more than

one. Once more, Rudi tried to feel hate for the man—or something. But there was nothing. Or, at least, she couldn't find anything. So, she just swung the heavy sea bag over her shoulder and cried out, "Have fun, Daddy Dearest! And don't fuck with my records. Or I'll fucking kill you!"

His only reply was a belch.

"I love you, too," she replied back, as she rushed out of the apartment.

She afterward slammed the door behind herself, and Mr. Reese slowly turned toward it.

He should've been happy, he knew. He'd been waiting for this moment for years. He even shook his fist a bit when Rudi's probation officer called him about the arrangement. However, from the instant she burst into the apartment that afternoon, he'd been feeling something strange—something bordering on ambivalence.

Why? he asked himself over and over while she was packing in her room. The girl had been nothing but trouble for years. Actually, forever. And she wasn't even his. Not really.

But this semi-ambivalence continued anyway, and even got stronger—to the point where it became the real thing, and, as Rudi burst out of the apartment and out of his life, Mr. Reese found himself feeling something he hadn't felt since his wife left him many years earlier.

As for Rudi, after she left the unit she just stood outside the door breathlessly, for a reason she didn't quite understand.

Why was she waiting? she asked herself. Wasn't this what she had been wanting since she was little?

Unfortunately, she didn't know either answer. So, she just kept standing there. She stood there until she heard her stepfather start to cry—and once again she started

falling apart.

Trying to escape both, she ran. She ran down the stairs and didn't dare look back.

Chapter Four

WHEN RUDI REACHED the front door of her building she looked through the glass in all directions.

There was no sign of the red Porsche, or Deke. All she could see was the setting sun. So, she flew out the door with the sea bag over her shoulder, and she kept flying while running down Stuyvesant—not stopping until she reached Springfield Avenue and the bus stop, where a half-dozen people were waiting, which she took as a sign that a bus was likely coming soon. Unfortunately, something came down the avenue sooner—the Porsche—from a little more than a block away.

Instantly, Rudi fell to her knees behind a couple of elderly women sitting on the bench, and she pretended to tie her shoelaces—which the police had returned to her along with the Walkman.

Soon after this, she heard the roar of an approaching bus, and, after seeing Deke's car continue down Springfield, she jumped to her feet—and cut in front of the old women as the bus opened its doors. Which was just before she rushed inside the vehicle and paid the driver—a thin old man who looked only half alive.

She then found an empty window seat directly behind the man, from which she looked down the street and saw that the Porsche was almost out of sight. Which caused her to sigh a little.

However, just as the final passenger stepped onboard—a limping middle-aged man—Deke's car made a sudden and sharp U-turn, and headed back in the direction of the bus.

With great fright, Rudi turned her attention toward the limping man, who had come to a stop by the driver and who was now slowly fishing out his wallet.

"Come on," she murmured, just out of earshot. "Move."

Finally, the man got out his wallet and started sifting through the contents of the billfold—just as the Porsche stopped at a light only a few blocks away.

"Hurry up!" Rudi cried out.

Ignoring her, the limping man pulled out a five-dollar bill and said to the driver: "This is all I got."

"Sorry," the old man muttered, "I don't have change."

"Well, I certainly ain't paying 5 dollars just to go to Maplewood."

As he said this, the Porsche parked across the street—and Rudi jumped to her feet, prior to yanking some change from her jeans, which she flung into the receptacle just as the door of the Porsche flew open.

"Can we fucking go now?" she hollered, as Deke exited his car.

Deke was a medium-sized man in his late twenties—a man with wiry muscles and long curly light brown hair, which settled just below his shoulders. He also had pasty skin and was wearing Aviator sunglasses and a black leather jacket—along with a pair of Sasson blue jeans and cowboy boots—and, after patiently waiting for a few cars to pass, he wiped his running nose and headed toward the bus.

Right before it took off down the road.

This caused Rudi to sigh once more—this time deeply—especially when she saw Deke walk down the street. She afterward plopped back down onto her seat

and peeked out the window, and didn't stop peeking until Deke completely faded from view. At which time she noticed that the bus had just entered the outskirts of Maplewood, which looked pretty much like Irvington. However, as the vehicle continued on, the neighborhood got better and better—especially after the vehicle turned up Valley Street. Which made Rudi more and more uncomfortable—for a variety of reasons, but mostly because she always felt out of place amongst affluence. And she dealt with this discomfort the way she dealt with most discomforts—she got out her Walkman, and she turned the player on at full volume.

Suddenly, Fear blasted into her head, and, just as suddenly, her discomfort disappeared. Then—almost involuntarily—she began howling along with Lee Ving and “I Don't Care About You.”

Within seconds, everyone sitting near Rudi got up and moved toward the back of the bus, particularly the elderly women and the limping middle-aged man. Even the bus driver desperately wanted to get away from her somehow.

Much like in the holding cell, Rudi smiled a little. She smiled all the way to Parker Avenue, where she exited right in front of Columbia High School. There she glared at the large and odd-looking structure—half of which looked about a hundred years newer than the other half, with neither looking especially enticing. Which caused her discomfort to increase exponentially.

“Fuck this shit,” she soon uttered, while shaking her head—forgetting everything she had told herself about being patient, as the suburbia all around her made her want to wretch. Though, before she did anything rash or stupid, she remembered her plan—and pulled out Paul's

directions from her coat. After which she tried to convince her body to move in the right direction.

It took a while, but finally, in the darkening sky, she made her way toward her new home—which for the most part entailed walking up steeper and steeper hills. At the same time the houses seemed to get more and more expensive, as if the angle of the road was somehow proportional to its value—and for Rudi this was like walking deeper and deeper into the petrified forest of some nightmarish children’s fairy tale, as the affluence here made the bus trip to the school look like a ride through a slum.

Eventually, her discomfort became overwhelming, and by the time she reached Collingwood Road a little more than halfway toward her destination, she decided to become more selective about the music she was listening to. So—while standing underneath a bright street-light—she dug around in her bag until she found a particular tape by Bad Brains. A tape that not only made all her discomfort magically go away but also made her strut up the sidewalk like a cock. It even made her grin.

Though this grin was interrupted when a large gold Mercedes sedan cut her off while turning onto a driveway.

Furiously, Rudi stood there and glared at the car as it parked behind an equally large BMW—in front of an upscale colonial. She also glared at the well dressed middle-aged woman who exited the vehicle—a woman who looked at both Rudi’s appearance and anger in shock.

“What’s your fucking problem?” Rudi demanded. “Can’t you fucking see?”

“I . . .” the woman muttered, before looking toward the front door of her home. Which was just before she shouted, “Oh, honey?”

There was no response, and Rudi took a deep breath and slowly started off. But right then a light went on in front of the house, and a small balding man with a big paunch exited the home—and with an overly serious expression he barked, “What’s the problem here?”

At once Rudi came to a stop, and she barked back: “Your wife’s fucking blind—that’s the problem here!”

“Why—”

“—Which is probably why she married you, ya ugly fuck!”

“You better call the police,” the woman told her husband.

Rudi sighed—once again remembering the virtue of patience—before once again starting off. Though not without saying, “You rich pigs think you own everything.”

The couple made no retort, and Rudi made it the rest of the way up the road without further incidence—and without police sirens. Then, when she got to Wyoming Avenue, she hung a right and walked a couple of blocks down to Lewis Drive, and afterward headed up yet another hill—this the steepest yet. And the most affluent, too.

At the top of this hill stood Stephen Cross’ house, which was just steps from South Mountain Reservation—a woodland preserve that went on for miles and miles. Which is exactly what the walk up the hill seemed like to Rudi, especially as the lack of sleep the night before was starting to get to her. By the time she got to her destination she was exhausted and sweating and breathing hard. Though she soon regained her senses and looked out at the large brick manor to her right—outside of which two preteen boys were playing tackle football underneath a floodlight.

Reluctantly, she turned off her music and said to them: "This 21 Lewis?"

Just as reluctantly, the boys stopped playing, and the taller one pointed to the number atop the house's white front door and uttered, "You can't fucking read?"

With lots of anger, Rudi started toward the boy, while uttering back, "You're gonna be the one who can't read."

Suddenly, the front door of the house opened wide, and Stephen Cross stepped outside and stopped—and Rudi stopped along with him.

Stephen was a tall man in his mid-forties—a man with the same crew cut he wore back in the service. He was also a man whose statuesque presence bore only a faint resemblance to his brother—and with his cool blue eyes he gazed warily upon Rudi for a few moments before politely asking, "Can I help you?"

"You Mr. Cross?" Rudi asked back, while looking at Stephen as warily as he was looking at her.

"You must be Rudi."

"I must be."

Stephen responded with a frown. He frowned because years earlier he thought he'd never witness anything as loathsome as hippies—but seeing Rudi almost made him yearn for the dirty long hair and peace signs.

"You're late," he continued. "In fact, I was just about to call my brother. He said you'd be here by eighteen hundred."

"By when?" she replied, as if he were speaking a foreign language.

"Six o'clock," he replied back. "The time we punctually have dinner every night."

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

"No cursing," he growled.

“Excuse me?” she growled back.

“No cursing while you’re staying in my home.”

“But,” Rudi replied, while pointing at the taller boy, “that brat just cursed at me.”

“She’s lying!” the boy cried out.

“You’re gonna be lying on the ground in a moment!” Rudi cried back.

“That’s enough!” yelled Stephen. “Look, Rudi, we all get along here, more or less. And so are you—if you want to stay.”

But Rudi didn’t want to stay, and she almost told him so. Though she just sighed instead.

“By the way,” Stephen went on—while pointing at the boys, who were snickering among themselves while staring at Rudi, “this is Todd and Derek.”

Just then, the front door of the house opened again, and a tallish woman wearing gray slacks and a white cashmere sweater stepped outside.

“And,” added Stephen, “this is my wife Pam.”

Pam was in her early forties, though she looked much younger due to a baby face that hadn’t a single wrinkle on it. She was also pretty, in a girl-next-door type of way—with an overabundance of what some might call wholesomeness. She actually looked much like an Ivory Girl. She looked like the type of woman who was always happy and smiling—which was exactly what she was doing until she saw Rudi—something that caused her smile to immediately fade. It faded because while the couple had had a lot of wild children living in their home over the years—many of which were also wild looking—Pam had never seen anything quite as ferocious as Rudi before, even on television. So she was frightened of her—so much so that she subconsciously took a few steps toward her husband before muttering, “You, you must be

Rudi.”

“I must be,” Rudi replied.

Pam afterward turned to Stephen and breathlessly said, “Why, she’s so . . . so . . . I just can’t think of the right word.”

Chapter Five

WITH THE ENTIRE family sitting around the crowded white porcelain kitchen table, Stephen passed Rudi a large plate of thinly slice roast beef.

Which she promptly passed to Derek, who was sitting on her left.

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

“I’m a vegetarian,” she told him matter-of-factly, before picking up a bowl of mashed potatoes from the center of the table.

“Is that, is that like a Buddhist thing?” asked Pam, not having personally known a vegetarian before. “Or is it Hari Krishna I’m thinking?”

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

“If you want, I can make you some—”

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

“Unfortunately,” uttered Todd, from under his breath.

“Now, as I was saying,” Stephen told 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 do your own laundry—and for you to clean up after yourself. And finally, your turn for washing the dinner dishes is on Mondays and Wednesdays.”

“What is today?” Rudi asked, honestly not knowing

what day of the week it was.

"Wednesday. But, since you must be tired from that climb up Kilimanjaro, you and Derek can switch—"

"—Ten dollars for all that?" Rudi interrupted, 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?"

"Then don't take it. But you still have to do the chores."

"This is total . . ."

Rudi almost said the final word, only stopping herself when she saw Stephen's glare.

"As to the rules here . . ." Stephen continued.

"Rules?" Rudi muttered. "You mean, there are more of them?"

"The rules 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 then started eating—and Rudi grabbed a half-empty bowl of string beans and emptied what was left onto her plate.

Afterward, as she began eating as well, she began thinking how—with her stepfather—she could eat what she wanted and when she wanted, and didn't have to clean or do chores. And there were no rules.

Strangely, she started missing living with the man—something she thought she'd never miss, and, even more strangely, she started missing him, too.

“YOU KNOW, RUDI,” Pam said near the end of the meal, “after dinner the whole family’s gonna watch *That’s Incredible* together in the living room. With plenty of popcorn, of course. How does that sound?”

“It sounds like . . .” Rudi began, before once again noticing Stephen’s glare and adding, “Actually, I think I’m just gonna go to bed.”

So, after everyone finished eating—while Derek did the dishes and Stephen and Todd started up the Jiffy Pop—Pam led Rudi out of the kitchen and into the marble hallway by the front of the house, where Rudi picked up her white sea bag and took out her Walkman from her coat, which was hanging on a nearby rack.

“You have an interesting name,” Pam said.

“Yeah?” Rudi said back, a bit suspiciously.

“Yeah. I’ve never heard of a girl with that name before.”

“Well, I like it,” Rudi told her, with lots of defensiveness.

“I didn’t say I didn’t like it,” Pam told her back—“I just said I never heard of it before.”

“It’s a whole lot better than my real name.”

“And what’s that?”

“One that makes me chuck.”

“Well,” Pam uttered, clearly trying to change the subject, “what do you think of this place?”

“It, it’s certainly something,” Rudi replied, with a couple of nods.

“I actually grew up here.”

“You don’t say?”

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

Rudi nodded another couple of times, and the two made their way to and up the carpeted staircase.

"It's going to be so nice having a girl with us," Pam went on.

Once again, Rudi nodded.

"We haven't had one in more than a year," the woman continued.

Rudi was all nodded out, so she just forced a smile—and the two soon reached the second floor, where they slowly and quietly walked down a long corridor, with Rudi feeling a bit discomforted by the woman's warmth.

"I want you to know if you ever need any advice on anything," Pam suddenly spoke, "just ask."

"Advice?" Rudi spoke back. "Advice on what?"

"You know, girl stuff."

"Ah-ha. I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

"You, you are a . . ."

"A what?"

Just then, the two stopped between a set of doors, and Pam leaned toward Rudi and whispered, "You are a real girl?"

"I must be," Rudi whispered back.

Awkwardly, Pam smiled, and, while pointing to the left door—one that had a "NO ENTRY" sign affixed to it—she said, "This is our bedroom. It . . ."

"It's off-limits," Rudi stated.

"Yeah," Pam stated back, with a hint of a blush. She then opened the door to her right, exposing a frilly and very pink little girl's bedroom.

Which just horrified Rudi.

The room, which was much larger than Rudi's old one, had dolls and dollhouses and doll accessories alongside the four pink walls. The carpet, too, was pink—as well as the nightstand and a big dresser—a dresser that had a large mirror on top of it. One framed in pink. Also this color was a soft-looking bed in the center of the

room—a bed Rudi instantly imagined Goldilocks once slept in. Though the room did have an almost unpink desk across from the dresser, which had—in addition to some old reference books—new notebooks as well as pens and pencils, and a manual typewriter. Most importantly, as far as Rudi was concerned, it also had a small boombox.

“This was once my bedroom,” Pam said proudly.

“You don’t say?” Rudi said back, as she continued to look on in horror.

“Yeah. Isn’t it nice?”

“It, it’s something.”

Pam wasn’t sure how to reply to this, and not wanting to miss the beginning of *That’s Incredible*, she said good-night and backed out of the room, while looking at Rudi with hopeful eyes. At the same time, after taking a deep breath, Rudi dropped her bag and Walkman by the door, and she walked over to the bed and sat down on it.

Right before it almost swallowed her.

“Oy vey,” she muttered, while shaking her head.

Though she realized the bedroom was still a lot better than where she didn’t sleep the night before—and infinitely better than juvie. Or facing Deke. So, she reluctantly unpacked, and removed her makeup, prior to playing some of her bedtime music on the boombox—Siouxsie and the Banshees. And, after listening to “Happy House”—a song that suddenly took on a whole new meaning—she undressed while staring blankly out the window at the endless trees in front of her, and soon thereafter went to bed.

However, even though she was tired enough to sleep for two days, she just couldn’t—something that was caused by more than only her worries. It was just too quiet. There were no sounds at all—not from the street

or from within the house itself. No screaming, no loud music or TV—no cars. It was almost as if she were in a vacuum, and this quickly drove her crazy.

“I won’t make it a week,” she muttered.

“Oh, Rudi!” Stephen suddenly called out from downstairs in the hallway. “You still up? I just want you to know that wake-up is at oh seven hundred.”

Bitterly, Rudi shook her head. She shook it realizing she might not even make it a day.

Chapter Six

THE SUN SLOWLY rose in front of a large and beautiful three-story white house in Newstead—the most exclusive section of South Orange, and one of the most affluent areas in the entire state—an area that almost made where Rudi now lived look like Irvington.

It wasn't long before the sun reached a window on the second floor of the house, from which you could see all the way to Manhattan twenty miles away. The light splashed through the window into a bedroom, and onto a huge display case full of trophies and awards and plaques of distinction. All of which told the story of an athlete, who in his short life had excelled in just about every sport, particularly football. This story continued on the wall with a framed newspaper clipping, which spoke of how, as a junior the year before, this athlete had been named an all-state flanker.

The walls of Tommy Goodwin's bedroom spoke of other achievements as well, especially academic ones, which included being named to the honor roll every single quarter of his high school career. On these walls were many pictures, too. Pictures not only of the Yardbirds and Bruce Springsteen, but also of a smiling and handsome and confident young man—one with wavy dark brown hair and penetrating eyes, who had no shortage of friends and admirers—of both sexes.

However, the bed in this room told a much different story than everything else. It told the story of a terrified boy well beyond lost, whose face was bathed in tears and whose expression was caked in both loneliness and

hopelessness.

“Tommy, you up?” suddenly came a soft female voice from just outside the door.

Quickly, Tommy wiped away some tears and uttered, “Yeah, Mom.”

“I’ll see you downstairs for breakfast.”

“All right.”

With lots of reluctance, Tommy lifted his muscular frame up to his waist and sighed, right before dragging himself out of bed and into the adjoining bathroom, where for many seconds he just stared at the image in the mirror above the sink—the image of a boy who had everything, and wanted for nothing.

All of a sudden, a burst of anger overcame him and he had a great urge to destroy the image, and everything it represented. Though instead he just sighed once again and turned on a nearby shower faucet. Soon afterward—under the scolding hot water—Tommy tried to wash it all away. With a face pleadingly turned upward, he tried to burn both his skin and all that was underneath it. But it just wouldn’t work—or perhaps he was just too numb to feel it. Regardless of which, he eventually turned off the water and dried himself off with a towel. Then, he returned to his bedroom, where he dressed himself—putting on some freshly ironed pleated khakis and a starched blue button-down Oxford—as well as a white wool Polo sweater. And, after stepping into a pair of shiny black penny loafers, he picked up a blue and white football jacket off a nearby chair—a jacket that had a big “C” stitched in front, along with his name.

As he put it on, he headed toward his nightstand, where waited a backpack and a small plain brown hard-cover book, which he gazed at.

SITTING AT THE dining room table downstairs was an elegant woman in her early fifties.

She was just a bit smallish, with her brilliant dirty-blonde hair combed tightly in a bun, and she was wearing a pastel-blue Dior dress—one that seemed chosen to complement the flowers and the fruit bowl in the center of the heavy oak table.

Suddenly, the doors leading from the adjoining kitchen swung open, and a tall dark woman in an immaculate white uniform entered. She was about as old as Mrs. Goodwin and was carrying a tray containing a Spanish omelet and some buttered toast—as well as coffee, orange juice, and a folded-over copy of the *New York Times*.

Reflexively, Mrs. Goodwin smiled at the woman, who responded in kind before bringing over the tray and placing the items on the table.

“Thank you, Elizabeth,” Mrs. Goodwin warmly said.

“You’re very welcome,” Elizabeth said back, just as warmly. “Can I make something for Tommy?”

“He’ll be down shortly.”

“All right. I’ll be in the kitchen.”

“All right.”

Elizabeth nodded, and Mrs. Goodwin again smiled at her. Then, she watched the woman exit, and, as she did, she couldn’t help notice the empty chair at the other end of the table—a chair she knew would forever be empty. She also couldn’t help stare at this chair. She stared at it as if she were somehow lost—lost in some different time and place. Which she only came out of when her son walked into the room and kissed her on the cheek—with his backpack now across his shoulder. This son was much like the one in the pictures on his walls. Tommy had a big phony smile on his handsome face and looked like a boy not only confident but indomitable.

"What would you like for breakfast?" his mother asked with a mild smile, right after the two said their good-mornings.

Tommy thought about it for a second, before grabbing an apple off the nearby bowl.

"That's not nearly enough," Mrs. Goodwin replied, while trying to muster some indignation. "It's bad enough this crazy diet kick you're on . . ."

"I gotta run," he told her.

"Will you be home for dinner?"

"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."

"Then, Saturday."

"Maybe," he said, with another of his phony smiles, before adding, "I'll see ya."

Seconds later, he was gone—and she realized just how fast they went. All of them. Which caused her eyes to return to the empty chair.

A SHORT DISTANCE away in her new bedroom Rudi put on a handmade Black Flag T-shirt while listening to her favorite song on the boombox. Then, after casually checking her makeup in the mirror above the dresser, she turned off the music and grabbed both her Walkman and white sea bag, and headed toward the door.

"How many times do I have to call you down for breakfast?" shouted Stephen from the downstairs hallway as she exited her room.

"I'm coming!" she shouted back.

Afterward, she made her way down both the corridor

and the stairs, before putting on her tattered overcoat in the hallway.

“Well?” Stephen loudly growled, from inside the kitchen.

With great exasperation, Rudi stepped into the threshold of the room, where she saw the entire family eating a breakfast consisting mainly of Eggo waffles, Pop Tarts, and Ovaltine—something that brought a nauseous expression to her face.

“Hurry up,” Stephen commanded.

“I’m not hungry,” she told him.

“Are you sure?” asked Pam. “It’s all vegetarian, I think.”

“I’m sure,” Rudi replied.

“What’s that shirt you got on?”

Reluctantly, Rudi opened her coat.

“Why are you wearing a shirt for a bug spray?” Pam inquired.

“It’s the name of a band,” Rudi replied, with unrestrained indignation.

“Why, 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.”

“Well, I’m gonna get going.”

“I’ll drive you,” Stephen said.

“I can get there myself,” Rudi insisted.

“Not if you want to get there on time.”

TOMMY SLOWLY ENTERED a garage with the apple and hit a button on the wall.

Instantly, one of the doors methodically opened, exposing a silver Jaguar, and next to it a yellow Corvette. It further exposed a Harley Sturgis, and, after choosing this,

Tommy put on a pair of Ray-Bans and sped out of the garage. He also took just a bite of the apple, prior to tossing the rest into a nearby garbage can as he headed down the driveway and onto Overhill Road.

Soon he was descending the mountain along South Orange Avenue, with the wind blowing through his wavy hair—and his mind blanker than the blue sky in front of him. So, he didn't really notice the light turn yellow at the bottom of the hill—at the intersection of Ridgewood Road. He just kept flying—way past the speed limit. Way past any speed limit. He barely even noticed the light turn red as he approached it, and he just as barely noticed the cars entering the intersection from both sides. Though they noticed him. They noticed him and came to a sharp stop in the middle of the street—and they honked their horns in disgust as he slithered between them.

Afterward, as he began rising up the next hill in the direction of Columbia, he knew he should've felt something—exhilaration or excitement. Or at least fear.

But he felt nothing.

RUDI AND STEPHEN got into the front seats of his late-model Volvo, and he put a key in the ignition.

"If you want," he told her, "we can get you something at Ralph's—it's right across the street from the school."

"I said, I'm not hungry," she growled, just before crossing her arms and putting on her apathy face.

"Fine," he growled back.

Then, he started the car, and said, "You know, I was looking at your transcripts last night—and I have to admit my brother wasn't exaggerating. It's pretty impressive what you've done—especially for someone who only shows up half the time. Just imagine what you could do if you actually put some effort into it."

Rudi shrugged.

“What did you get on your SAT?” he went on.

Rudi shrugged again, and added, “I forget.”

“I bet. I bet it was perfect.”

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

Stephen chuckled at this, and added, “Have you given any thought about what you’re gonna do after high school?”

“I don’t even know what I’m gonna do after today,” Rudi replied, before putting on her headphones and blasting Bad Brains’ “Attitude” on her Walkman—blasting it so loud that Stephen could hear the lyrics, even if he didn’t really want to hear them. Especially when she started singing them.

But Rudi couldn’t help herself, anymore than she could help herself from jumping up and down in her seat as the music jacked her soul.

TOMMY PARKED HIS bike in the school lot.

Right then he saw a small sea of football jackets by the front doors of Columbia—a sea mixed with its close sibling—one of beautiful and well-dressed girls. Like a few minutes earlier, he tried to feel something: happiness, loathing—anything. But he couldn’t feel a single thing.

Suddenly, one of his teammates spotted him, and the boy waved his arm wildly and shouted, “Tom-me!”

The other boys and the girls also turned to Tommy, and they waved and shouted as well, and Tommy had the strongest urge to take off—to take off and never come back. But instead he forced another of his phony smiles and waved, and headed toward them.

THE VOLVO PARKED a short distance from the Harley, and Rudi and Stephen stepped out of the vehicle and walked toward the school—outside of which still stood Tommy and his friends, who were still laughing and horsing around.

Rudi still had Bad Brains hopping inside her head while Stephen was glancing through a manila folder—and he soon uttered, “I wanted to tell you something yesterday . . .”

“What did you say?” she uttered back, after stopping and turning toward him.

With a bit of anger, he turned off her Walkman, and he softly told her: “NA meets on Sunday nights—in the South Orange Recreation Center.”

“Terrific,” she replied.

“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.”

Rudi shrugged once again, and pretended once again to be apathetic. Though, as the two continued on, she started feeling more and more uncomfortable—about being out of place. Which peaked when the two reached Tommy and his friends, who all fell silent the moment they saw her, having never seen someone so strange—even in the movies. Everything about her was just baffling to them, and they weren’t sure what to think of her, good or bad. This was especially true of Tommy. Part of him felt revulsion—revulsion for someone so different than him—someone so out of order. But he was also oddly fascinated by Rudi—a girl who walked so uprightly and seemed not to care what anyone thought about her.

As for Rudi, she quickly noticed the stares—which, of course, she had seen many times before. She also

stared back—specifically at Tommy, who was clearly the focal point of the whole group. At the same time—much like him—she was uncertain what to think. On one hand, Tommy represented everything she hated, as she quickly judged him a dumb preppy jock—something she was certain of. On the other hand, though, there was something different about him—something in his dark penetrating eyes—eyes that were probing her. But she tried to pretend this something was just biological—that it only existed because he was so good looking. However, she knew there was more to it than that. She just didn't know what more, and this made her even more uncomfortable. So, to fight this, she stopped cold—and, with her hands on her hips, she growled, “What are you looking at?”

The tone of her voice actually surprised Tommy even more than her appearance, as no girl had ever talked to him like that before. Most adored him, and even the few that had been mad at him in the past never spoke with such irreverence and disdain—and strength. Which frightened him. It frightened him enough that he put his arm around Darlene—a tall leggy girl with long permed strawberry-blonde hair, who had on a short pink skirt and who happily replied to his gesture in kind, especially as she, too, felt threatened by Rudi—though for a much different reason. She felt threatened by the way Tommy was looking at Rudi—a way he never looked at her.

Rudi also felt threatened—by her own feelings. Because watching the two arm-in-arm only made her madder, even though she knew she had no reason to be mad at all.

“Guys,” Tommy said to his friends with a nervous grin—with his eyes still locked on Rudi—“I, I thought Halloween was last month.”

All at once, Tommy's friends broke out in laughter. Though this came to a halt when Rudi took a threatening step toward Tommy and barked, "How'd you like to go next Halloween as a rug?" She then took another step toward him, and he instinctively stepped back—more than shocked that a girl could frighten him—him, a big tough football player.

Fortunately for him, before she could take another step, Stephen grabbed her coat from behind—causing her to come to a quick stop.

Seeing her restrained, some of Tommy's friends cried out, "Ooooooooooh!"—while another added, "Them's fighting words, Tommy."

"I don't fight girls," Tommy replied, while holding Darlene even tighter. "Hell, I wouldn't even fight her!"

No longer able to control her temper, Rudi broke away from Stephen, and rushed at Tommy, who again stepped back in fear. But Stephen again grabbed her, and effortlessly spun her in front of him—and afterward he pushed her forward, toward the school entrance.

"Nice start," he softly hollered.

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

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

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

Stephen, too, could no longer control his temper, and he slammed open the front door of the school with his left hand, and with his right he pushed Rudi inside the building—with Tommy's eyes still locked on her. And even after she was long out of sight—even after all his friends finally stopped talking about her—Tommy couldn't stop thinking about her, and what he found most amazing of all was that he was actually feeling something.

Chapter Seven

STEPHEN LED RUDI down a short and crowded passageway, which itself led to a perpendicular corridor, with Rudi feeling incensed—incensed that Tommy had incensed her.

He wasn't worth her incense, she tried telling herself. But she just wasn't all that convincing. Though at least she was able to convince herself to keep a lower profile from now on—and not draw so much attention to herself. She would stay innocuous and invisible, until her chance to escape came.

"Here's your class schedule, meal card, and ID," Stephen said, as he pulled out a short computer printout and two laminated cards from his manila folder, before handing them to her as they stopped in the corridor. He afterward pointed down the hallway at an open door to his right and added, "Your homeroom is over there. The teacher, Mr. Strother, will assign you a locker and a combination. And, if you need anything, my office is around the—"

Just then, Stephen was interrupted—by the loud clearing of a throat.

Slowly, the two turned around, and they saw a man glaring at them from just outside the school offices. This man was in his late forties and was about medium height and weight and complexion—and was wearing a tight gray suit and an even tighter black tie. And those weren't the only things tight about Mr. Gonzalez, as underneath his thick black-rimmed eyeglasses was a man wound tighter than the most unopenable knot.

"This Miss Weiss?" he growled, while threateningly pointing at Rudi.

"Yes, sir," Stephen replied, with great reverence, and more than just a little fear.

Gonzalez responded by pointing inside the offices with his thumb, and, while focusing his glare solely on Rudi, he commanded, "Get inside."

Rudi sighed, but she followed the man through the door—and, after the two passed the reception area, she followed him into his office. There Mr. Gonzalez marched behind his large and neat desk and told her to sit down on a wooden stool in front of it while he himself sat in a huge leather chair that looked more like a throne, from which he proudly perched, relishing his reputation as "the biggest bastard principal on earth"—something he more than once heard students call him. He afterward opened a file on top of his desk, and he started perusing a set of documents. Which quickly caused some surprise to cross his face—and, as he looked through more and more pages, more than once he glanced at Rudi. He glanced at her as if he were trying to measure what he was reading against the girl he was seeing.

Eventually, he muttered to himself: "There must be some mistake with these transcripts."

Rudi shrugged, but he didn't see it. He just kept scanning the file, and finally, with a shake of his head, he added—again to himself—"It, it's just not possible. I'll have someone call Irvington. In the meantime . . ."

Dramatically, he closed the folder and glared at Rudi, and he sternly said, "I'll be quite honest with you, Miss Weiss—"

"—*Ms. Weiss*," she interrupted.

"I'll be quite honest with you, Miss Weiss," he went on, "I was opposed to letting you attend this school."

“That makes two of us.”

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

Rudi sneered at both the remark and the principal, and she noticed a picture on the wall behind him—and she motioned toward it with a nod of her head, while telling him: “Yeah, well, criminals come in all varieties.”

Unhesitantly, Mr. Gonzalez spun around, and he looked at what she was staring at—a framed picture of a smiling Ronald Reagan. Which caused him to return her sneer.

“Unfortunately,” he continued, “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, of course, did—and she also knew that he had no idea what it would really mean to her. So, after glancing at the nameplate on his desk, she sighed and uttered, “Look, Mr. Gonzalez . . .”

“*Gonthaleth*,” he corrected.

“Excuse me?”

“The name’s Castilian, and is pronounced ‘*Gonthaleth*.’”

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

“Well, I’m not one of these neighbors, am I?”

Right then—while gazing at Gonzalez’s smug expression—Rudi started to forget what she had just told herself about keeping under the proverbial radar, and, once she fully forgot it, she uttered, “No, Mr. Gonzalez, you are certainly not one of them.”

“Say ‘Gonzalez’ one more time,” the principal hollered with his nostrils flaring—“just say it one more time.

I've kicked people in the head for less than that!"

For a few seconds Rudi didn't say anything. Then, she burst out in laughter.

"You think this is funny?" the principal howled, while desperately trying to control his anger—and not doing a particularly good job of it.

"Actually," answered Rudi, "yes—I think it's hilarious, Mr. *Gonzalez*."

Suddenly, a school bell rang, and the principal pointed to his open door and ordered her out.

At once, she jumped to her feet and saluted him, while saying, "Aye, aye, captain."

Chapter Eight

RUDI WALKED UP to the second floor and found the classroom listed on her schedule, just moments before a bell rang.

She soon after stopped at the open door and looked inside, where she noticed three long tables that—along with the teacher’s desk up front—formed something of a square. But that wasn’t the only thing she noticed, as among the dozen or so students in the class was Tommy, who was sitting near the front next to Darlene, who had her arm around his and who was looking up at him with great affection—something that wasn’t exactly returned, as Tommy’s mind was somewhere else. It was still outside in front of the school.

As for Rudi—despite her best efforts—she again felt incensed, and she couldn’t help moving closer to the pair.

“Did you see *That’s Incredible* last night?” Darlene murmured to Tommy.

“What?” he replied.

“*That’s Incredible*—did you see it?”

“Ah, I missed it.”

“It was like,” suddenly came a condescending female voice from behind them, “it was like, *incredible*.”

Instantly, Tommy spun toward Rudi—and glared at her. And she all-to-eagerly glared back, while adding, “You know, maybe we could all meet at my house tonight and have a big TV party. Yeah, I think *Hill Street Blues* is on. It’ll be a real blast.”

Tommy responded by pointing out the open door

and saying, "Special Ed is down the hall."

"Then you'd better get going," she said back.

"Can I help you?" interjected a high-pitched male voice from behind her.

Reluctantly, Rudi turned around, and she saw a small man standing by the door—a man with bright white skin and a big brown afro, who was in his early thirties and who was wearing a tie-dye T-shirt underneath his tan corduroy sports jacket.

"Help me with what?" Rudi asked.

"I'm the teacher here," he answered—"Mr. Krasner."

"Well, I'm the student here—Ms. Weiss."

"This is *Honors* English."

With a drawn-out sigh, Rudi glanced at her schedule, prior to glancing back at Krasner and saying, "Yeah, well, that's what it says here, too."

Quickly, Mr. Krasner marched up to her and grabbed the printout—and, after reading it over, he uttered, "All right, Gertrude—take a seat."

Gertrude.

To Rudi, the word was worse than "Deke" or "juvie"—or even the scratching of a chalkboard. To her it was the most evil word there was, and she cringed at its utterance. Though everyone else in the class had a much different reaction. First, surprise crossed their faces, and afterward many of them mumbled, "*Gertrude?*"

"Gertrude, the punk rock girl!" Tommy proclaimed with a grin—causing the other students to laugh. That is, apart from Rudi, who looked as if she wanted to murder Tommy. But he just smiled at this, and to continued laughter he added, "Yeah, I think I once saw her in a circus sideshow—right alongside the ape boy."

"The name's *Rudi*," Rudi firmly told the teacher, who smiled in reply—and, while pointing to the printout, he

told her, "It says here: '*Gertrude*.'"

"I don't care what it fucking says—my name's Rudi—with an 'i'!"

Furiously, Rudi grabbed back the printout, and she again glared at Tommy before sitting in the back—next to a tall thin boy, who grinned at her and gave her a big wave, before jokingly crying out, "Hey, Gertie!"

Rudi, though, didn't find this funny—and so she took hold of the boy by the collar and held her fist up to his frightened face while exclaiming, "Hey, how would you like some dentures?"

Suddenly, there was a banging sound—and Rudi released the boy and turned around, and she saw the teacher smiling in front of her. She also saw on the table a small plain brown hardcover book.

"What's that?" she inquired, while pointing at it.

"*The Catcher in the Rye*," the man answered. "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."

Mr. Krasner then walked toward the chalkboard in the front of the class, and, as he did, Rudi flipped open the book, without much reverence. She also glanced at Tommy, who was staring at her while again trying to figure her out. Without any success at all.

But she was now even more sure that she had figured him out, especially when she noticed his expensive clothes—and she was sure she hated him, too. So, she

flipped him her middle finger.

Reflexively, he smiled at this, and mockingly blew her a kiss—something that infuriated her even more. It infuriated her so much that she had to hold the table just to keep herself from rising.

“At the end of class yesterday,” Mr. Krasner stated, as he started writing on the chalkboard, “we were discussing the subjunctive mood. Can anyone tell me the difference between it and the indicative?”

The teacher afterward waited for a reply, but when none was forthcoming, he turned around and looked at the class—and saw that no one was looking his way.

“Anyone?” he asked. “Come on, guys—you’re supposed to be the best and brightest here.”

Still no one volunteered. So, he knowingly smiled and turned to Rudi, who was also looking away from him—and he said to her: “How about you, Rudi?”

“Excuse me?” she replied, after turning toward him. “I wasn’t listening.”

This caused muted snickering around the class—something that angered Mr. Krasner, who stepped toward Rudi and growled, “The difference between the subjunctive and indicative moods?”

She didn’t answer.

“Do you have any clue what I’m talking about?” he went on.

Again, she didn’t reply.

“I guess not,” he said, with his knowing smile having returned, and he then walked back to the chalkboard and once more started writing.

As for Rudi, while this time she remembered about being innocuous and invisible, an anger rose inside her—an anger at the teacher for thinking he was better than her. And this anger soon boiled over.

“Indicative,” she called out: “I’m sitting in this stupid, fucking class.”

In shock, Mr. Krasner stopped writing, and Tommy looked at Rudi with great surprise—something she noticed, even if she pretended not to. And Tommy’s surprise only increased when she added, “Subjunctive: ‘I wish I *weren’t* sitting in this stupid, fucking class.’”

Again, there was muted snickering—and the teacher furiously spun his head around the class to make it fall silent.

“What’s the matter,” Rudi said to the man, “am I wrong, *teacher*?”

“And the imperative?” he said back. “Give me an example of the imperative.”

“Cut that stupid, fucking afro off—it’s the eighties.”

This time no one snickered. There were actually no sounds whatsoever, and for many seconds there was only glaring—between Mr. Krasner and Rudi.

Finally, he spoke: “You have until Monday to give me that paper. *Monday*.”

He afterward returned to his chalkboard and his writing—while Rudi and Tommy’s eyes slowly turned to each other. Only this time they didn’t glare or smirk—or make vulgar gestures. This time something odd happened. This time there was a spark. Which caused both of them to quickly look away. Though this didn’t accomplish a thing.

Chapter Nine

RUDI TOOK HER tray of food and started through the large cafeteria.

It didn't take long before she noticed that just about everyone's eyes were on her. She even created something of a wave as she walked through the center of the hall.

But she ignored it. She ignored it just like she ignored all such attention. Then, she saw one particular pair of eyes on her—a pair belonging to a boy sitting at a table full of football players and beautiful girls. At the same time, she tried to pretend the look she and Tommy shared in English class meant nothing—nothing to her and nothing to him. However, she walked faster—and not so surely. Or uprightly. And if she could've, she would've walked right through the wall.

Instead she found an empty table way in the back and sat down, and tried not to look anywhere. But she couldn't help herself, and she saw that Tommy was still staring at her, with eyes warmer than any she had ever seen before. Though this wasn't actually his intention, as he, too, was trying to pretend that nothing had happened in class. He was especially trying to pretend he didn't find her attractive.

Just look at her, he told himself—she's a nightmare, and behaves like an animal.

Yet he couldn't stop thinking about her, or stop looking at her—even though he was already kind of going out with the best-looking girl in school.

Speaking of which, Darlene—who was sitting next to Tommy—couldn't help notice how he was staring at

Rudi, nor could she prevent her own face from turning red.

“Can you believe she’s in my Chemistry class, too?” she soon uttered, while glaring at Rudi.

Tommy shrugged, while continuing his stare.

“She should probably be the one teaching the class,” Darlene went on.

“What do you mean?” Tommy asked.

“I heard she’s a big-time druggie,” Darlene replied. “And she got caught—that’s why they sent her here.”

Once again, Tommy shrugged—and kept on looking.

“Someone like that doesn’t care about anyone,” continued Darlene.

“Why are you telling me this?” Tommy growled. But he finally looked away from Rudi, even if he didn’t actually stop thinking about her.

As for Rudi, she was now able to turn from Tommy, even if she didn’t actually stop thinking about him, and she started picking at her food.

Just then, three small boys nervously stopped at the other end of her table with trays of food. All three had awkward and uneven haircuts, as well as collared polyester shirts—shirts direct from the racks of Korvette’s. They also all wore dark Haggar slacks—slacks that really didn’t go well with their white sneakers.

“We, we usually sit here,” mumbled Philip—the tallest of the three.

Angrily, Rudi turned to the boys and said, “So?”

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

“Why are you asking me?” Rudi howled.

“Sorry,” uttered Eliot—the shortest of the three—just before they started slowly backing up, causing Rudi to sigh deeply and cry out, “*Oy vey*—sit wherever you

want!”

Eventually, the three geeks sat at Rudi’s table, though not without considerable fear. Which just annoyed her even more.

Chapter Ten

AFTER LAST CLASS Rudi went into a girls' bathroom not far from her locker.

There by the sink she fished out her textbooks from her white sea bag, and found her makeup—and she began touching up her eye shadow while trying to convince herself there was no particular reason for doing this, even though it wasn't something she normally did in the middle of the day.

Suddenly, the door creaked open, and a small girl stepped inside the bathroom—a girl named Maria.

Maria was kind of plain and mousy-looking, with long black hair and no makeup or earrings—or any kind of jewelry. She furthermore was dressed very conservatively, wearing a simple white blouse buttoned all the way to the top, which contrasted not only with her light brown skin but also with her dark plaid skirt—one that fell well below her knees.

Instantly, Rudi recognized her. She recognized her because more than once in History class she had seen Maria staring at her. Though she had been staring in a way different than the others. She had been staring in wonder, and when Maria saw Rudi in the bathroom she stopped and again stared at Rudi in wonder. She stared as if she were witnessing an entirely new species of life.

Rudi at first tried to ignore her. She just continued with her eye shadow. But soon she had had enough—and she spun toward the girl and barked, “Is there something fucking wrong with you?”

Without answering, Maria quickly backed out of the

bathroom, and Rudi sighed for the umpteenth time that day before returning to the mirror and shaking her head, while saying, "These stupid, fucking people."

She afterward put away her makeup, and—after tossing her bag over her shoulder—she grabbed her books, which she planned on dumping into her locker prior to leaving school. Then, she stormed out of the bathroom into the crowded hallway, where she looked around.

For no one in particular, she told herself. Though she didn't spot this particular no one. Instead she spotted Owen Connors—the school bully.

Owen, who was wearing a light blue work shirt over a pair of long johns, was a big hulking kid—the biggest in the whole school. Which was at least partly due to no longer being much of a kid. With a face full of whiskers and a small bald spot in the back of his head, Owen looked older than some of the teachers, and, in truth, wasn't much younger than a few of them. He was also holding a textbook high over his head—well out of reach of Philip, who was quixotically grasping for it, with the two other geeks helplessly watching nearby.

"This is an awfully big book for such a little man," Owen cooed.

"Come on, Owen," Philip cried out, "please—I need it!"

"I need it, too. I always wanted to learn . . ."

Owen then looked at the book, and with great difficulty, he read the cover while muttering, "Phi-sicks."

Rudi tried to ignore this. She tried to ignore it and remain apathetic.

Innocuous and invisible.

She kept telling herself this. Besides, she added, it wasn't her fight. It had nothing to do with her. And what did she care about those geeks anyway?

But before she knew it she was standing right in front of Owen and saying, "Just give him back the book."

With surprise, Owen looked down at Rudi, and he grinned, before uttering, "And who's gonna make me?"

"I'll give you three seconds. One . . . two . . ."

"Three," he stated, with his grin having turned into the biggest of smiles.

Suddenly, Rudi dropped all her textbooks except for a thick Chemistry one, and, just as suddenly, she swung this book across Owen's jaw—sending him flying into a nearby locker, where he cracked his head before falling onto the floor in a stupor, amidst dozens of stunned students.

Rudi then calmly turned to the geeks—who were by far the most stunned of all and who were looking up at her as if she were some kind of Greek god. And she pointed to the Physics book in Owen's paw and told the three: "I suggest you take it while you still can."

Instantly, Philip rushed up to Owen and yanked the book out of his grasp—and he cried out, "Thank you so much!"

"Yeah!" the other geeks added as they joined him.

"Now don't think this means we're friends or nothing," Rudi remarked while wagging her finger, prior to kneeling down to pick up her own books—surrounded by the dozens of students, who were staring at her with expressions mixed of horror and awe.

"What's the matter with you people?" she exclaimed. "Have you never seen an ass-whipping before? Go on—get out of here!"

Hesitantly, the students moved on, and Rudi rose to her feet with her books—only to see Mr. Gonzalez standing by the school offices with his arms crossed.

He soon motioned her toward him with his index finger—and, after sighing deeply, she headed in his direction.

As she did, she reached the passageway leading to the front entrance, where standing near a wall were Tommy and a fellow football player named Billy, who were both staring at Rudi in utter disbelief. Tommy's disbelief was only partially because she had just beaten up the biggest kid in school—a kid Tommy had feared for as long as he could remember. The other and much larger cause of his disbelief was that Rudi had stood up for the geeks, as this ran counter to everything he believed about her—or tried to believe. It actually ran counter to everything he thought he knew about punks—everything the media had told him, over and over and over again. Especially on TV shows like *Quincy, M. E.* It contradicted everything, and so he was just baffled. Though Rudi misinterpreted this—thinking Tommy was scared—and still fighting her own feelings about him, she took a sudden step toward him in a threatening manner.

Which caused both Tommy and Billy to jump backward—and hit their heads against the wall. Which, in turn, made Rudi chuckle a bit.

Then, something odd happened.

Tommy smiled at her—and he smiled with a smile that was much different from the ones earlier that day. This smile had something special wrapped inside it—something that said, “I get you—and I like it,” and this something immediately caused Rudi to shift her eyes away.

“Miss Weiss!” Gonzalez howled. “Come here this instant!”

Quickly, Rudi rushed off—mostly to get away from Tommy—and just as quickly she was right in front of the

principal, who said to her: "I see your future, as the village idiot."

"Cool, we can hang together," she said back.

Furiously, the man pointed to an open room in the opposite direction, and he hollered, "Detention is the next door down!"

"Detention?" she hollered back. "But he was—"

"—And the next time something like this happens, you're finished here."

Rudi sighed, and headed down the hallway with her head lowered. At the same time, Mr. Gonzalez watched two teachers leaning over the near motionless body of Owen, and the principal had to work hard to suppress a smile, as he had wanted to do what Rudi had just done for a long, long time.

"If Mr. Connors comes to his senses," he called out to the teachers, "drag him into detention!"

Gonzalez then entered the offices, exposing Rudi, who was just entering the detention room. Abruptly, she stopped and turned her head—and she saw that Tommy was still staring at her. He was still smiling at her, too—with a smile that was making something inside her scream. What's more, she had this strange feeling that if she had been completely naked she wouldn't have been any more exposed to him. And this made her cross her arms.

Though it didn't help at all. So, she tried to look through him as well. But she just couldn't. She just couldn't figure him out—apart from knowing that he wasn't nearly as simple as she thought, or wanted to think.

"Come on," Billy said, while grabbing Tommy's shoulder, "we gotta get to practice."

Reluctantly, Tommy walked off with him—with his

eyes still stuck on Rudi. And pretty much everything else.

Chapter Eleven

RUDI SAT BEHIND a table in the back of the detention room—a few seats from Owen, who was leaning against his chair and looking up at the ceiling in a complete daze, unable to comprehend the set of events that led him to his present condition.

Watching them both, from the front of the room, was Mr. Thompson—a tall, bearded, and utterly humorless gym teacher, who was also the assistant director of security at the school and who wouldn't even let Rudi listen to music. So, instead she scribbled a picture on a piece of paper inside her notebook.

A great artist she was not—she actually only had a little more drawing skill than singing talent. But she still enjoyed doing it now and then when she had nothing better to do and felt some inspiration. Which was exactly what she felt, even if she didn't quite understand that that was what she was feeling. The drawing also helped take her mind off things—or, more exactly, off a certain person. Though not for long, because as the drawing came close to completion she suddenly realized something—something that made her stop cold.

In her mind, she thought she had been drawing Lee Ving, who was probably the best-looking guy in punk at the time. But she now saw that it really wasn't Ving at all. Sure, the figure had the same penetrating eyes Ving had—eyes that were cutting through her even when rendered in just two dimensions. But the hair wasn't right—it was much too wavy, and the jaw was too angular. And the nose and cheeks were thinner than what they should

have been. Then, when she realized who was really staring at her from the paper, she ripped the page from the notebook and crumpled it up—and tossed it down the table.

However—try as she may—she couldn't help retrieve it, and uncrumple it. And stare at it. She stared while looking for some kind of an answer. But all she got were more questions.

IN THE PRACTICE field behind the school Tommy—who was in full uniform—sat on the ground by himself with his knees crossed, while staring into the dirt with his mind on only one thing—or rather, one person.

He had now given up on his fantasy that he wasn't attracted to Rudi. He knew that he was more attracted to her than he had been to anything before. So, instead he tried to come up with reasons to believe his attraction was hopeless—in spite of the way she was looking at him from outside the detention room.

Finally, he came up with one.

"How could I ever interest a girl like that?" he asked himself.

She'd be bored of him in five minutes, he knew, as he even found himself boring. But this didn't stop him from thinking about her, and, before he knew it, he started writing her name in the dirt with his finger—something he hadn't done since the 7th grade.

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

Quickly, Tommy wiped out Rudi's name and jumped to his feet—and he hustled over to the angry and thickly set coach.

"What's the matter with you today?" the man growled.

“Nothing,” Tommy innocently replied.

“You’re elsewhere!”

“Sorry.”

“Sorry? You’re the captain of this fucking team—now show it!”

The coach then pushed Tommy toward the scrimmage.

But Tommy was still elsewhere.

Chapter Twelve

IT WAS LATE in the afternoon when Mr. Thompson told Rudi and Owen they could go home.

Instantly, Rudi jumped to her feet—but Owen just groaned, and strangely Rudi felt a little sorry for him. She even thought about saying something to him—something to make him feel a little bit better about getting beaten up by a girl.

Instead she just picked up her things and headed out into the empty hallway. Then, after dumping most of her books into her locker, she swung her bag over her shoulder and walked outside into the empty parking lot, with her mind in some netherworld, where the only thing that existed was a certain smile.

Suddenly, though, she came to a quick stop at a red light on the corner of Parker and Valley, while watching the red Porsche 944 speeding toward her.

For just a second she froze, and when she finally unfroze, it was too late—the car was parked in front of her, with MC5's "Kick Out the Jams" blasting out of its open windows. And, just seconds after this, the passenger door opened. But even then Rudi didn't move. She didn't even move when Deke called out from inside: "Get in." She just looked around, not only to see if anyone were nearby, but also to see if there were any possible escape. Though there was none of either. So, after Deke repeated his command—this time sterner—she sighed and fatalistically stepped inside the car, and tried to accept the nightmare to come.

"*Rudi, Rudi, Rudi!*" Deke smilingly cried out, with a

bad Cary Grant accent, and with his eyes heavily blood-shot—which kind of matched the red spandex outfit he was wearing. “What you doing here? Slumming it with the suburbanites?”

“How’d you find me?” Rudi muttered, while avoiding looking into those reddened eyes, with her whole body shaking almost imperceptibly—something Deke both noticed and enjoyed.

“Butch told me,” Deke answered.

“That motherfucker,” Rudi uttered, while shaking her head.

“So, where is it?” Deke demanded, as he started speeding down Valley.

“Where’s what?” she innocently inquired.

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

“I got busted.”

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

“I was, you know . . .”

“Scared?”

“Yeah.”

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

“Some undercover cop,” she meekly replied.

“Someone we know?” he replied back, not so meekly.

“I don’t think so.”

“*You don’t think so?* Why the hell 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’s the damage?”

"Everything. Stash, loot—fucking everything."

"What a shame," Deke said, with a slight grin—and an even slighter shake of his head.

"You're not mad?" Rudi asked, with a bit of surprise, while still not looking at him.

"Mad?" he replied. "Hell no, I ain't mad. Especially as you're gonna make it all up."

"What do you mean?" she mumbled, with an eye toward her nightmare.

Deke's response was to make a sharp left turn, prior to parking by the side of the road. He afterward took a vial of coke from his leather jacket and poured himself a thin white line on the back of his hand before snorting it. Then, he asked, "You want some?"

She didn't reply. So, he asked again—this time a bit firmer—after wiping a drop of blood from his nose.

"No," she finally told him.

"You never turned down anything in the old days," he told her back, while shaking his head. "Well, almost anything."

"The old days are old," she murmured. "They were old even when they weren't."

"Look at me," he commanded, and she slowly turned to him—and he said, "We're about to hit the big time, babe."

"What do you mean?"

"We're still in business."

At once Rudi felt some relief, knowing her fate could've been worse. Far worse. But still she told him: "Look, Deke, I need to stay straight."

"Fuck that shit," he told her back.

"Or they'll send me back to juvie—for a whole fucking year!"

"There are worse places than juvie. Much worse."

“Please.”

“I’ve been trying for years to connect with these preps and jocks and JAP shits,” he continued. “They’re all loaded with daddy’s money, with no place to spend it. And now, now you’re right inside with them.”

“I told you,” she softly pleaded, “I can’t.”

“Sure you can,” he cooed, 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?”

With a big grimace, she pushed his hand away, and stated, “Neither way—I’m out.”

He responded by slapping her face hard, and he growled, “I say who’s fucking in and out. Me! And when you’re out, you’re really fucking out!”

“It wasn’t 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 the fuck that means!”

“Look, I’ll pay you back somehow.”

“When?”

“I don’t know!”

“How?”

“I don’t know!”

Suddenly, Deke sped off, and he howled, “Not good enough! Not fucking good enough!”

TOMMY GOT INTO the shower, under the scalding hot water—much as he had done that morning.

Only this time he could feel the heat, and it bothered him. It bothered him so much that he had to turn it down, and this just amazed him—it amazed him how much he had changed during the course of one day. It amazed him how much she had changed him, and all his

reasons for not trying for her washed away with the water, right into the drain.

And he smiled—one that wasn't a bit phony.

IN FRONT OF her house Pam directed her foster sons, who were raking and packing leaves.

All of a sudden, the red Porsche made a sharp stop by the curb, with the Stooges' "No Fun" blasting from within it—causing Pam to look at the car suspiciously.

At the same time, inside the vehicle Deke turned to Rudi and grinned. He grinned because he really liked her. In his own strange way he might've even loved her. She was so different from the rest—from the near endless array of street kids he had recruited over the years. She was not only smart, but tough, too. She also had something else—something he couldn't quite describe or categorize—something, though, he knew he didn't have but wanted. Something that made her special. She was so special that he invested a lot in her. He took the aimless and strung-out 15-year-old he met at rehab and gave her some direction, even if it wasn't always the best kind—and he taught her how to take care of herself, in many different ways.

He also introduced her to punk rock.

Rudi would never forget the first chords. The first chords of "Blitzkrieg Bop," which Deke played for her when she visited him soon after they were both released from the clinic. Then, he played her another song—one by Richard Hell, which was so personal that it would become her favorite. And before she knew it she was hooked—with the music giving her an outlet for all her anger, and a means to extirpate all her dark thoughts. It even gave her a line of defense against her demons—a line that wasn't impenetrable, but still one a lot better

than any she had before.

Along with the music, Deke gave Rudi her nickname. Before meeting him she had been using “Trudi,” but Deke convinced her to switch it to “Rudi.” He convinced her that nobody was ever afraid of a Trudi. But Rudi—Rudi was someone who’d kick your ass. Rudi was also someone Deke found more and more attractive—more attractive than any girl he ever knew, especially as she—unlike most others—always resisted his advances. But now she owed him, and Rudi knew it would now be much harder to resist—if not impossible. And this was her nightmare.

Fortunately for Rudi, Deke really didn’t want to take what he desperately wanted, but wanted it given to him. To this end, he again put his hand on Rudi’s knee, and he caressed it lovingly while murmuring, “I meant it before, you can pay off your debt some other way. You can pay it all off in one afternoon.”

Once again, she pushed his hand away—and she thrust open the car door, just before he grabbed her arm and said, “I’m gonna come collecting real soon, baby. One way or the other.”

Hurriedly, Rudi burst out of the car and slammed the door closed—and she rushed away, just as the vehicle made a U-turn and sped off. Then, she marched up to the front door of the house, where she was met by Pam, who couldn’t help notice how frightened she was. So, she said, “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Rudi replied, without looking at the woman directly.

“Was that someone from school?” Pam inquired while pointing down the road.

“Sorta,” Rudi answered.

“You’re awfully late.”

"Let's just say I was detained."

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

"Sounds like a real blast."

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

"What?" Rudi replied, a bit indignantly.

"Well," Pam replied back, while pointing at Rudi's hair, "I thought maybe he could . . ."

"My hair's fine."

"Sure," Todd interjected from nearby, "if you just stuck your finger in a socket."

Derek laughed at this, and Pam herself had to hide her smile underneath her hand. But Rudi didn't find it funny, and so she warned the boy: "I'm gonna stick a finger somewhere else in a moment."

"So," Pam continued, "if you're all ready . . ."

"I, I actually have a lot of homework to do," Rudi told her.

"Already?"

"Yeah, they seem to be under the perception that I'm smart or something."

"But, but what will you do for dinner?"

"Why don't you just bring me back some of that 'fun.'"

Rudi afterward rushed inside the house and up the stairs—and then into her room, where she began packing—realizing there was no longer any reason for hanging around this nothing town. It was actually a detriment—not only because of Deke, but because of the crazy feelings she was having—feelings she was certain would only make her weak.

However, she also realized she still had only twenty

dollars, and—even more importantly—still had absolutely nowhere to go.

Soon, a panic set in—and with it, a bit of the shakes as well. Neither of which could be calmed or overcome by any music she tried. Not even “Blitzkrieg Bop.” Or her favorite song. So, with the house now empty, she rushed downstairs and started looking for something.

A drink.

Only one, she told herself—just to take off the edge. But strangely, after rifling through the refrigerator and all the kitchen cabinets, she couldn’t even find a warm can of beer. Eventually, she rummaged around in every room on the ground floor, and in the basement, too. But still she couldn’t find anything—not even a locked liquor cabinet. And, left with no other options, she started frantically checking to see if there were anything good in the medicine cabinets. Or even something bad.

But the cabinets were all bare, apart from aspirin and alike—and this alike didn’t even include cough syrup.

“They must’ve cleaned out the whole fucking place for me!” she bellowed—and her panic began to grow even worse, and her shaking grew worse, too. But there was nothing she could do about either. So, she just returned to her bedroom and hid under the covers of her way-too-soft bed, desperate for anything that could take her mind off what she needed. This led her to grab her white sea bag, and pull out the hardcover copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Chapter Thirteen

THROUGH THE LIT window of Reservoir Restaurant sat a half-dozen teenage boys, who were all wearing blue and white football jackets.

There Tommy and five of his teammates were finishing off three pizzas—with Tommy looking much as he had during practice—that is, lost in thought.

“I’m telling you,” Billy said, “she knocked him out cold.”

“Get the fuck out of here!” cried Vinny—a huge 250-pound lineman. “Even I wouldn’t fuck with that guy.”

Billy responded to this by putting his hand on Tommy’s shoulder and saying, “We saw it—didn’t we, Tommy?”

Suddenly, Tommy came out of his daze, and uttered, “What?”

“Rudi Weiss,” Billy replied—“we saw her knock out Connors, right?”

“Yeah,” Tommy replied back with a bit of a smile, “it was a thing of beauty. Been wanting to see that since fifth grade.”

“Your fifth grade or one of his?”

Everyone laughed at this, and a boy named Manny added, “Shit, he must’ve been the only kid ever to take fifth grade three times.”

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

“Who?” asked Vinny.

“Rudi!”

“Well,” Vinny replied, “all I’ll say is that she must fuck

like a banshee.”

“What makes you say that?” Tommy interjected, with more than just a bit of indignation, and perhaps some agitation as well.

“Come on,” Vinny insisted, “just look at the chick, 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 even he doesn’t curse like that. I’m not shitting you—I was fucking blushing out there.”

“I think she’s kinda cool,” murmured a boy named Seth from the end of the table.

“What do you fucking know?” Vinny replied, before tossing some napkins in Seth’s face.

“I know she’s pretty.”

“Pretty? She’s a fucking horror show.”

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

“You guys,” Tommy growled, while shaking his head, “you guys really don’t know anything.” He then wiped his mouth with a napkin and stood up, and headed toward the bathroom.

“What’s with him?” Billy muttered.

“It’s his fucking diet,” Vinny loudly answered. “Who ever heard of a real man not eating meat?”

Chapter Fourteen

RUDI WAS SITTING on the softness of her bed—about halfway through *The Catcher in the Rye*—when she suddenly sneered. She sneered at the part where the pimp abuses Holden. She was actually so annoyed with the boy—and his inability to stand up for himself—that she felt like abusing him, too.

Instead, she flung the book onto the floor, not far from her white sea bag—a bag that was calling out to her for some reason.

In truth, it was something inside the bag that was doing all the calling—and she reached for the sack. Then, while noticing how frayed the rope holding it all together was, she opened it—and pulled out the crumpled drawing, and, after uncrumpling it, she stared into the penetrating eyes—eyes that seemed realer than most she saw in real life.

It was stupid, she told herself, to be so attracted to someone so impossible—someone who represented everything she hated, and she felt repulsed by her own feelings. But this did nothing to stop them. Nor did it stop her from staring. Still, her mind came up with a million reasons not to care about Tommy, especially her own worthlessness—which caused her to start thinking about numbing her feelings again.

So, she again crumpled up the drawing and tossed it back into her bag. After which she sighed deeply and got underneath the covers of her bed, and, without even realizing it, she grabbed a pillow and held it—imagining it was something other than a pillow. Though she tried not

allowing her mind to focus on what that something was—or, more exactly, who it was.

Soon, her eyes became heavy—and, soon after this, they closed.

Right away, she started hearing music—music that was way different than the kind she normally listened to. It was slow and romantic—and punctuated by a gentle but steady trombone, with its beat closely matching the rate of her heart. And while she couldn't name the song, it was somehow recognizable to her—and recognizable as something from a much different era.

Along with this song, came a dream of sorts—even though she was still conscious. A dream in which she was in a large and dusty hall from some forgotten time, amidst dozens of shabbily dressed dancers. Furthermore, she noticed that the music was coming from a small orchestra nearby—led by a tall bespectacled man, who was holding that gentle but steady trombone. She also noticed that her arms were desperately clinging to someone—someone she was dancing with but couldn't see, as his cheek was pressed against hers. Which made her feel good—better than she had ever felt before. She felt light and high—a much different high than she ever experienced, and she so wanted to continue feeling like this—she wanted the dream to never end.

But the whole image started fading to black, with the music. And she fell asleep.

A SHORT DISTANCE away in Newstead someone else was in their bed with their eyes closed, and this someone was having a beautiful dream, too.

He, too, was holding a pillow as if it were something else—and, he, too, was hearing music. Though, unlike Rudi, Tommy knew exactly what the song was, and this

made him smile—another of his unphony ones.

“Tommy, you up?” suddenly came a soft female voice from outside his room. Just as suddenly, the music stopped—and, with it, the dream ended. And Tommy reluctantly opened his eyes, and released the pillow.

“Yes, Mom,” he uttered, while trying to hide his aggravation.

“Will Darlene be coming over tomorrow?” the woman asked.

“There’s a football game tomorrow.”

“Then, Saturday.”

“Ah, perhaps some other time.”

“All right. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

The woman then walked off, and Tommy again closed his eyes, hoping the dream would come back—along with the music. But neither did. Nor did the person he was dancing with.

And this made him want to cry.

Chapter Fifteen

THE FOLLOWING MORNING Rudi was practically dressed-up, though she told herself there was no particular reason for this.

She was wearing a plain white T-shirt over an almost untattered pair of blue jeans—and what's more she didn't even have her Walkman out when she entered the school. It was then, as she started walking toward her locker, that she saw people were smiling at her—and not in a derisive way. A few even gave her a thumbs up.

Not understanding this at all, Rudi shrugged and went to her locker, where she pulled out her books after placing her coat inside the long and thin metal cage.

Suddenly, she sensed something peculiar, and she slowly turned her head—and with great surprise she saw the three geeks nearby, looking much like her. They all had short and spiked peroxide-blond hair and powder-white faces, and were even wearing dark menacing eye shadow. They also had black T-shirts with the word "DEATH" handwritten on them in indelible white ink.

"What . . ." she muttered, barely able to get the word out.

"What do ya think?" Philip asked, with a big smile.

"You, you look like a bunch of Quincy Punks," she barked.

"What's a Quincy Punk?" Doug inquired.

"A fake punk—like on that stupid TV show."

"But, but we look just like you," insisted Eliot.

"Well, besides the shirts," Doug added.

"What was that last word?" Rudi asked Eliot, while

cupping her right ear.

For a few seconds the three geeks inquisitively looked at each other before turning back to Rudi—and Eliot mumbled, “Shirts?”

“No, you idiot—*your* last word!”

Again, the geeks conferred with one another.

“You said,” Rudi uttered 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 then turned around, and, after locking her locker, she started off with her books—with the three boys following.

She reacted to this by stopping and spinning toward them, looking even angrier than before—and she said, “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 almost exactly like how you guys dressed and looked yesterday. The difference is he’s got an attitude. You wanna be punk? Get a fucking attitude—and get that clown shit off you!”

Rudi afterward turned around again and headed off, and the geeks again followed.

“And stop following me!” she howled.

“We don’t take orders from no one!” Philip howled back—in a voice full of attitude—just before both his friends slapped his hand.

Rudi shook her head at this and muttered, “*Oy vey*,” and she quickly headed toward the girls’ bathroom—the one place she knew they couldn’t follow.

“Hey,” a male voice suddenly called out as she reached the door. Just as suddenly she turned toward the voice, and she saw a smiling Tommy, who was dressed in a suit—a school tradition for football players on the day of a game. Though it wasn’t just any suit—it was an

expensive gray-striped Saint Laurent—one that made him look like some kind of jet-setter.

This made Rudi think back to her dream the night before, and right away something told her it really was nothing more than a dream—and could never be anything more. So, she didn't even reply to him. She just slammed open the bathroom door and burst inside. Which caused Tommy's smile to disappear, and make him realize his dream was just a dream, too. It also made him feel low and worthless, as he knew he had been right all along—he was just too dull for her.

"Hey," a female voice called out from behind him.

Tommy turned around, and he saw Darlene wearing a killer red dress—one that showed off her flawless legs. Though she also had a nervous smile, which made her look vulnerable, and, in turn, attractive.

Hesitantly, Tommy smiled back at her, just as the school bell rang.

"You headed off to English?" she asked.

"Yeah," he replied, before the two walked off together. Which was just before she extended her hand out to him—something he reluctantly took.

As for Rudi—still disturbed by her feelings—and her lack of control over them—she hung out in the bathroom and listened to music, even after the next bell rang. The only problem was that she didn't have the song she really wanted to hear—the one she heard the night before in her head. So, after a while, she just slowly made her way to English class.

There from the doorway she saw Mr. Krasner writing "Allusion & Metaphor in *The Catcher in the Rye*" on the chalkboard. But that wasn't the only thing she saw. She also saw Tommy holding hands with Darlene—something that made her furious—at herself. And when this

fury reached the boiling point, she marched over to her seat in the back, and—after grabbing her copy of the novel—she loudly dropped it onto the table, prior to sitting down.

At once all the students in class—including Tommy—spun toward her. Mr. Krasner also turned around and looked at her. And, with a wry smile, he said, “Nice of you to join us, Rudi.”

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

“Perhaps you can start the conversation rolling,” he told her, before pointing to the writing on the chalkboard and adding, “Your thoughts?”

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

“So, I gather that means you have at least started it.”

“Unfortunately.”

“Ah-ha. So, I gather you’re not a big fan.”

“It’s total bullshit.”

Again, Krasner smiled—and this smile was even wrier than the first, and he afterward uttered, “*The Catcher in the Rye*—the greatest coming-of-age novel ever written—perhaps the greatest American novel, period—and Rudi Weiss thinks it’s total bullshit. Care to elaborate?”

“Why,” Rudi replied, “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 then looked around the class, and while pointing at the book, she added, “I mean, come on—does this shithead relate to any of you? In any way whatsoever?”

The students all looked away from her—and she smiled at this, prior to turning to Mr. Krasner and saying, “See?”

“So tell me, Rudi,” the teacher said back, “what book

relates to you? Maybe we can read it next.”

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

“Well, something must relate to you.”

“You want to know what relates to me?”

“Yes, I do.”

“You *really* want to know?”

“I wanna fucking know!” Krasner hollered, while flailing his arms.

Instantly, Rudi rose to her feet—and after yanking her Walkman out of her bag, she slammed it onto the table, before tossing the headphones on top of it. Then, she turned the player on at full volume.

Which is when things got a little weird.

At least as far as Tommy was concerned, as instead of music dribbling out of the feeble speakers, it sounded to him as if a live band were in the classroom—which made him tilt his head in shock. And, when he looked around the room, he became even more shocked, because it seemed that he was the only one shocked.

Soon things got even weirder. Rudi jumped on top of the table, and, along with the music, she began singing, horrendously off-key, “Blank Generation”—Richard Hell’s anthem of alienation and self-loathing. She also started kicking books off the table, left and right. Then, as she continued belting out the poetry of the opening verse, she danced her way toward Tommy—knocking over every book in her path.

Tommy was just amazed at this. Not just because of her outrageousness, but also because of something he couldn’t quite define—something, though, he so wanted to have. He even found himself reaching toward her.

It wasn’t long before Rudi was right in front of Tommy. Which is when she kicked his book into his

face, and she continued with her singing and dancing—with Tommy becoming lost in the words of the song—words about someone who seemed just as lost, and very much alone.

When all these words were finally spoken, Rudi jumped off the table and returned to the Walkman, and she turned it off. She further pointed at it, and while looking at a dazed-looking Mr. Krasner she asked, “Which book says that?”

He didn’t reply.

“Well?” she demanded.

Still, he didn’t answer.

“That’s what I thought,” she went on, before she picked up her Walkman—along with her bag—and stormed out of the class, with Tommy staring at her in awe. And he kept staring at the open door well after she was gone.

“Is there a problem, Tommy?” Mr. Krasner suddenly said.

Looking well beyond frazzled, Tommy spun toward the teacher and uttered, “What?”

“Is something wrong? You were staring out the door.”

“I was staring at . . .”

Slowly, Tommy turned his head, and he saw Rudi sitting in her seat. Which caused him to become even more shocked than before, and he soon muttered, “You’re back.”

“Back?” Rudi uttered.

“But . . .”

Just then, Tommy looked around the room, and he noticed that all the books were still on the table, including his own—and he added, “The books . . .”

“What about them?” Krasner asked. “Would, would

you like to see the nurse?"

Tommy didn't respond. He didn't even seem to understand the question. So, the teacher repeated himself.

"I'm fine," Tommy answered, quite unsurely. "I think."

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

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

Again, Tommy turned toward Rudi, with still more shock—shock that only increased when Rudi said, "Why, why should I care about some spoiled fuck-up from the forties who's whining about how he can't get laid? How—"

All of a sudden, the school bell rang.

"Ah, isn't that a shame," spoke Mr. Krasner. "Perhaps, Rudi, perhaps you can elaborate in the paper I expect to have in my hands Monday morning."

The students afterward stood up and rapidly headed toward the door. That is, apart from Tommy, who just sat there in a stupor.

"You coming?" Darlene asked from the doorway.

"But class just started," he replied, before coming to the only conclusion that made sense: he had been daydreaming.

Darlene shook her head at this and backed out of the door, followed by Rudi, who was also looking at Tommy—and expressing something that was quite unusual for her.

Concern.

Chapter Sixteen

LIKE THE DAY before, Rudi took her tray of food and started through the large cafeteria. And, much like the day before, she noticed that just about everyone's eyes were on her—and once again as she walked through the center of the hall she created something of a wave. Only this time it was accompanied by silence.

This caused her to stop, and glance around, just before someone started clapping from somewhere unseen.

Like lightning, Rudi spun toward the sound, and she saw its source: a heavysset boy with a big smile on his face.

Soon, others started clapping, too—and others still—until much of the lunchroom was cheering her.

Surprised by this—and moreover not understanding it—Rudi started turning in a circle. Then, about halfway around, she finally figured it out. She figured it out when she saw Owen glaring at her from the corner of the room, where he was sitting on a table by himself—slapping his big fist into his palm, over and over.

Rudi, though, ignored this, and part of her even wanted to laugh, as Owen was as threatening to her as a bug passing around her head. And she continued in her circle—with the cheering finally subsiding—and she saw Tommy, who was once again sitting with the other football players and the beautiful girls. She also saw that he was staring out into space—with Darlene lovingly caressing his arm. But Tommy didn't notice this. He didn't even notice Darlene, as he was still trying to convince himself that the whole episode in English class had been a daydream—like the one he had the night before. The

only problem with this was that both incidents seemed far too vivid to be dreams—and then he asked himself: “Do people dream songs they’ve never heard before?”

Even more eerie was the realization the song was about him—or at least could’ve been about him. Or was it really about her?

Just then, feeling well beyond confused, Tommy stood up with his tray and headed off.

“Where you going?” Darlene asked.

“To get some fresh air,” he answered.

“You want some company?”

“Not right now.”

As he walked off, Darlene turned her head, and she saw Rudi sitting in the back, staring at their table—at the spot where Tommy had just been. Also looking at Rudi was Mr. Gonzalez, from the entrance to the cafeteria—something he had been doing with his arms crossed from the moment the applause started. He didn’t like Rudi. He didn’t like her at all, especially as she was upending an order he had spent a long time establishing. So, she had to go, he told himself.

And soon.

Chapter Seventeen

AFTER SCHOOL THAT day Rudi entered the girls' bathroom, just like she did the day before.

Also, like the day before, she worked on her makeup—despite telling herself that she had no real reason to do so.

"This is so fucking stupid," she muttered into the mirror while touching up her lipstick. "He doesn't care about you. No one cares about you. I don't even care about you!"

However, she didn't stop touching herself up.

Suddenly, Maria entered the bathroom—just like the day before. And, like the day before, she stared at Rudi. Though this time there wasn't wonder on her face. This time there was something else.

Hope.

But Rudi didn't notice the difference, especially as she was still more than a little upset—and even if she had noticed, it probably wouldn't have mattered. So, she just spun toward the girl, and, with great exasperation, uttered, "Again?"

Again, Maria backed out of the bathroom—and again Rudi sighed. Afterward, she threw the lipstick into her bag and picked up the sack along with her books, prior to exiting the bathroom and heading toward her locker. But before she could take more than a few steps Owen jumped in front of her with his arms crossed and a confident smile on his face.

Reluctantly, she came to a stop, with dozens of students starting to encircle them.

“Again?” Rudi moaned.

“You’re not gonna sucker-punch me this time,” Owen told her.

“Is that so?”

“That’s so.”

In less than a blink of Owen’s eye, Rudi thrust her right leg up into his groin, and he collapsed onto his knees gasping—while holding on to the remnants of his manliness with a face full of pain. Then, he tumbled over onto the floor—with everyone around them loudly cheering. Which was just before Mr. Gonzalez stormed out of the school offices.

Quickly, the circle of students broke apart, exposing Owen on the floor, with Rudi only steps from him.

“That’s it, Weiss,” the principal howled—“you’re finished here!”

“Fine with me!” she howled back, despite knowing it likely meant a return engagement to the Essex County Juvenile Detention Center—with all the dangers that went along with it. At least, she told herself, she’d now be able to get out of her head one of the few things that scared her even more. So, she added, “Why don’t you take this stupid school—”

Out of nowhere, she was interrupted. She was interrupted by someone behind her.

“It wasn’t her,” Tommy called out—causing Rudi to spin toward him in surprise.

“What are you talking about, Tommy?” Mr. Gonzalez demanded.

“It was me,” Tommy replied. “I did it.”

“You?”

“I’m sorry—I lost my temper.”

Gonzalez, not believing Tommy at all, turned to the

other students and asked, "Is that what really happened?"

But everyone just looked away from him. So, the principal sighed—and, while shaking his head over and over, he said, "I'm very disappointed in you, Tommy."

He meant he was disappointed that Tommy was lying, but Tommy just played dumb and said back, "I'm sorry, sir. He was picking on someone." Tommy afterward glanced at Rudi, who was glaring at him. Though he didn't care. He didn't care how mad she was, because—daydream or no daydream—there was something between them—something he couldn't lose.

"All right," Mr. Gonzalez uttered, "all three of you in detention."

"You mean me?" Rudi uttered back.

"Yes, you!"

"Why me?"

"Detention or suspension, Weiss," the principal hollered, with his face reddening—"you pick!"

"Can I think about it?"

Mr. Gonzalez responded by pointing emphatically toward the detention room—and Rudi reluctantly headed that way, along with Tommy.

"I don't need your help," she whispered to him, with her eyes directly ahead. "Or want it."

"I know," he whispered 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."

"What do you mean?"

"I really don't know."

Not understanding him, Rudi gave Tommy an inquisitive look. But no response was forthcoming, and the two

entered the detention room, followed by a slumped-over and limping—and thoroughly deflated Owen. And the three sat down at the table in the back, many seats apart from each other—watched by Mr. Thompson.

Unlike the day before, Rudi didn't dare do any drawings. She just sat and sat and sat, and so did Tommy. And so did Owen as well—though he sat with his head in his hands.

TOWARD THE END of the detention period Rudi felt an odd sensation.

So, she turned her head, and saw Tommy staring at her—staring at her with his warm eyes—eyes that were even warmer than the day before. Which made her well beyond uncomfortable.

“Don't look at me,” she growled.

“Quiet!” Thompson barked.

Immediately, Tommy and Rudi turned away from each other. Then, soon after this, a middle-aged woman entered the room and said to the teacher: “Mr. Gonthaleth would like to see you for a moment.”

Thompson responded by standing up, and, as he walked out with the woman, he told the three: “I'll be right back.” After which Rudi murmured to herself: “*Gonthaleth*. What a joke. This whole fucking school is a joke.”

Reflexively, Tommy glanced at Rudi—and she glanced back, before bellowing, “Didn't you hear what I just fucking said?”

Once more, he turned away, and she did the same. But he soon glanced at her again—though only for the briefest of seconds. And when he returned his eyes toward the front of the classroom, he started arguing with himself—over whether he should open himself up to

her—something he had never really done with anyone before. He argued over whether he should tell her everything and in return risk humiliation and scorn—all for someone who might not give a damn.

Eventually, he decided against telling her anything. But then, then he thought about the song she was singing in his so-called daydream—specifically the lyrics, and he realized if it hadn't been just a daydream it possibly meant something incredible. It all depended on whether he believed—not only in the dream, but in her as well.

"You know," he suddenly and softly told her, "you were wrong earlier."

"About what?" she told him back, in a voice thick with attitude.

"*The Catcher in the Rye*. It's not at all what you think."

"It's bullshit. Total bullshit."

"Actually, it's about being alone," Tommy murmured, with his voice breaking just slightly. "It's about being the only person in the whole fucking world—the only person who feels and thinks 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, he's you."

"Speak for yourself," she replied, with obvious bitterness, once again feeling totally exposed to him.

"I am," he replied back.

Rudi wasn't sure what to think about this. She wasn't sure what he really meant. So, she slowly turned toward him, and she saw her reflection in his watery eyes—and she knew exactly what he meant. And she almost lost it. The big tough girl from Irvington almost started crying, because she knew this meant he was just like her. She also knew it meant there could be no more excuses—no more reasons not to care about him. Which, in turn,

would mean she'd have to open herself up, too—and risk everything, by allowing someone to get close to her.

Instead she wrapped her arms around herself. She wrapped them as tightly as she could and pretended she hadn't heard a word he said—and she kept pretending until Mr. Thompson returned and told the three they could go home.

Loudly, Owen moaned—while Rudi grabbed her sea bag and books and rushed out of the room, with Tommy not far behind. And, while standing a safe distance away, he watched her reach her locker and angrily 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 had checked-out from the school library earlier that day. Then, once she had stuffed both books inside her bag, she grabbed her coat and hurriedly locked her locker—and took off. Which was just before she ran into Tommy in the front passageway, where he saw she was desperately trying to control her emotions.

“Just fuck off,” she told him, with her voice crackling—and she ran to the front entrance, dragging her bag along the floor—with him slowly following her.

Not long afterward, she burst outside, and, not long after this, she flung her bag over her shoulder—doing so with such force that the frayed rope holding the sack together broke, causing the bag to fall onto the ground—and its contents to spew out.

Instantly, she stopped and spun around, and, just as instantly, she kneeled down and started to collect her things back into the bag. She also saw Tommy exiting the front doors of the school, with her crumpled drawing tumbling toward him.

Which he leaned down to pick up.

“That's mine!” she hollered, with fear overflowing her

face—and she rushed toward him with the bag in her arms, getting there just as he opened the paper and saw his likeness. Actually, he found it way better than his likeness. Even with her crude lines, he saw she captured something no mirror ever had. She captured something he himself had never seen: a humanness trying to escape from underneath all the trappings. More importantly, the drawing somehow captured a longing—a longing for something he couldn't even describe. All this caused his jaw to drop—and he could feel his whole body shake. Because it meant that, in a fraction of time, she knew more about him than everyone else had in seventeen years.

"I said, that's mine!" Rudi screamed, as she yanked the drawing from him.

"Thank you," Tommy mumbled.

"Thank me for what?" she demanded.

He replied by pointing to the drawing.

"It's not you!" she yelled, before rushing off with the bag in one arm and the drawing in the other, while adding, "It's Lee Ving!"

"I don't even know who that is," he told her, while watching her go.

"You wouldn't!"

"You know, there's a football game tonight," he went on.

Abruptly, Rudi stopped, but she didn't turn around. And, with a voice full of indignation, she called out, "So?"

"So, are you going?" he replied.

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

"Well, it's my last game, and I kinda like you to be there."

With her indignation now turned up a notch, she

turned to him and said, "And why would *I* want to be there?"

He replied by pointing to the drawing once again.

This caused her face to become well beyond flush—and she hid the paper behind her back and howled, "I told you—it's not you!"

He smiled at this. Which just made her angrier—and she cried out, "What's so fucking funny?"

"I didn't know punk girls blush," he answered.

She had no answer—or, at least, no good one. So, she just uttered, "Fuck you!"

Ignoring this, he uttered back, "Will you come to-night?"

"What, what about your *girlfriend*?"

Hearing the unmistakable tone of jealousy in her words, he smiled even more, and became even more confident in what he felt. And he told her: "I don't have a girlfriend. Not really. At least not at the moment."

This time Rudi couldn't even come up with a lame response. So, she just spun around and ran off.

"8 o'clock—at Underhill!" he called out to her.

Chapter Eighteen

RUDI LEANED AGAINST her bedpost as she read the last pages of *The Catcher in the Rye*. As opposed to the night before, there was no sneer on her face. She actually looked engrossed—and perhaps even a little guilty.

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

Trying not to think about this, Rudi turned to the penultimate page of the book. Then, for some reason, she glanced at the alarm clock on her nightstand—and saw that it was almost a quarter to eight. And she paused awhile, looking as if a huge argument were taking place inside her head.

Which is exactly what was happening.

“Why would I want to go to a football game?” one side of her brain asked the other.

The other answered: “Because the most beautiful boy you have ever seen is crazy about you—a boy different than any you’ve ever known or could imagine. A boy who, unlike everyone else, feels and thinks just like you. Then, then there was that dream—and the music.”

Unfortunately, while the second side of her brain was winning the argument, the first side had control of her eyes—and it drifted them toward the mirror on top of the dresser, into which she stared. She stared for a long time—at both her face and her petite frame. While she knew she wasn’t ugly, she also knew she wasn’t beautiful, either—at least not like Tommy. She also knew she couldn’t match up with the girls he hung out with, especially the leggy one who was always draped over him.

What's more, she knew there was no place for someone like her in his world—and she didn't even want a place there. So, she just shook her head and started reading again, and once again she was engrossed.

"Hey," Stephen suddenly uttered from the doorway.

This caused Rudi to jump a bit, and also caused her foster dad to giggle.

"Sorry about that," he then said.

"What did I do now?" she growled.

"Aren't we defensive?"

"It comes from everyone being so offensive."

"Well, you've done nothing," he told her. "It's just that 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 told him back.

"We're gonna go to Baskin Robbins afterward," he enticingly added. "You know, they've got Bubblegum Ice Cream this month."

"Oh my God!" Rudi cried out, with faux shock. "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."

"Really? That sounds kinda interesting."

Rudi shrugged.

"Who are you doing it on?" Stephen asked.

"Well," she answered, "the obvious choice, of course, is Hamlet. I figure every dipshit in class did it on him, especially as Salinger references 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 replied, with some exasperation. "The Italian Renaissance writer."

"Oh," Stephen replied back. "That Boccaccio."

"Anyway," Rudi continued, "the play's about this Helena—who's in love with this guy Bertram, who's completely out of her class. 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 again, but she's also completely 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 said, with his head tilted a little, "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 replied while shaking her finger. "That's why I'm gonna *compare* the two."

Stephen smiled at this.

"What's so funny?" Rudi demanded.

"You're liking this school."

"Get out of here."

"Look, I've been a guidance counselor long enough to know when a student is excited about school. It happens about once every other blue moon."

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

“All right,” he relented, “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 then started out. But all of a sudden he stopped and turned back to Rudi—and said, “Remember, curfew still holds—even on a Friday.”

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

Chapter Nineteen

THE SOUND OF furious typing poured out of Rudi's bedroom, which was interrupted by the ringing of a phone.

Inside her room, Rudi checked the time on the clock and saw it was well past nine, and afterward she got up and entered the hallway. There she could hear the phone in the bedroom across the way—something echoed by a similar device downstairs in the kitchen. And, choosing the shortest path, she walked to Stephen and Pam's bedroom door, where—after ignoring the “NO ENTRY” sign—she tried to open it.

But the knob wouldn't move.

At first, she thought it was locked. But then she applied some more force, and it finally opened—and she stepped inside the room and turned on the light. Which caused her to become shocked, as the whole place was covered with chains and whips and various leather garments—as well as dozens of sex toys.

“What . . .” she mumbled with a bit of a smile, prior to remembering the phone. Subsequently she rushed over and picked it up, and, while eyeing the mirror on the ceiling, she uttered, “Hello?”

“Rudi?” replied a young female voice—one with a drunken slur.

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

“You've forgotten me already?”

“Leila?” replied Rudi, with some surprise. “How'd you find me?”

“Fucking Butch,” Leila answered.

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

“Don’t blame him. I forced it out of him.”

“I bet. So, what’s up?”

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

“No fucking way!” Rudi howled back.

“Where and when do we pick you up?”

“I, I can’t go. I’ve 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. 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 thought this over. She thought it over hard, because she knew there was a lot of sense to it, as it could’ve been the escape she had been waiting for. Or, at least, a sort of escape.

Sure, she told herself, perhaps it wasn’t 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 was, and perhaps it would be even worse. Then, then there was being with Leila and her friends—people she liked, in small doses. Very small ones. They were also people who would, almost surely, expose her to every bad temptation out there. But, on the other hand, she would be able to get out of reach of both Deke

and the police—at least for a little while. And perhaps she could even get Tommy out of her head. Perhaps that was the best part of the whole idea.

“You still there?” Leila uttered.

TOMMY WAS HAVING a bad game.

A really bad one.

He was missing catches and blocks, and running poor routes—and the coach was screaming at him pretty much constantly. The problem was that he just couldn’t think, as his mind was far away—back outside the school with Rudi. And his eyes were mostly on the entrance to the stadium.

“Come on, show up!” he pleaded, as the third quarter started.

RUDI RAN DOWN the carpeted stairs, with her packed white sea bag across her shoulder—a bag that now had a new rope holding it together.

Then, when she got to the marble hallway at the bottom, she suddenly stopped and turned around, and she looked up inquisitively, as if expecting an answer to some unspoken question. And, as soon as it came, she grabbed her overcoat from the rack and stormed out of the house, before slamming the door behind herself.

Chapter Twenty

“WHAT AM I fucking doing here?” Rudi screamed from just outside Underhill Field, over the sounds of a crowd—as well as a marching band.

She afterward lamented 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 her way to a sort of freedom. And instead, instead she was now just a short walk from her very first football game.

So, what went wrong? she asked herself.

It was all kind of blurry, but she kind of recalled 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. Of course, she told herself at the time, it had nothing to do with the fact that the bus would go right past the stadium. Though when the vehicle did stop at Boyden Avenue, she got off without any hesitation, and walked a short distance to where she was now.

Suddenly, the crowd roared—and Rudi remembered why she hated football and anything else that had to do with large groups of people who thought alike. Which she defined as any group larger than one. She also realized she still had time to meet Leila, and so she started up the road.

Which is when things got a little weird.

At least as far as Rudi was concerned, as that’s when everything went silent. No longer could she hear a crowd, or even a marching band.

With lots of fright, she spun around and saw that the

stands were empty.

"It, it can't be," she muttered, before taking a step toward the stadium.

Soon, she took another step, and yet another—and, before she knew it, she was underneath the stands.

"This is not real," she tried telling herself. "It just isn't. It, 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. And maybe I even went to CBGB. And maybe someone slipped something in my drink. Yeah, I just need to sit down awhile."

But she continued on, and eventually reached the outskirts of the field—at which time she saw someone. A football player. He was in the left end zone and was squirming on the ground, seemingly in pain, and, not long afterward, he took off his helmet, revealing Tommy—and he called out, "Rudi!"

"Tommy?" Rudi uttered in reply, while shaking her head.

"Rudi!" he repeated.

Without thinking, she started running toward him—and, also without thinking, she started calling out his name.

"I'm right here," came a familiar male voice from nearby.

Instantly, Rudi came to a sharp stop—in front of the far end of the sidelines. And, just as instantly, she could again hear the roar of the crowd—and the marching band, too. Then, she felt something—something different than anything she ever felt before.

Something better. Way better.

She responded to this by turning to her right—and there was Tommy standing in his uniform, with one hand holding his helmet and the other holding her hand.

With bliss covering every aspect of his face. A bliss she also felt. A bliss caused by the very same thing—the simple touch of someone special. A touch that shot current throughout her body, making her shiver while sending her sky-high with ever-increasing acceleration. Because of all this, she just stared at Tommy's hand. She stared at it in awe.

Unfortunately, Tommy misread this, thinking he had offended her. So, he reluctantly removed his hand—taking the bliss from both their faces along with it, before saying, “Sorry about that.”

Though she was the one who was really sorry, and so as not to think about it, she looked away from him and saw that the game between Columbia and East Orange was in its final minutes, with Columbia trailing 13-10.

“I’m glad you made it,” he softly told her.

“What?” she replied, before turning back to him, with her face still in shock.

“You okay?” he asked.

“What, what the hell’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“The field . . . you . . . you were on the ground.”

Just then, the crowd roared.

“Come on, Tommy,” the coach screamed, from way down the sidelines, “get in there!”

“I gotta go,” Tommy told her, prior to putting on his helmet.

“No, don’t,” she told him back, with fear in her voice.

“What do ya mean—I gotta score the winning touchdown.”

“Come on, Tommy,” howled the coach—“move your fucking ass!”

“I’ll see you later,” Tommy said to Rudi with a grin, while rushing backward onto the field, toward the huddle

by midfield.

“Tommy!” she cried out.

But he couldn’t hear her. So she just looked around the stadium blankly, and saw the rest of the players up the sidelines and the cheerleaders in back of them—which included Darlene, who was glaring right at Rudi—with murderous eyes.

“Rudi!” a female voice screamed from behind her.

Without thinking, Rudi spun around—and she saw Pam and Stephen in the stands waving her toward them, with the two boys sitting nearby.

“Up here!” Pam added.

Instead Rudi turned her head and saw Columbia break the huddle, with Tommy lining up on the right, just behind the line of scrimmage. Soon the tall quarterback took the snap, and he tossed the ball to Tommy, who was running an inside slant over the middle. And, after avoiding a huge linebacker who was trying to take his head off, Tommy ran into the secondary, eluding some players while knocking others to the ground with his shoulder and free hand.

Watching this, Rudi—against her will—couldn’t help shake her fists in excitement, and she hollered, “Go, you motherfucker! Fucking go!” Though, suddenly shock crossed her face when she saw a safety fly toward Tommy by the twenty-yard line—one who was leading with his helmet.

“Look out!” she yelled.

Tommy ducked, and he seemed to have a clear path to the end zone. However, at the same time, two defensive backs were quickly converging on him from different angles.

“Go, Tommy!” Rudi cried out, while shaking all over. “Don’t stop running!”

Right after saying this, Tommy crossed the end zone, and the two defenders hit him. The first flew into the left side of Tommy's upper body, while the second rammed into Tommy's right hip—sandwiching him. And the three subsequently collapsed onto the ground. Just as the referee signaled a touchdown.

All at once, most of the crowd rose to its feet and roared—and the band loudly played, with joy filling the stadium. But it didn't fill Rudi. She was actually terrified. She was terrified because Tommy was lying in the same exact spot of the field as when she entered the stadium—and this terror only increased when the two defenders slowly rose, leaving Tommy squirming on the ground.

Suddenly, the whole stadium became quiet—as quiet as when Rudi was outside, and it only got quieter when Tommy removed his helmet and called out, “Rudi!”

“Tommy!” Rudi called back, prior to rushing out onto the field.

“Rudi!” he repeated.

She soon reached him, and saw blood spurting out of his mouth—something that caused her to cover her own mouth in horror, moments before she was pushed onto the ground. Then, just moments after this, she rose to her waist and saw Darlene a few steps away, kneeling in front of an unconscious Tommy with a face of fury—all of which was directed at Rudi.

“Stay away from him, druggie!” Darlene hollered, on the verge of tears. “You stay the fuck away!”

Darlene afterward looked down at Tommy, and she howled, “Help! Somebody fucking help!”

Chapter Twenty-One

FROM JUST OUTSIDE Underhill Field an ambulance sped off.

Slowly following it down Boyden Avenue was a dazed-looking Rudi, who before long stopped and turned back toward the stadium, where hundreds of people—players and fans and band members—were streaming out. This included the three geeks, who were pretty much back to their normal selves apart from their hair, which was still blond and still kind of spiked. And Rudi ran up to them and pleaded, “You guys got a car?”

AN OLD SILVER station wagon slithered up to the emergency entrance of St. Barnabas Hospital and stopped.

Rudi then exited the front passenger seat and closed the door behind herself, prior to looking inside the car at the three geeks. She also smiled, and, with unusual sincerity, said, “Thanks, guys.”

“Sure thing,” Philip replied from the driver’s seat, a bit surprised by her lack of attitude. “Anytime.”

“You want us to wait?” Doug asked from the back seat.

“You don’t have to,” she answered, while shaking her head.

“We’ll wait,” Philip told her.

Again, Rudi smiled, before rushing into the hospital, where she saw Darlene sitting down the corridor.

Quickly, Rudi took a seat behind a large man, who kept her out of sight just as a distraught Mrs. Goodwin

entered. The woman afterward passed Rudi and joined Darlene—and for many hours the three just nervously sat there, with Rudi occasionally changing her seat whenever her camouflage got up and left.

Suddenly, Darlene and Mrs. Goodwin jumped to their feet and headed toward a woman dressed in blue scrubs—and Rudi jumped up as well, and followed them. Then, as the two women stopped in front of the doctor with their arms around each other, Rudi stopped nearby behind a corner, well within earshot.

“We had to remove his spleen,” the doctor stated unemotionally.

“Oh, my God,” Mrs. Goodwin cried out, prior to covering her mouth in shock.

“He’s lost a lot of blood,” the doctor went on, “and there are a whole host of potential complications that accompany the loss of a spleen, which I’ll discuss with both of you. But other than that he should be all right.”

These last words made Mrs. Goodwin close her eyes and take a deep breath, and Rudi—while listening to the very same words—echoed the woman’s actions. Darlene also was relieved and she hugged Mrs. Goodwin, and the two got a little emotional right before Mrs. Goodwin got a hold of herself and said to the doctor: “Where is he?”

“He’s resting comfortably,” answered the woman.

“Where?”

“Room 314.”

“We want to see him.”

“Tomorrow.”

“*Now*.”

“He’s sedated, Mrs. Goodwin. Come back tomorrow morning. If anything changes, we’ll call you.”

RUDI STOPPED IN front of a darkened room and

peeked inside, and she saw the sleeping face of Tommy.

No longer did he look like a big tough football player. He looked more like a helpless little boy, lying there with all sorts of wires and contraptions attached to him. She also saw his hand, and she remembered how good it felt upon hers—and she wondered if it had felt the same to him.

It did, she told herself—she had seen it on his face, and this had been almost as wonderful as the feeling itself.

Uncontrollably, she found herself walking toward his bed—and she gently took hold of his hand. Once again, current shot through her, causing her to once again shiver—and she was feeling so wonderful that she never wanted to let go of his hand again.

Just then, his eyes opened, and he saw the powder-white face of the angel hovering over him—and he muttered, “Rudi?”

“Hey,” she softly replied, with a bit of a smile. “How are you?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’ll be fine,” she told him, with a much bigger smile. “I overheard the doctor. You’re gonna be fine.”

“Did we win?” he asked.

She shook her head and murmured, “I don’t know.”

Feeling dazed, Tommy glanced around the room, and he noticed a wall clock—and saw it was almost three in the morning, and he told Rudi: “It can’t still be visiting hours.”

“I’ve never been real good at following rules,” she told him back.

This made him feel a burst of warmth, and it gave him the courage to say, “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” she said back.

"This is gonna sound real crazy, but is there, is there a punk song called . . . shit, I don't even know the name. It, it's about being part of a blank generation."

"Yeah," she interrupted, "that's exactly what it's called—'Blank Generation'—by Richard Hell. It's actually my favorite song."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I've never told anyone that before. 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 likes older punk rock—and he turned me onto the song. And, I don't know, I just really like it—it says everything I think. Everything I feel."

Tommy smiled at this, thinking back to the risk he took earlier and realizing it had all been worth it.

"What?" she asked in response to his smile, with a smile of her own.

"I like the song, too," he replied.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Even though I've never really heard it before."

"What?" she uttered, with a confused expression.

"It doesn't matter," he told her.

"You know, I actually got it in my bag—the song. Actually, it's the last song on every single tape I've made. That way I know there's always something good coming up."

Once again, Tommy smiled. This time he smiled at how wonderful Rudi was.

"Why, why are you asking me about it?" she went on.

"You'd think I was crazy," he answered.

"I already think that."

"At first, I, I thought it was just a daydream."

"A daydream?"

"Today in English class I swear I saw you . . ."

"Saw me what?"

"It's crazy."

"Come on—tell me. Please."

"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 exclaimed, with a grin and a dismissive wave.

"I told you it was crazy," he mumbled.

"I've actually done that before, sorta."

"Really?"

"Sure, in my old bedroom—and on my bed. And against the walls. I used to really piss off the neighbors. But never would I do it in a class, or in front of anyone. I'd be embarrassed, especially as I sing like shit."

"I know," he murmured, with a bit of a smirk. "Man, I think they're gonna be sending me to a whole different type of hospital."

"You and me both," she murmured back.

"What do you mean?"

"I saw you tonight. Beforehand."

"I don't understand," he uttered, with the same confused expression she expressed only a short time earlier.

"I thought it was just a daydream, too," she replied. "Like the music last night."

"Music?"

"I saw you lying 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. And that's when I was calling your name, just before that last play."

"You know what I think?" he mumbled.

"What?" she asked.

"I think, I think we're connected somehow."

"I have a better explanation."

“What’s that?”

“I think we’re both crazy. A good crazy maybe.”

The two right then paused, as if they had run out of things to say—after which Tommy matter-of-factly stated: “I want you to be my girl.”

It took a long while for Rudi to react to this, as the words were as incongruent as if they had been spoken in Martian. They were words she never expected to hear, or even wanted to hear. And they frightened her. They frightened her so much that she released his hand—something she really didn’t want to do, and something she regretted the moment she had.

“What’s wrong?” he said.

“This is crazy, Tommy,” she replied, while shaking her head. “I mean, *really* crazy. Just look at us—we’re barely the same species.”

“Not really. It just seems that way.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” she muttered, with her voice breaking a bit. “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 implored. “I only care about now.”

“Sometimes you can’t separate now from the past. I know I can’t separate mine.”

“I don’t care.”

“You should. I’m trash.”

“Rudi—”

“—Even my mom thought so. She hated me so much, she hated me so much that she abandoned me when I was three. I don’t even remember her. And I don’t even know who my real dad is. I’m not sure my mom even knows. That is, if she’s still alive.”

All of a sudden, Tommy started tearing up.

“Why are you crying?” she quietly howled, on the verge of tears herself. “I should be the one fucking crying!”

“I cry all the time,” he replied. “Every fucking day.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s like I’ve been missing something, and only now do I know what it is.”

At this moment all Rudi could do was shake her head, as she couldn’t think of any other response. She actually couldn’t think much of anything other than his hand—and how badly she wanted to hold it.

Finally, she clutched at something in her mind and said, “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, she must really love you.”

“But I don’t love her,” Tommy insisted.

“I can’t be your girl,” Rudi insisted back. “I can never be anyone’s anything. Most of the time I don’t even want to be with me.” She then started backing up toward the door, and, as she did, she pointed in that direction with her thumb and uttered, “Look, I . . . I’ve gotta go—a bunch of Quincy Punks are waiting for me.”

“Who?” he uttered back.

She didn’t answer. She just turned and ran out of the room.

“Rudi!” he screamed.

But she kept running.

“I tried running, too!” he continued. “It doesn’t work! It doesn’t fucking work!”

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE SILVER STATION wagon stopped in front of Stephen's house.

But Rudi, who was again sitting in the front passenger seat, didn't even notice, as her mind was still 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—and now, now they were all she could think about.

"Rudi?" suddenly came Eliot's voice from the back seat. Just as suddenly, Rudi realized where she was—and she quickly exited the vehicle prior to glancing back at the three boys and noticing how they seemed different than they did just a day before. They no longer seemed like geeks.

"You guys are the best," she told them with a mild smile—one that was trying to cover her emotions, which were flying around her head in a million directions at once, looking for any means of escape.

Her smile, though, was transparent to the boys, especially to Philip, who asked, "You okay?"

"Sure," she replied, while desperately trying to keep the smile on her face.

"You don't look okay," said Doug.

"You just don't know me," she said back.

"We know you," Eliot uttered.

Rudi wasn't too sure how to reply to this, so she just started walking off toward the house. Though, as she did,

she called 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."

Right then, the car took off, and Rudi reached the front door of the house. But, before she could even grab the handle, the door swung open—exposing Stephen, who was wearing both a robe and a ferocious expression.

"Where have you been?" he growled.

"Out," she growled back.

"Slamdancing with the crickets?"

Rudi didn't reply—she just pushed Stephen inside and entered the house, and he followed her toward the staircase while barking, "It's way past curfew. It's almost past tomorrow's."

"Ground me," she barked back.

"How about I just return you to juvie instead? It seems you're already packed!"

"Do whatever you want!"

Angrily, he grabbed her shoulder and spun her around—and yelled, "Why do you insist on self-destructing? You could be something so terrific. Hell, you're probably the smartest kid in that whole fucking school!"

"No cursing in this house!" she yelled back.

"It's my fucking house!"

All of a sudden, the telephone rang in the kitchen, which somehow calmed the two a bit—and, once the phone was picked up, Stephen continued: "Who were you with all night?"

"Friends," she answered.

"Friends? You mean, Tommy Goodwin, don't you?"

"What?"

"You went to see him in the hospital, didn't you?"

Rudi didn't exactly respond. She just turned away from Stephen slightly.

“Come on,” he went on, “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 uttered, with her head shaking in a near continuous manner.

“Tell me, is it such a crime to be normal?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

With that, she started up the stairs. But she stopped when she heard the swinging doors of the kitchen open—and she spun around. After which she saw a timid-looking Pam, who was wearing a robe that matched her husband’s.

“That was for you, Rudi,” Pam softly said. “A guy named Butch. Something about a dead Kennedy.” Pam then turned to Stephen and added, “It must be Teddy.”

This almost made Rudi smile. But instead she just muttered, “I’m going to bed. Assuming I still have one.”

“You still have one,” Stephen told her. “But this conversation isn’t over.”

“Whatever,” she told him back, before rushing up the stairs and into her room. Then, after slamming her door, she quickly undressed, and, without even removing her makeup, she dove into her swimming-pool-like bed.

There under the covers she involuntarily grabbed her free pillow, and—just as involuntarily—those million emotions finally escaped, and she started crying. She cried for the first time in years. She actually couldn’t remember the last time she had. And the strangest part was that she wasn’t even sure why she was crying, or whether she was crying because she was happy or sad.

Chapter Twenty-Three

BY SATURDAY MORNING Rudi's face was dry and her toughness had returned, and, while staying in bed till well past noon, she tried to convince herself that the previous evening had been an aberration—a temporary bout of insanity. Not only in regards to the weird daydream in the stadium, but also as to the entire episode with Tommy in the hospital.

None of it was real, she told herself. She further told herself that she was better now, and stronger—and that she wouldn't allow herself to be weakened again. Nevermore would she have daydreams about Tommy, nor would she think of that hand of his, or his tears—or the words he spoke to her—words that spoke to how much alike they were, and how perfect they could become.

It was all nothing, she insisted, and meant nothing—to either of them. He'd soon be back with that cheerleader, she further insisted, or with another just like her, and she'd return back, too—back to whatever it was she had before.

To help with all this insisting, Rudi listened to the most cynical song she had about the crazy feelings swirling around her: “Love Und Romance” by the Slits—an all-female band Butch had recently turned her onto. She listened to this song for hours on her Walkman—and soon knew exactly how long to hold the rewind button in order to get the tape back to the beginning of the song.

Eventually, she sort of convinced herself about everything, and she showered and spent the rest of the day

immersed in her English paper, which was quickly becoming the size of a dissertation. The problem was that she never knew how to do anything halfway—good or bad—and this was particularly the case with this paper, which became more and more personal. Whenever she wrote about Helena she had great difficulty separating the character from herself—and she had equal difficulty separating Holden from Tommy. This made the paper far more passionate than the typical academic work, and she often found herself moved by her own words, which only drove her deeper into them. So, by sunset, it was no longer a paper, but something closer to poetry. Furthermore—despite what she had promised herself that morning—she was once more on the verge of tears.

“Are you all right?” Stephen suddenly murmured from the doorway.

Like the night before, Rudi jumped a bit—and she wiped her eyes before growling, “How about knocking?”

“How about closing the door?”

Instantly, Rudi got to her feet and rushed to the door, and attempted to close it. But Stephen held it open and uttered, “You haven’t answered my question—are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I really wish you were more like my stepdad and just didn’t care.”

“You know, I talked to your stepfather before you came here.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And he didn’t exactly sound like a man who didn’t care. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

“He could’ve fooled me.”

“Yeah, well maybe you’ve been fooling him, too.”

“Are we through with the psychoanalysis?”

“Actually,” Stephen replied, “Pam and I are going out

to dinner, and we would like you to come with us.”

“I,” Rudi replied back, while pointing to the thick 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 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, too.”

Stephen then started off, but he soon stopped himself and turned around—and told her: “Don’t forget about the NA meeting tomorrow night.”

“I, I can’t,” she pleaded.

“*Rudi.*”

“I have to finish this paper!”

“It won’t take long.”

“Listen, 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.”

Stephen thought it over awhile, and he finally blurted out, “Okay. But no excuses next week.”

“Next week is Thanksgiving.”

“Then the week after.”

“Fine,” she told him, before quickly returning to her paper. And, just as quickly, she became immersed again. Though a few hours later she started feeling a certain hunger—one that often comes after not eating for an entire day. So, she headed downstairs, where she saw the two boys watching wrestling on the TV in the living room. She then entered the kitchen and found the remains of a large pizza on the white porcelain table, and

she pulled out a slice. And, once she had picked off all the pepperoni, she put the cold and greasy triangular glob in her mouth—and immediately wished she hadn't.

Afterward, as she quickly and reluctantly swallowed the mess with an accentuated grimace, she saw it: the nearby telephone—and lying not far from it, a telephone directory.

Strangely, she found herself drawn to both of them, and once again forgetting what she had promised herself that morning, she located a number in the phone book and called it.

“St. Barnabas Hospital,” a female voice answered. “Can I help you?”

Rudi didn't answer back.

“Hello?” the voice added.

“I'm sorry,” Rudi replied, before hanging up and rushing back upstairs to the safety of her paper.

Chapter Twenty-Four

TOMMY STARED OUT the window from his hospital bed, just as he had been doing most of the day. And, while looking through the endless trees of the reservation, he tried to imagine where a particular person was.

"All I can say is that I'm happy I wasn't there," his mother said to him from the chair next to his bed. "I couldn't even stand listening to the way Darlene described it."

Tommy shrugged, and mumbled, "I've been hit worse."

"Well, 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 finally picking a college. Have you given any more thought to it?"

Tommy shrugged again, as college was the last thing on his mind. The only thing there was that particular person—a person who had been there ever since he awoke. And not only couldn't he get this person out of his mind, he didn't want to get it out.

"Darlene told me last night that she's leaning toward Princeton," Mrs. Goodwin went on. "Of course, she's waiting to see what you decide."

"She shouldn't," replied Tommy.

"And 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 had been able to go to school with your father."

"Can we talk about something else?" Tommy begged.

"Such as?" she inquired.

"I don't know—the weather maybe?"

"Darlene alluded to some problems you two are having."

Tommy sighed, and said, "There are no problems with her, Mom. Believe me."

"That's good to hear. You know, I talked to her earlier today, and she should be here any time."

Tommy didn't reply.

"Is there a reason why you won't look at me?" his mother then asked.

Reluctantly, Tommy turned from the window and looked at his mom, and he forced a smile before saying, "I'm just elsewhere."

"It's quite understandable after all you've been through," she said back. She also took her son's hand, and, with her eyes beginning to water, she muttered, "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 insisted.

"This place, it brings back such horrible memories. I wish they would've sent you to a different hospital."

Just then, Darlene came to the door, and she smiled—at both of them.

Quickly, Mrs. Goodwin pulled herself together and smiled as well, prior to standing up and telling the two: "Well, I'm gonna let you have some privacy. I'll be by tomorrow morning."

"Goodnight," Tommy said.

The woman replied in kind, and she briefly took hold of Darlene's hand as she walked out.

Tommy afterward returned his gaze to the window—and he kept it there, even after Darlene sat down in the chair next to him. He kept it there even after she squeezed his hand, while desperately trying to bring him

to her.

To him, her hand was cold and lifeless. It was the exact opposite of another—the hand he wished he was holding.

“I think we need to talk about some things,” Darlene murmured.

“Yeah,” Tommy murmured back. “We do.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

MONDAY MORNING RUDI sauntered toward Mr. Krasner's class wearing an old and torn Bruce Springsteen T-shirt. Which had "I Hate" scrawled on top.

Then, as she stopped inside the doorway of the classroom, she saw Darlene staring blankly at the empty seat next to her—and she couldn't help do the same thing.

"Well, good morning, Rudi," the teacher cooed from the front of the room. "I sure hope you have something for me."

Hearing this caused Darlene to shift her stare toward Rudi, and Rudi stared right back.

"Well?" Mr. Krasner went on, from in front of Rudi's face.

Rudi sighed, before putting her bag on top of the back table. After which she reached inside the sack and pulled out the paper—something so thick it had to be bound together with extra-large rubber bands. And she handed the document to a more than shocked Mr. Krasner, who looked down at it and read the title:

HELENA AND HOLDEN: A PARTIAL DI-
CHOTOMY

Krasner afterward removed the rubber bands and shuffled through the pages, while uttering, "I, I was only expecting a half-dozen pages. You didn't even have to type it."

"You didn't tell me that," Rudi uttered back unemotionally.

There was actually a good reason he didn't tell her these things: he wasn't expecting anything. In truth,

never before had a student ever gone so beyond his expectations—even in Honors English. So, as he continued scanning through the document, he did so in kind of a daze.

Eventually, he reached the last pages, and glanced at the copious amounts of references.

“You also didn’t say whether you wanted footnotes or endnotes,” she went on. “I hope it’s okay.”

He didn’t reply to this. He just slowly walked toward the front of the room with his tail between his legs and read 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.

After reading this, Mr. Krasner placed the cover page on top of it, and he put the rubber bands back over the entire document. He also turned back to Rudi, who was now sitting down and staring out the window with such sad and longing eyes that he had trouble believing it was the same girl from just a few days earlier.

Chapter Twenty-Six

AFTER SCHOOL RUDI entered the bathroom and put her white sea bag by the sink, and, as she looked at herself in the mirror, she thought about touching up her makeup—even though she knew she really didn't have a reason for doing so.

All of a sudden, one of the stall doors behind her opened, and Maria stepped out—and the two stared at each other uneasily through the mirror. And while Rudi tried to work up a glare, she just didn't have it in her that day. So, instead she tried to figure Maria out—one of many people at the school who confused her.

Finally, Rudi asked, "Why are you so afraid of me?"

Maria didn't reply.

"Well?" Rudi demanded. "Do you think I'm gonna bite you or something?"

Maria shook her head, and muttered, "I'm sorry." She also headed toward the exit—causing Rudi to sigh a bit. And feeling a bit sorry as well—not to mention lonely—she tried to make some conversation by uttering, "How come you don't wear any makeup?"

Instantly, Maria came to a stop, just in front of the door. Though she didn't dare look back, let alone give an answer.

"You must be the only girl here who doesn't," Rudi went on.

"My dad won't let me," Maria told her.

"Why not?"

"I don't know," replied Maria with a shrug. "He, he's real strict."

“So?” Rudi said.

“So?” Maria said back.

“So, would you like to try some of mine?”

With lots of surprise, Maria spun around, and she started to say, “I just told you, my dad—”

“—Is your dad here in this bathroom somewhere?” Rudi interrupted.

RUDI CAREFULLY SCRAPED the excess mascara from the wand while standing behind Maria—who was staring into the mirror and shaking slightly.

“I don’t know about this,” Maria mumbled.

“It’s easy,” Rudi replied, after lifting up the wand. “Here, take it.”

Hesitantly, Maria took the wand, and applied her shaking to it. Which made Rudi grin a little—and afterward she gently took Maria’s wrist and brought the wand up to the girl’s top right eyelash.

“You want to start at the base,” Rudi told her, “and move it a bit, side to side.”

To demonstrate this, Rudi wiggled Maria’s hand some and said, “Like that”—and she soon added, “Now, sweep it up.”

Together, the two swept up the wand, and, after they applied a few coats, they did the bottom eyelash—with Maria smiling at the result.

Which made Rudi smile, too.

“Wow,” Maria uttered, prior to tilting her head side-to-side, while looking at her eye as if she had never quite seen it before.

“You do the other eye,” Rudi commanded, as she searched through her bag. And, after taking out her eye shadow, she pulled out a bottle of baby powder and shook her head, before telling the girl: “I don’t think this

is quite your color.”

Maria grinned, and shook her head, too—and uttered, “Me, neither.”

So, Rudi put the powder back and found her red lipstick, which she showed to Maria while asking, “How about some of this?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” Maria answered.

But Rudi opened it anyway.

RUDI EXITED THE bathroom, and she stopped before reopening the door and saying, “Come on, you look great.”

“This isn’t a very good idea,” Maria replied, with a voice ripe with anxiety.

“Look, you have two choices: you can either come out on your own, or I’m gonna drag you out.”

Reluctantly, Maria entered the hallway. Or someone resembling Maria. Because this girl was neither plain nor mousy. Even with just a modest amount of makeup, she was radiant—and with this radiance came a confidence that was growing with every step she took. Which only increased when a passing boy winked at her—even if this was something she found more amusing than anything else.

“See,” Rudi said, “what did I tell ya?”

“Maria!” suddenly howled a man’s voice from nearby.

At once the two turned around, and they saw Mr. Gonzalez glaring at them from just outside the school offices—something that sent shock waves across Maria’s face, and she mumbled, “Oh-oh.”

“What?” Rudi mumbled back.

“What are you doing with that makeup?” the principal demanded.

“Nothing, Daddy,” Maria replied.

This last word transferred Maria's shock to Rudi, who gasped, "*Daddy?*"

To which all Maria could do was shrug.

"Miss Weiss," Gonzalez then howled, "is there anything in this school you haven't corrupted?"

"Just you," Rudi replied.

This caused Gonzalez's face to turn a shade of red—one even brighter than his daughter's lipstick, and he pointed behind himself and yelled, "Detention!"

"On what charge?" Rudi yelled back.

"For your own protection—so I don't strangle you!"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

IN THE LATE afternoon sun Rudi burst through the front entrance of the school, and she confronted Darlene, who had been waiting for her outside, and who uttered, "I saw Tommy Saturday."

Involuntarily, Rudi stopped. But she soon continued on, and, while feigning disinterest, she uttered back, "So, how is he?"

"Fine. He'll be back after Thanksgiving."

"You must be excited."

"He broke up with me."

Once again, Rudi stopped—this time with an expression of mild surprise—one she didn't want Darlene to see, so she didn't turn around. She just growled, "Why are you telling me this?"

Darlene responded by grabbing Rudi's shoulder and angrily spinning her around, while crying out, "Because I know what you're up to, and you're not getting away with it!"

Unhesitantly, Rudi returned the girl's anger, before taking a threatening step toward her, causing Darlene to jump back. Which was just before Rudi said, "Listen, I gave you a pass on Friday, but don't push it."

"I saw how you were looking at him during the game!" Darlene screamed. "Everyone did!"

Without responding, Rudi turned from Darlene and rushed off. Though, once she was a safe distance away, she hollered, "Just leave me alone! And tell Tommy to leave me alone, too!"

Soon, Rudi reached the corner of Parker and Valley,

where she stopped at a red light and shook her fists with incredible fury—and howled, “Everyone, just leave me the fuck alone!”

One person in particular didn’t listen—and this person’s red Porsche pulled up in front of Rudi, with the Buzzcocks’ “What Do I Get?” pouring out of its open windows.

Realizing Darlene was still behind her, Rudi didn’t react to this. She just paused while collecting her thoughts. Then, after pointing down Parker, she shouted over the music: “Yeah, Maplewood Avenue is just a couple of blocks down that way.”

Deke—who was totally wired and who had eyes a red well beyond bloodshot—begrudgingly nodded, and he sped off down Valley, with Rudi walking down Parker. She also glanced back, and saw Darlene glaring at her from the street corner. But she wasn’t following—and, by the time Rudi reached Maplewood Avenue, Darlene was long out of sight. However, the Porsche wasn’t. It again pulled up in front of Rudi—this time with the sounds of the Damned—and its passenger door opened. And Rudi quickly jumped inside, just before the car sped off.

“What was that shit all about?” Deke demanded with great agitation, as soon as he turned down the music a bit.

“A nosy bitch,” Rudi replied—“that’s what it was about.”

“So,” Deke subsequently said, with a twisted little smile, “are we still in business?”

“I just can’t do it right now,” she told him back, with great exasperation. “There are way too many eyes on me.”

“All right—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.”

Furiously, Deke pulled out a handgun from his waist, and he pointed it at Rudi’s head—and uttered, “What did you just say?”

Rudi didn’t reply, but she also shook—fearing Deke was both crazy enough and loaded enough to pull the trigger.

As for Deke, he liked how the fear looked on her face. He even fed off it. And, once he finished his cruel meal, he cocked back the hammer of the weapon and hollered, “What did you just fucking say?”

“All right,” she muttered.

“I can’t fucking hear you!”

“All right!”

“All right what?” he screamed.

“We’re still in business!” she screamed back.

Deke smiled at this, even though he was hoping for a different answer—and he eventually put back his gun. Then, he came to a sharp stop by the curb, prior to yanking out a large plastic bag of joints from inside his leather jacket. Which he offered to Rudi while saying, “We’ll start out small and work our way up to the big time.”

Rudi, though, didn’t make any move toward the pot. She just sat there while trying to come up with some way out.

However, none came.

“Well?” he murmured.

Still, she didn’t react. So, he again reached for his gun—and she reluctantly took the bag.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

DAN REESE STARED out into the mess that was once his stepdaughter's bedroom—with a can of Schaefer beer in his big paw.

He looked both bitter and angry, but soon a small smile crept across his big face—and he was smiling mostly at himself. He was smiling because he couldn't believe how much he missed his stepdaughter. He missed her almost as much as he missed the girl's mother.

In truth, he always knew he cared about Rudi some. He just never realized how much that “some” was until now—a now in which the large man found himself moving inside the room, for a reason he wasn't certain. And for the same unknown reason he sat down in front of her music collection and started sifting through the records and tapes. Which included one that depicted a golden Jesus crucified on a dollar bill. Another showed a man's bloody fist through a mirror, and still another portrayed the Capitol building zapped and destroyed by lightning. These images shocked Mr. Reese, making him think about when he was Rudi's age and how the bands he listened to shocked his parents in much the same way. Which, in turn, caused his smile to return.

“Yeah, she wasn't such a bad kid,” he said while shaking his head. “A little fucked-up and all, like her mom . . . and her stepdad.”

Just then, Mr. Reese felt something strange. He felt something was somehow wrong, and so he put the music down and finished off his beer, before crushing the

empty can in his huge hand. Afterward, he stood up and left the bedroom—and entered the kitchen, ostensibly to throw away the smashed-up aluminum. But, as he did, he saw his old rotary phone on the counter, and walked over to it—and, after putting on a pair of reading glasses, he read a handwritten scrap of paper next to the phone and dialed a number.

The phone rang—and rang again and again, and more than once Mr. Reese almost put the receiver down.

“Hello?” Rudi gasped into the device, having just returned home and still shaking with fear from her encounter with Deke.

“Hi,” Mr. Reese said, not recognizing Rudi’s voice in its current state. “Is, is this the Cross family?”

Rudi paused, recognizing her stepfather’s voice all too well, and then muttered, “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” he replied, right before hanging up.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

THE FOLLOWING MORNING Rudi opened her locker, wearing underneath her overcoat one of her more benign T-shirts—a basic black Ramones one.

Then, after carefully looking around in many directions and for many seconds, she reached inside her bag and pulled out the joints, handling them as if they were on fire. And she tossed them inside her locker—prior to hiding them under a bunch of junk—and on top of this she put her coat, which she stared at blankly.

Deke, she knew, would be calling on her soon, and he would be expecting either money or something else—and preferably something else. So, she knew she had to start selling—no matter how much she didn't want to—no matter how much she never wanted to sell anything again. But she didn't want to think about it just then. So, she slammed the door closed and locked it, before turning around and seeing Maria smiling bashfully at her, causing her to jump a bit in fright.

“Sorry about that,” Maria murmured.

“It's all right,” Rudi replied, before the two started slowly walking down the hallway together.

“So?” Maria uttered.

“So?” Rudi uttered back.

“So, you must hate me.”

“Why would I hate you?”

“I got you in trouble.”

“Believe me,” Rudi said, “that's not trouble where I'm from.”

“Still,” Maria said 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, though, as I never go anywhere anyway.”

The two soon reached Rudi’s homeroom, and they stopped at the threshold.

“What’s your dad’s problem anyway?” Rudi asked. “Why is he so uptight?”

“I don’t know,” Maria replied. “He, he’s just from a different era. He means well, I think.”

“And what, what’s with all this *Gonthaleth*?”

“Oh, that,” answered Maria with a smirk. “Well, you see, that’s how they supposedly say it back in Spain. My dad, in fact, is always telling me how we can trace our lineage all the way back to the Visigoths.” Right then, Maria cautiously looked 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 demanded.

“He thinks people will look down on us if we’re Mexican,” Maria told her. “And he’s probably right.”

Rudi shrugged, and added, “Yeah, well, I guess I shouldn’t talk. My real name is Gertrude.”

Instantly, Maria’s expression turned to one mixed equally of shock and humor, and, with her hand covering her mouth, she muttered, “*Gertrude*?”

“Say ‘Gertrude’ one more time,” Rudi growled, while mimicking the principal’s voice, “just say it one more time. I’ve kicked people in the head for less than that!”

Maria, having heard her father say things like this more than once, laughed heartily—and afterward uttered, “So?”

“So?” Rudi uttered 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 surprised Rudi—and caused her to ask, “Do you want to be grounded till the twenty-first century?”

“I told you,” Maria insisted, “he’s not that bad.”

Rudi responded to this by pausing in thought. After which she said, “What kind of music do you like?”

Chapter Thirty

RUDI CARRIED HER tray of food toward the back of the cafeteria, where her three friends were sitting at their usual table.

All of a sudden, she noticed Owen sitting alone with his head down—with lots of paper balls flying at him from nearby. And she wanted to ignore it, as not only did she not like Owen but knew there was likely some justice in what was happening to him. She also told herself it wasn't her problem if he were down on himself. But for some reason she came to a halt anyway, right beside the boy—and she ordered a stop to the aerial assault.

Which happened instantly.

Afterward Rudi turned to Owen—whose head was still down—and she said, “You’re just gonna let them get away with that?”

“What’s the point?” he replied. “My rep’s shot. I got beat up by a girl. Twice.”

Rudi smirked a bit at this, before sitting down across from Owen and saying, “You just need better karma.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” he said back, while shaking his head.

“It means you don’t fuck with defenseless little kids.”

Owen sighed.

“Come on,” she told him, “lift that chin up.”

“So you can punch it?” he asked.

“See, that would be bad karma. ’Cause I don’t have any reason to punch you.”

Suddenly, Owen lifted his head up, and mumbled, “Oh.”

“So, you get it?”

“No.”

Chapter Thirty-One

STEPHEN ENTERED THE front door of his house and immediately heard “Blitzkrieg Bop” loudly playing upstairs, and, with something of a frown, he marched to the staircase and up it. He then rushed toward Rudi’s open door, and once there he froze when he saw his foster daughter jumping up and down on her bed—along with the daughter of his boss. What’s more, the two were screaming with the music—while shaking their fists high over their heads, with the biggest of smiles on their faces.

Rudi, of course, had long loved this song. But never did she enjoy it as much as she did that day with Maria—a girl she would’ve never even glanced at a week earlier. That afternoon, the two discovered that, while they didn’t have much in common, they complemented each other almost perfectly—and had fun together. They actually had been laughing ever since they left the school—something that helped Rudi forget all her problems.

Watching them, Stephen for a few seconds had trouble believing his eyes, as he couldn’t believe it was really Maria. Gone was the girl he had known for more than three years—a girl who never even seemed to raise her eyes, and in her place was this bouncing and bubbling young woman—a woman who was clearly excited about being alive.

Soon, though, Stephen regained his senses, and he headed over to the boombox on the floor nearby—and turned it off, causing both girls to stop their jumping and spin toward him.

“What’s your problem?” Rudi howled.

“Rudi,” Stephen howled back, “are you trying to get me fired?”

“What?”

“Do you know who her father is?” he said, while pointing at Maria.

With a big grin, Rudi jumped off the bed, prior to leading Stephen out of her room while saying, “You want me to be normal, right? Well, this is what normal girls do.”

“But . . .”

Stephen couldn’t finish his thought, as Rudi gently pushed him out of the room and said, “Just let us know when dinner’s ready.”

“It’s always at eighteen hundred,” he said back.

“Then let us know when it’s eighteen hundred.”

Rudi subsequently closed the door in Stephen’s face—and she turned back to Maria, who was standing behind her. After a brief pause, the two started giggling, and slowly shuffled back toward the bed.

“It must be really weird having a guidance councilor as a dad,” Maria said.

“*Foster* dad,” Rudi corrected.

“Still . . .”

“It can’t be any weirder than having a principal as a dad.”

“True.”

Just then, the two reached Rudi’s bed, and Rudi took a deep breath before plunging back onto the endless softness.

Maria joined her, and said, “Man, how do you sleep on this?”

“Tell me about it,” Rudi replied, while staring up at the ceiling—at which time a thought strangely entered her head, and she began daydreaming about something.

Or, more exactly, someone. And, noticing this dreamy look, Maria smiled a little and uttered, "So?"

"So?" Rudi uttered back, still lost in her daydream.

"So, what's going on with you and Tommy Goodwin?"

Angrily, Rudi rose to her waist, and cried out, "Not you, too?"

"Everybody saw you guys at the game," Maria cried back. "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 growled, while averting her eyes just slightly.

Again, Maria smiled—though this time it wasn't just a little, and she also cooed, "Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

With just a bit of a smile of her own, Rudi turned to Maria, and said, "You like Shakespeare, too?"

"Love him," answered Maria. "But don't change the subject."

"There is no subject."

"That's not what we all saw Friday night."

Rudi right away blushed a bit, and again averted her eyes—and muttered, "It's crazy. I mean, come on—I, I'm no . . . I'm no . . ." She then paused for a few seconds, prior to turning to Maria and adding, "I'm no fucking cheerleader."

"You're better," Maria insisted, after putting her hand on Rudi's wrist. "And prettier."

"You need glasses."

"Maybe it's you who needs them."

"So, what about you?" Rudi asked.

"What about me?" Maria asked back.

"You going with someone?"

Maria responded by shaking her head bashfully.

"It must be pretty tough with your dad around," Rudi said.

Maria shrugged.

"But you must at least be hot for someone," Rudi went on.

Once again, Maria shrugged—though this time with a grin. So, Rudi playfully punched her shoulder, before exclaiming, "All right—spill it!"

But Maria didn't say anything back. She just turned away, as she knew they were heading into dangerous territory—and part of her hoped Rudi would just forget all about it. However, Rudi wouldn't relent, and so Maria finally decided to lie—or, at least, half-lie. And she said, "Well, there is this someone in my Math class."

Which was actually true.

"Yeah?" Rudi replied, in a tone of voice suggesting she wanted to hear more—a lot more.

"Yeah," Maria continued, "we're always smiling at each other and stuff."

Which was also true.

"What's his name?" Rudi asked.

Maria didn't answer. She didn't because she was busy trying to make up a name.

"Come on," Rudi insisted. "I'll keep it quiet. What's his name?"

But Maria still didn't answer. Then, she realized a lie would be so easy, and she uttered, "Sam."

"Sam?" Rudi uttered back with a tilt of her head, thinking she might know the boy. "Sam who?"

Not sure how to reply, Maria looked into Rudi's eyes—eyes she found so strong and fearless—eyes she wished she had. And she decided to confess something she didn't even want to confess to herself—and she said,

"Sam . . . antha."

"His name is Sam *Anth*?" Rudi said back.

Suddenly, it hit her—and, try as she may, she was unable to hide her shock. She couldn't even come up with something to say, which was quite unusual for her. Though finally she muttered, "Oh."

The two afterward just stared at each other—and Maria started feeling ashamed of herself, and she was certain Rudi felt the same. And, once these feelings became overwhelming, she stood up and mumbled, "Perhaps I should go."

But Rudi grabbed her shoulder and effortlessly flung her back onto the soft bed—and asked, "Where you going?"

"You must hate me."

"Why would I hate you?"

"Because I'm a . . ."

"A lesbian?"

Maria nodded.

"I actually think it's pretty cool," Rudi told her, without an ounce of phoniness.

"You do?" Maria told her back, with lots of surprise.

"Sure. And just think, you'll never have to give a blowjob."

Maria grimaced at this, and cried out, "*Eeenwww*. Even if I were straight that'd be disgusting."

"It's not so bad. You get used to it."

"Really?"

"Sure," Rudi replied, while once more averting her eyes. Though she soon glanced at Maria and added, "But don't change the subject."

"There is no subject," Maria insisted.

"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!"

"I can't! My dad would kill me. I'm not even allowed to date boys, which fortunately isn't such a problem."

"So, you're just gonna live your whole life for your dad?"

Maria shrugged.

"You're gonna marry some guy and have babies," Rudi went on, "just for good old dad?"

Again, Maria shrugged, and added, "Maybe?"

"Maria, to thine own self be true!" Rudi shouted, and when there was no response, she threateningly wagged her finger and said, "Listen to me—tomorrow after Math class you're gonna walk right up to this Samantha and say something."

"I can't," Maria pleaded, 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 Thirty-Two

RUDI SPENT ALL Thanksgiving morning on the phone with Maria, which was just how she spent the previous night, when Maria described her first conversation with Samantha—a conversation punctuated with lots of ahs and uhs and you-knows.

However, in the afternoon Maria had to leave for her aunt's house, and Rudi found herself stuck with many of Stephen and Pam's extended family, who had come over to celebrate the holiday, along with lots of friends and coworkers.

Eventually, the house was mobbed with people, especially young screaming children. The latter in particular sent Rudi outside into the cool air, and she sat down on the front steps while watching the sun slowly set behind the endless trees in front of her—with her mind somewhere far, far away.

RUDI ONLY CAME out of her reverie when the door behind her opened and a smiling Pam exited and said, "A little too noisy for you?"

"A little," Rudi said back, while still gazing out into space.

"The turkeys are almost ready."

Rudi nodded, without much excitement.

"But we've got stuffing, too," Pam quickly added. "You can eat stuffing, can't you?"

"I guess," Rudi replied.

"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."

Inquisitively, Rudi turned to Pam, moments before the woman sat down next to her and put her arm around the girl—something that felt good to Rudi, in spite of herself.

"I had a crush on Stephen all through school," Pam went on. "I'm talking like from South Mountain Elementary on up. He, he was *the* guy. But he was also a couple of years older and had lots of beautiful girls his own age throwing themselves at him. So, he never really 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, one day 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 so sad and lonely all the time. And, and he had lots of other problems, too. But, you know, somehow I found him even more attractive than before."

"So, you threw yourself at him?" Rudi asked.

"You bet I did," Pam answered, with a big smile.

"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. And what's more, I think you already know this."

Reflexively, Rudi put her head on Pam's shoulder—something that felt better than just good. And she said,

"You know, you're okay."

"So are you," Pam said back.

A SHORT DISTANCE away at Tommy's house Thanksgiving was far quieter.

With her son having just come home from the hospital the day before, Mrs. Goodwin didn't invite anyone over or accept any invitations. It was just she and her son, with the modest dinner Elizabeth had prepared for them warming in the oven.

Tommy actually spent most of the holiday in bed, staring out the window—much as he had done in the hospital, with his mind much like the stuck needle of a record player—playing the same beautiful tune over and over again.

Eventually, though, he gave the needle a rest, and he got up. And, with some difficulty, he walked outside, where, like Rudi, he watched the sun set. But soon it got a little cold for him, and he returned inside the house—and he found his mother in the living room watching *Miracle on 34th Street*.

"Hey," he said to her as he slowly came striding up. Then, once in front of her, she took his hand and smiled, and asked him how he was feeling.

"All right," he told her.

"We can have dinner whenever you want," she told him back.

"All right."

"I know, why don't you call Darlene up—maybe she could have coffee with us later."

"Mom."

"What?"

"It's over."

"But why?" his mother asked. "What happened?"

"Nothing," he replied. "That was the whole problem."

"She's beautiful," Mrs. Goodwin continued. "Gorgeous, actually."

"Yeah, 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 Thirty-Three

MONDAY MORNING RUDI opened her locker, and underneath all the garbage she noticed the bag of joints—a bag she hadn't touched since she threw them there the week before.

"Tom-me!" a crowd of people suddenly chanted, over and over, from the front passageway.

Against her will, Rudi turned her head and saw Tommy in his blue and white football jacket—weakly and uneasily walking through a crowd of admirers, who were slapping his hands and patting his shoulders.

Tommy soon spotted Rudi and stopped—and he stared at her. Which caused her to quickly slam the door of her locker—and, after locking it, she rushed off to her homeroom.

"You getting tired yet?" he called out.

But she just rushed faster—and as soon as the first bell rang out, she rushed off to English class. And she was the first one there apart from Mr. Krasner, who was sitting solemnly behind his desk with a big stack of papers in front of him—including her thick one, which was way on the bottom.

"Hi," she uttered.

"Hello," he uttered back, without looking at her directly.

As she sat down, she knew what this likely meant: he didn't like her paper—and she tried to pretend that it didn't matter to her.

"So, he failed me," she told herself. "He doesn't like me. What did you expect? I would've probably done the

same.”

Gingerly, Tommy entered the classroom, and Rudi spun away from him. So, while walking with obvious discomfort, he headed over to his normal seat. And so did Darlene when she came a short time later—though she did so with a stern expression, and didn’t say a word to Tommy as the next bell rang. Then, once a few stragglers wandered inside the room, the teacher stood up and picked up the heavy stack of documents while telling the class: “Some very solid work here.”

Ignoring this, Rudi crossed her arms and looked downward.

“It seems we have a lot of admirers of the Danish Prince,” Mr. Krasner continued, as he started distributing the papers to their respective owners. “Almost all of you, in fact.”

Eventually, the teacher delivered everything but Rudi’s—and while slowly walking over to her, he said, “Of course, there were a few substandard papers.”

Before long, he was standing right in front of Rudi, who was still gazing downward. And, with a blank expression, he plopped her thick paper onto the table, much as he had done with the novel on her first day—and said, “But this wasn’t one of those substandard ones.”

Slowly, Rudi looked up at him, and, after she saw his mild smile, she glanced at the big stack of pages in front of her—and with great shock she noticed an A+ written on top of them.

“You know,” he told her, “I was a TA at Harvard for many classes, but never have I read anything quite like this before. And, believe me, I didn’t want to like it. To tell you the truth, it’s too bad Salinger’s a recluse. Because he would be flattered by this, especially coming from

such a *detractor*.”

The teacher afterward walked back to the front of the room while proclaiming, “Today we’re gonna start Carson McCullers, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*.”

Like in the hallway before school, Rudi couldn’t help turn to Tommy—this time because she was so happy and had this odd desire to share it with someone. But when she saw him smiling at her so proudly, she instinctively flipped him her middle finger.

Though this only made him smile more.

Chapter Thirty-Four

AFTER SCHOOL RUDI put her books inside her locker, right on top of her thick English paper—just as a thin well-dressed boy with long blond hair stopped nearby, with his back against the wall.

Furtively, he looked around awhile, prior to whispering, “I hear you got some shit.”

Instantly, Rudi froze—and involuntarily looked at the partially hidden bag of joints.

Here was her chance, she told herself. Perhaps the guy would even buy the whole load off her. He certainly looked rich enough. However, something stopped her, even though she wasn’t exactly sure what this something was.

“Well?” he asked.

“You heard wrong,” she told him, in a voice seemingly not her own.

“But—”

“—Get out of here.”

The boy, though, didn’t move.

“I’m not gonna ask you again,” she went on, with a much sterner tone, before he reluctantly walked off.

At the same time, Rudi angrily grabbed her coat, and with even more anger she slammed the locker shut—and she was angry mostly at herself. Then, once she locked the tall metal cage, she turned around and saw Tommy approaching her.

“What do you want?” she growled.

“I, I was wondering if I could borrow your notes from last week.”

“Why don’t you just borrow the *cheerleader’s*?”

“She’s not exactly talking to me. And besides, she didn’t get an A+.”

Rudi sighed.

“Just for tonight,” he went on.

“Look,” she told him, “I use only one notebook for all my classes, and I need to study it tonight for a Chemistry test.”

“So, how about this: we go to my house, and I’ll copy the notes. And then I’ll drive you home.”

“You think I’m stupid or something?” she quietly barked. “That I don’t know what this is all about?”

“But you’re not running anymore.”

WATCHING RUDI AND Tommy from down the hallway was Owen, who was heading to his usual after-school destination.

For a while now he had been thinking about what Rudi had told him in the lunchroom—about karma. He even looked up the word in the dictionary, which wasn’t so easy, as he thought it began with a “C”—like his neighbor Carmen. And, as he saw Tommy and Rudi reach the front passageway, Owen wondered how he could get this karma—the good kind.

He wondered hard.

TOMMY AND RUDI slowly walked onto the school parking lot—with Tommy still moving a little gingerly.

Soon they stopped, in front of Tommy’s Harley, which surprised Rudi a little.

“You drive a motorcycle?” she asked.

“What did you expect?” he asked back.

“A Rolls perhaps.”

“Unfortunately,” he told her with a smile, “it’s in the

shop. Along with the chauffeur."

Tommy then climbed onto the bike, and he looked at her before uttering, "Well, come on."

"Where?" she uttered back, with some exasperation.

"To my house!"

"I mean, where am I supposed to sit?"

"Sit behind me."

This caused Rudi to blush, and she turned away from Tommy—in the direction of the school, as being that close to him was the last thing she wanted. Or, at least, this was what she tried to tell herself, and she told him: "Why, why don't you just copy the notes in the library?"

"It's closing in a couple of minutes," he told her back.

"You can make photocopies."

"Come on—it's been tough enough today climbing up and down those stairs."

"I'll go."

"You think I'm stupid or something?" he said to her. "That I don't know what this is all about?"

She responded by turning to him and saying, "I really don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yes you do. Come on already—get on. We have a lot to talk about."

"What about helmets?"

"I like to live dangerously."

"I bet."

She was still hesitant, but eventually she sat behind him—though she was careful not to let her body touch his.

"I would suggest you put your arms around me," he murmured. "Unless you want to fly out onto the street."

Rudi sighed, but she put her arms around Tommy anyway—and even touching him through clothes felt good. It felt so good that she involuntarily caressed her cheek

against his back. Which he, of course, felt, and now it was his turn to blush—and he was thankful she couldn't see him.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" she muttered.

"You have no idea," he muttered back with a smile.

The motorcycle then sped off—out of the parking lot and down Valley, and because Rudi had her back to traffic and her eyes closed, she didn't see the passing Porsche.

Nor did Deke see her.

AS TOMMY HEADED down South Orange Avenue he approached Ridgewood Road—toward the very same intersection which he sped through less than two weeks earlier.

However, this time when the light turned yellow, he didn't even maintain his speed, despite the fact that he could've easily made it. This time he slowed down and came to a gentle stop. He afterward looked back at Rudi and saw her resting peacefully, with her eyes closed. Like in the hospital, she looked to him like an angel—only this time he was the one hovering. And he so wanted to never stop.

Unfortunately, when the light turned green, the drivers behind him wanted something else, and a few honked their horns. Though Tommy just smiled at them. He smiled and waved, prior to lifting his beauty up the mountain toward his castle.

Chapter Thirty-Five

AFTER TOMMY PARKED the bike by the curb of his house Rudi opened her eyes—awaking to another world: the world of Newstead.

Previously, she had only seen such opulent houses in passing or on TV, and she instantly started feeling uncomfortable and out of place—and even a bit frightened. Which only increased by the time she and Tommy reached his house, and this caused her to be in a foul mood.

“So,” she uttered while looking up at the towering home, “this must be where foreign dignitaries stay when they visit.”

“Funny,” Tommy uttered back, before unlocking the front door.

“Seriously, you must have more money than my whole fucking hometown put together.”

Tommy then opened the door, and Rudi walked inside—and, while slowly following her, he asked, “And what hometown is that?”

“Irvington,” she replied, as she tossed her sea bag by the entrance.

“I actually go there pretty often,” he replied back.

“What, when you’re slumming it?”

“Actually, there’s this really great record store right on Springfield Avenue.”

“You’re not talking about Vintage Vinyl, are you?”

“Yeah, as a matter of fact, I am.”

“Get out of here!” she cried out, in total disbelief.

“I go there lots,” he insisted. “They get lots of great

Yardbirds records.”

“I’ve never seen you there. And I go there like all the time. Or, at least, I used to.”

“Ask Butch if you don’t believe me.”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore,” she told him, before taking off her coat and tossing it on top of her bag.

“I can hang that up for you,” he told her back, while pointing at the coat, which had slipped onto the floor.

“I’m not gonna be staying that long.”

He smiled at this, which just made her more angry—and, after he took off his own coat and hung it up in a nearby closet, he headed toward the kitchen while saying, “You want something to drink?”

Instead of answering, Rudi looked around the place, and she saw a big wooden staircase with an ornate white railing—and she shuffled off in its direction while saying, “Actually, I want to see the rest of this palace.” Then, once at the steps, she started up them, before blurting out, “Man, this is just like the staircase Scarlett O’Hara had.”

“Not quite,” Tommy replied, as he started following, with both some difficulty and pain.

As he did, Rudi began singing. She sang “Happy House,” way-off-key but with an abundance of verve. She even bounced to the music—bounced much the same way Siouxsie had done in her video. Though, a short distance from the top, she suddenly stopped and spun back to Tommy—and said, “You know, some people say I look a little like her.”

“Who?” he asked.

“*Siouxsie*,” Rudi replied, with more than just a little indignation. “Well, a blonde Siouxsie. But then, of course, I’m not really a blonde.”

“Susie who?” Tommy inquired.

Part of Rudi wanted to laugh at this. But the other part was annoyed, and this part won out—and it growled, “What music do you listen to? I mean, other than the Yardbirds.”

“Lots.”

“For instance?”

“Springsteen, for instance.”

“Oh, my God!”

“What?”

“I’m gonna fucking chuck! I don’t even think I’ll make it to the bathroom.”

To emphasize this, Rudi started making a gagging sound while gripping her stomach.

“All right, Susie Whatever,” Tommy said, suddenly feeling—much like her—uncomfortable. “Can we go back downstairs now?”

“After you show me the rest of the estate,” she told him. She then spun around and shot up the rest of the stairs, before coming to a sharp stop at the top, where she looked at a large framed picture hanging on the wall—and looked at it in utter horror.

“Now, I’m really gonna chuck,” she exclaimed.

“Now what?” he exclaimed back, after stopping next to her.

She nodded—toward an autographed photo of Ronald Reagan, and uttered, “What a surprise—you’re a Reagan fuck.”

“My dad actually knew him,” Tommy told her, while pointing at the picture.

“You don’t say?” she gasped, 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."

Hearing about the death of Tommy's father caused Rudi's expression to soften considerably, especially as it made her think about her own parents, and she lowered her eyes and murmured, "When did he die, your dad?"

"Over the summer," he told her, while looking down at her sad eyes.

"Sorry."

"You never get over it."

"I wouldn't know."

Once again feeling uncomfortable, Rudi turned around and headed down the big hallway, and she soon pointed to a large door at the end of it and said, "Whose room is that?"

"My parents'," he replied, as he followed. "I mean, my mother's."

Rudi soon stopped in front of the door—and, after putting her hand on the knob, she said to Tommy: "You should see the shit in my foster parents' bedroom. It would make the Marquis de Sade blush." She afterward opened the door and stepped inside the bedroom.

"Don't go in there," Tommy insisted. But she continued inside anyway, before stopping in awe at the palatialness of the room. It was like something out of a fairy tale—and included a huge antique king-sized bed and a crystal chandelier, and all sorts of expensive furniture—some of which Rudi could only guess at its purpose.

"Man," she muttered, "your mom must be the Queen of Navarre."

"Not even close. Can we go now?"

"Why?"

"My mother wouldn't like it."

"*My mother wouldn't like it,*" Rudi retorted in falsetto, before slowly stepping backward into the room, followed close behind by Tommy.

"You a momma's boy?" she demanded.

"No," he growled.

"You always do what she says?"

"No."

"All right—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?"

"Oooooohhhh! Them's fighting words, Tommy!"

"Fuck you!"

"I'm not making you uncomfortable, am I?"

He didn't reply to this. He just kept following her deeper into the room, with his face reddening with every step.

"You know," she went on, "you get a big kick out of making me uncomfortable—you do it all the fucking time. But you don't like it when it's done to you."

"I was never trying to make you uncomfortable."

Suddenly, Rudi backed into a long closet door—and she turned around and started to open it. But Tommy grabbed her arm and said, "Don't."

"Why—are there dead bodies inside?" she said back, before shaking off his arm and thrusting open the closet. Which exposed an almost countless number of expensive dresses and other garments, and at least that many pairs of shoes.

"Wow," she whispered. "I'll never have this many clothes in a lifetime." She then started walking along the length of the closet, caressing the dresses as she did.

"It doesn't mean anything," Tommy told her.

"Sure," she replied, "coming from someone who has

everything.”

Suddenly, she stopped, in front of a white lace wedding gown—one that was covered in plastic. And she gazed at it, while pretending she didn’t find it beautiful—and breathtaking.

“They should make these things in stripes,” she eventually uttered.

“Stripes?” he uttered back.

“Prison stripes.”

“I see.”

“You certainly won’t see me wearing one.”

But she actually did see it. She saw herself wearing this very same dress—posing with a big smile on her face, and this just horrified her.

“Is something wrong?” Tommy asked.

“What?” Rudi asked back.

“Can we please go now?”

“Where? Out of this room, or out of this house?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you see now how wrong we are? How I don’t fit in your world? How I would fucking embarrass the shit out of you?”

“I’m not embarrassed!” he insisted.

“You’re not embarrassed?” she said incredulously. “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 fucking life! And I never will be!”

While lowering his eyes, Tommy turned from Rudi slightly, beginning to believe what she was saying was right—that they were just ridiculous together. Which

made him look vulnerable—something she found attractive—so attractive that, without thinking, she took hold of his hand. And at once everything flew out of his head—especially his doubts about her, as all he could think about was her hand on top of his and how good it felt—how it made him feel indomitable.

As for Rudi, while trying to block very similar thoughts, she softly told him: “I don’t want to hurt you, but I will. It, it’s just my nature—like the scorpion in that fable. So, let’s just call it a day, shall we?”

She afterward—and quite reluctantly—released his hand, and headed out. But he grabbed her arm.

“Let me go,” she ordered.

“No,” he told her.

“Are you fucking crazy? Don’t you realize I can kill you? Especially in your condition.”

“Believe me, I know,” he said with a smile. “But I have just one more thing to say to you.”

“What’s that?”

He didn’t answer in words. Instead he flung her into his arms and kissed her lips hard—causing both of them to reflexively shut their eyes. And, at this very second, he felt his insides ignite. She felt it, too. She felt it but tried to pretend she didn’t. She even feigned resistance. Though she didn’t feign all that hard, and before long she didn’t even do that, as her whole body became numb while welcoming the flames—flames that were lifting her far beyond any place she could normally see. Then, as she kept rising through the infiniteness, she felt his fingers and hands—on her back and spine, smothering them and sending her even higher. And now acting only on instinct, she clawed his thick shoulders—practically tearing them apart. She also wrapped her legs around his waist as they shot well past the universe.

Soon, the music began. The same old romantic song she heard in her bedroom—the one with the gentle but steady trombone whose beat matched her heart. Which caused her eyes to suddenly open wide, and she saw she was back in her dream—back in the large and dusty old hall, amidst dozens of shabbily dressed dancers. The orchestra was there, too—led by the same tall bespectacled man with the trombone, and, just like in her dream, her arms were desperately clinging to someone—someone she was dancing with but couldn't see, as his cheek was pressed against hers.

"Tommy?" she mumbled. "Do you see what I see?"

On command, Tommy opened his eyes, and he saw the same hall—the one he also dreamed. And in shock he muttered, "I . . ."

"What's happening to us?" Rudi asked.

"I don't know."

"Are we really crazy?"

"Yeah," he murmured with a smile—one that was involuntarily replicated on her face. "A good crazy maybe."

"What is this place?" she gasped.

"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 little kid just sitting outside her room listening to it, over and over, and never once getting tired of it."

Tommy subsequently looked around the room, and he spotted the orchestra—and the tall bespectacled man, and he pointed at him while whispering, "I could almost swear that's really Glenn Miller."

"You wanna know what's crazier?" Rudi whispered

back.

“What?”

“I had a dream about this place. Kinda. Only it, it wasn’t even a dream. It was like a daydream or something. Like when I saw you on that football field.”

“Yeah?”

“I mean, everything was in the dream: the song—the dance hall.”

“Was I in it?”

“Maybe. Oh, Tommy—I must be losing my mind!”

“Yeah.”

“It’s not funny!”

“No, it’s something far 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 believe in anything.”

“I’m not sure what I believe anymore. So, I’m just gonna feel from now on.”

Slowly, they pulled back their heads a bit and looked into each other’s eyes, and afterward—while closing these very same eyes—they kissed again, only this time much sweeter than before.

Suddenly, though, they heard the sound of someone loudly clearing their throat. After which they broke their kiss and opened their eyes—and found themselves back in Mrs. Goodwin’s bedroom. And that wasn’t the only thing they found. They also found Mrs. Goodwin glaring at them from nearby, with her hands on her hips.

Rudi reacted to this by releasing her arms and legs from around Tommy, and she crashed to the floor—with her face redder than any beet in existence. Tommy’s face, too, was close to this peculiar shade, and while

straightening himself up his mind fumbled around for some kind of excuse.

“Sorry to disturb you,” Mrs. Goodwin uttered through her clenched jaws, as she watched Rudi awkwardly rise to her feet. The woman also shook her head—at Rudi’s hair and makeup, and at her clothes—and she couldn’t help grimace with disgust.

“Sorry about all this, Mom,” Tommy said, with his eyes lowered.

“Well,” his mother replied, “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 your, to your friend?”

“This is Rudi, my girl—”

“—His friend,” Rudi interrupted, while timidly reaching out her hand toward Mrs. Goodwin. “I’m his friend. Sorta.”

Daintily, Mrs. Goodwin took hold of Rudi’s hand for just a second, with the kind of unpleasant expression someone has when they pick up after a dog.

“Will Rudi be staying with us for dinner?” Mrs. Goodwin then asked.

“No,” Rudi replied. But Tommy at the same time answered “Yes” much louder—causing Rudi to turn to him and glare.

“Yes, by all means stay for dinner, Rudi,” Mrs. Goodwin insisted. “I’m just dying to know more about you.”

MRS. GOODWIN COULDN’T wait until dinner to find out more about her son’s new “friend,” as the girl seemed so incongruent that the woman’s curiosity overwhelmed her.

So, after spotting the two teens watching TV together

in the living room, the woman quietly headed toward the front door—and to Rudi's white sea bag. The sack and the coat beside it were actually the first things Mrs. Goodwin saw when she got home, and the bag in particular had piqued her interest even then. But now it was doing something way more than just piquing it, and—after carefully checking to see that she was alone—the woman kneeled down in front of the bag. Then, with just a bit of reluctance, she started sifting through its contents, while keeping an eye in the direction of the living room.

At first, she found nothing unusual—just school items, cassette tapes, and makeup. But when she got to the bottom, she finally found something interesting. She found a key chain stuck in the stitching of the bag. A key chain with the letters “NA” printed on it.

“THIS IS NOT a good idea,” Rudi emphatically whispered to Tommy inside the living room, right after turning off *The Uncle Floyd Show* on the TV, while feeling anxious for a myriad of reasons—not the least because she really believed she was going crazy. Though she tried hard not to think about this.

“What's not a good idea?” he asked.

“Staying for dinner,” she replied.

“Why not?”

“Your mother doesn't like me. And if I were her, I probably wouldn't like me, either.”

“What are you talking about? She invited you to dinner.”

“I'm going home.”

“But you already called and said you were staying!”

“So?”

“So, didn’t you just tell me that they always eat at exactly six?”

“So?”

“So, you’ll miss dinner.”

“I’m not hungry!”

“Look, I still need your notes.”

“I’ll leave them.”

“What about your Chemistry test?”

“Screw my Chemistry test!”

Just then, Mrs. Goodwin peeked her head from down the hall—and Rudi sighed, because it was the third time the woman had checked up on them. Rudi also waved at her and called out, “It’s all right, Mrs. Goodwin—we’re still dressed!”

“*Rudi*,” Tommy muttered, while watching his mom storm off—which was just before he shook his head.

“She hates me,” Rudi muttered back.

“It’s just you remind her of someone. Someone real close.”

“It’s hard to believe 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 said, with a big smile on his face.

“It was beautiful,” she said back, with a reluctant smile of her own—“I’ll admit it. But it doesn’t change anything.”

“Is that so?”

“That’s so.”

Tommy responded by brushing the back of his fingers against Rudi’s cheek—something that drove her back into flight. At the same time, Mrs. Goodwin appeared once again in the hallway—and proclaimed,

“Dinner is almost ready.”

RUDI, TOMMY, AND his mother sat down together in the dining room a short distance from each other—in front of a formal table setting, which Rudi stared at with great confusion.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many utensils,” she mumbled.

“We don’t usually eat so formally,” Tommy replied 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 innocently insisted.

Tommy, though, kept up his glare, and he told 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 asked. “What’s the big deal?”

Mrs. Goodwin laughed at this a bit, and did so derisively—and said, “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’s response was to glower at Mrs. Goodwin, and so did Tommy, who was beginning to boil with rage—as he knew convincing Rudi to be with him was going to be hard enough even without his mother’s interference.

“I know,” he soon uttered, “why don’t we just go to Reservoir.”

“Reservoir?” Rudi uttered back.

“It’s the best restaurant in the world.”

“Hardly,” Mrs. Goodwin interjected, with a condescending chuckle. “Besides, Elizabeth has prepared a big

meal.”

“Who’s Elizabeth?” Rudi asked.

Seemingly in reply, Elizabeth entered from the kitchen, carrying a tray of piping-hot parsley soup—the smell of which made Rudi a little dizzy, as having grown up mostly with TV dinners and fast food, the aroma coming toward her was something entirely unrecognizable. Though, at the same time, Rudi felt uncomfortable being served by someone, and she tried to hide this discomfort with a little joke.

“Now I know where they got the idea for *Upstairs Downstairs*,” she whispered to Tommy.

Elizabeth couldn’t help smile a little at this—a smile though she tried to hide when she saw Mrs. Goodwin glaring at Rudi.

“Thank you, Elizabeth,” Mrs. Goodwin stated, right before the woman finished serving and headed back toward the kitchen. Then, just as she left the room, Mrs. Goodwin noticed Rudi staring down at her soup somewhat bewilderedly, and she told 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 replied, after lifting her eyes toward the woman.

“He doesn’t eat meat.”

With great surprise, Rudi turned to Tommy, as she had known very few non-meat-eaters in her life, and never expected Tommy to be one of them. And she muttered, “You, you’re a vegetarian?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “Crazy, isn’t it? Me—a big bad football player.”

Rudi just shrugged, and turned away from him.

“If you want,” Tommy went 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 uttered, hoping to change the subject—as it was just one more contradiction spoiling her perfect fantasy about how she and Tommy were so different.

"So, Tommy," voiced Mrs. Goodwin, "tell me—where did you meet this, this friend of yours?"

"We have English together," Tommy answered.

"Really?" the woman replied, with a look of amazement. "I thought you were taking Honors English."

"I am. Rudi's actually the smartest person in the class."

"That's not true," Rudi insisted, as she watched Tommy and his mother pick up their soup spoons. Which was just before she picked up hers.

"Krasner gave her an A+ today," Tommy continued, with obvious pride in his voice. "He's never given me anything higher than a B, and I don't know anyone else who's ever gotten higher than a B from him. And you should've just seen the size of her paper—it was bigger than a boat."

"*Tommy*," Rudi muttered, obviously feeling embarrassed.

"Well," spoke Mrs. Goodwin, "I guess it's true what they say: looks can certainly be deceiving. Speaking of which, Rudi—do you actually pay someone to do that to your hair?"

With barely muted anger, Rudi dropped her spoon, and she said to Tommy: "I really think I should go. Before I say something . . ."

She couldn't finish her thought. She couldn't because Tommy put his hand on her wrist—and she couldn't think of anything other than this.

"Never mind my mom," Tommy told her, while again

glaring at his mother. "This is just her way of kidding around. Just like how you kid around with me."

"Who was kidding?" Rudi told him back, right after jerking away her hand.

"I didn't catch your last name, Rudi," Mrs. Goodwin afterward remarked.

"Weiss," Rudi replied.

This surprised Mrs. Goodwin, more than just a little—and, once this surprise finally passed, she blurted out, "So, so you're Jewish?"

"I don't know," answered Rudi with a shrug. "But I don't think so."

"How can you not know?"

"She doesn't have a family," Tommy murmured. "She's staying with Mr. Cross."

"I see," continued his mother, with a knowing nod. "I've heard all about him and the children he takes in. It's very admirable. But, Rudi, I'm completely serious—Weiss is a Jewish name."

"It is?" Rudi asked. "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 said to Rudi, "I have heard you say '*Oy vey*.'"

"That's Jewish?" Rudi said back.

"It's Yiddish," Mrs. Goodwin replied.

"Really?" Rudi replied back. "You know, I don't even know where I picked that up from. So, maybe I am Jewish. Does it matter?"

Rudi then took a sip of the unbelievably delicious soup, and slurped it perhaps a bit too loud, gaining the unwanted attention of Tommy's mom—and she immediately apologized. But it really wasn't the noise that

brought Mrs. Goodwin's attention. It was that she now realized Rudi wasn't just some joke Tommy was bemusing himself with. She was anything but a joke. Which meant that she could be a real threat—and possibly a dangerous one. Which she felt compelled to squash.

"Tommy," the woman said with a forced smile, "you'll never guess who I saw at the mall the other day: Darlene. Talk about flawless. So unlike . . . anything else." As she finished saying this, she glanced at Rudi and saw her avert her eyes—and she knew she had struck a nerve.

"Stop it," Tommy growled.

"Just telling it like I see it. I'm sure Rudi sees it, too. Don't you?"

Once again, Rudi dropped her spoon—and she turned to Tommy and said, "I'm sorry, but I'm feeling very uncomfortable."

"Me, too," he told her.

"And this is just a small taste of what we'd get if we went together."

"*Went together?*" Mrs. Goodwin gasped to herself, in utter horror.

"You think my friends would like you any more than she likes me?" Rudi went on.

"Well," Mrs. Goodwin interrupted, "I certainly hope I didn't give you the impression that I don't *like* you, Rudi. It's just—"

"—Look, Mrs. Goodwin," Rudi interrupted back, while desperately trying to keep herself together, "despite what you saw earlier—and despite what Tommy *thinks* he feels—there, there's really nothing serious going on between us."

"Nothing but Glenn Miller," Tommy interjected.

“Glenn Miller?” Mrs. Goodwin uttered, in astonishment.

“But that’s nothing serious,” Tommy went on, with a bit of a snarl. “Just because we hear the same music and share the same dreams, and think and feel alike. I mean, it’s not like anything happens to us when I take her hand.”

To prove this, he snatched her hand and felt her tremble—and she felt him do the same. And this upset her more than anything Mrs. Goodwin had said, as it made her lose whatever togetherness she still possessed. Which manifested itself when—with her voice breaking just a bit—she said, “Next week, Tommy, next week you’ll find another cheerleader, or some—or some Reagan fuck.”

“Excuse me?” Mrs. Goodwin howled.

“I’m not talking to you!” Rudi howled back, while pointing her finger at the woman.

“Why—” Mrs. Goodwin began.

—“Just look at me, Tommy,” Rudi cried out, with her eyes beginning to water. “*Look*. And not just at my hair or my makeup or my clothes. But look at who I am. I’ll never be the girlfriend of someone like you. Let’s not kid ourselves—I’ll never be the girlfriend of anyone!”

Feeling herself uncontrollably breaking, Rudi jumped up from the table, and she rushed off—and Tommy jumped up as well.

“Let her go,” Mrs. Goodwin insisted.

“Shut up!” he screamed, before running after Rudi, with his mother looking on in shock.

BY THE FRONT door Tommy caught up with a crying Rudi as she hurriedly put on her coat and threw her sea bag over her shoulder, and he took hold of her arms from behind.

“Let go of me!” she hollered, before pushing him away.

“I’ll drive you home,” he told her.

“Just let me be!” she screamed, after wiping her tears. “Why can’t you just let me be? I was doing fine until I met you. I never used to get so emotional, and now look at me—I’m all fucked up!”

She then rushed out the front door—into the emptiness of the night, with Tommy watching her until she was well out of sight. And even then his eyes wouldn’t move.

Chapter Thirty-Six

RUDI WAS RUSHING aimlessly down a dark and quiet side street when a strange thought entered her head: she had no idea where she was.

As her eyes had been closed when Tommy drove her to his house, she didn't know where he lived. And, as soon as this realization hit her, she came to a stop and spun around in circles, looking for some kind of a landmark—though not finding any in the moonless night. She wasn't even sure if she could've retraced her steps back to Tommy's house to ask for help.

Suddenly, she heard a sound in the distance well behind her—the sound of a dog collar—one accompanied by footsteps, and she turned toward it—and rushed in the direction of a little old woman, who was walking a little old dog.

At first, the woman was a little frightened, because of Rudi's appearance. But when she saw the girl's teary face, another instinct kicked in—a much stronger one, and she softly said, "Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"I'm lost," Rudi replied, knowing right then that the words had more than one meaning.

"Where do you want to go?" asked 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. And 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 cried out, and she almost hugged the woman. But she stopped herself at the last second and scurried off, with the woman staring at her while trying to make some sense of the enigma that had just been in front of her.

TOMMY WAS FUMING by the time he returned to the dining room, even though he purposely waited awhile to cool off. Never had he felt such anger toward his mother, and, without even realizing it, his hands had turned into fists.

“Really, Tommy,” Mrs. Goodwin said, the moment she saw the glaring eyes of her son. “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 . . .”

“She’s not a ‘this,’” he quietly howled.

“She’s a drug addict!”

“How did 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.”

“Where did you find it?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Where-did-you-find-it?” Tommy screamed.

“In her bag!” his mother screamed back.

“You went through her bag?”

“I’d do worse to protect my son! Much worse!”

“You don’t understand,” he mumbled, while shaking

his head.

"I blame myself actually," she replied—though not in reply to what he had just said. "I should've sent you to Pingry when I had the chance."

"I love her," Tommy suddenly stated, surprising even himself with these words, as up until then he had never used them, even in his thoughts.

"*Love?*" his mother uttered derisively. "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 is Rudi!"

"I don't care what her name is!"

"I love her, Mom. Can you understand that? Sure you can. I know you loved Dad. It wasn't about his money or material things or stature. You *loved* him."

"That was different."

"How?"

"I wasn't 17! And your father was someone! He was someone special!"

"And so is she! She's so fucking special! She's the first thing I've ever really cared about. The first thing that's ever made me care!"

"There will be others."

"Will there be another for you?"

"That's different!"

"Next time she's here," he threatened, while pointing his finger, "you're gonna treat her with some respect!"

"There won't be a next time!" Mrs. Goodwin hollered, 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 then rushed off.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

But there was no answer.

RUDI SPENT THE long walk home accompanied by the Slits.

But no matter how often she listened to "Love Und Romance" she couldn't regain her cynicism. This is when she knew she was really lost—that there was no help for her at all. The only consolation was that she also knew she was alive—more so than she had ever been. She felt as if she were about to explode out of her skin.

Suddenly, she was in front of her house, and she walked inside and found the entire family in the living room, engrossed by *Monday Night Football*. And, without even being noticed, she entered the kitchen, and—desperately in need of talking with someone—she picked up the phone and called Maria.

However, Mr. Gonzalez answered, and she hung up. Though she still needed to talk to someone. So, she started dialing a number.

"Hello?" her stepfather said on the other end of the line.

She didn't reply.

"Is, is someone there?" he asked.

A moment later there wasn't.

MRS. GOODWIN STOPPED at the door of her son's bedroom and looked inside, and she saw Tommy packing a large backpack—one he had used when going camping a few summers earlier.

Watching this, it made her think back to when someone else she loved left her. Which caused her to become a little emotional. Though she tried hard not to show it.

"Running away?" she asked breathlessly.

He didn't answer.

"You haven't done that since you were 12," she went on.

"I'm not 12 anymore," he told her.

"You could've fooled me."

"I'll be at Barry's."

"I don't understand what's gotten into you," she uttered, while shaking her head.

"Yeah, you do," he uttered back. "My guess is you must've felt the same exact thing once. And you probably would've done just what I'm doing."

"You'd do this, you'd do this to me after what just happened to your father?" she cried out, with her voice cracking. "You'd leave me by myself—alone?"

"I didn't do anything," he replied, before putting on the backpack and walking toward her.

"You leave now and you're never coming back!" she threatened.

He didn't say anything in reply. But he did stop in front of her.

"I'll cut you off from me for good!" she added.

"If you weren't so pigheaded," he retorted, "you'd realize just how much you and Rudi are alike."

"How could you say such a thing!" she screeched, with an expression of utter disgust.

He didn't respond to this. He just walked past her. Though he soon again stopped—and whispered, "It's true. She's 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?"

Tommy then started off.

"I mean it!" Mrs. Goodwin yelled. "Don't even think of coming back after she spits you out!"

This caused Tommy to stop, right by the staircase—and he said to her: "I love you, Mom. I don't always like you, but I'll always love you."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

THE FOLLOWING MORNING a tired-looking Rudi—who hadn't slept much the night before—approached the school parking lot, and she saw Tommy leaning against his Harley with his arms crossed and his head down. He saw her, too—out of the corners of his eyes. But he didn't react. He knew he'd have to be patient, and hopeful—and he was willing to do both that morning, and for as long as it took.

As for Rudi, she just ignored him. She also ignored him in English class, where she avoided looking anywhere near his direction. Then, later on, when she walked through the cafeteria with her tray of food, she refused to look in the direction of the table where he always sat. Though she knew his eyes were on her. She could just feel it.

Tommy's eyes weren't the only ones on her. From a few seats over, Darlene's were also on her—and they were loaded with hate. Rudi, of course, didn't see this, and she soon sat down with the three geeks in the back of the lunchroom.

"You okay?" Philip asked her.

"Sure," she replied, while picking at her food.

"You don't look okay," said Doug.

"We're not gonna go through this again, are we?" she growled.

"Hey," a female voice suddenly muttered from nearby.

With a bit of surprise, Rudi turned and looked up, and saw a nervous-looking Maria standing there, holding a

tray of food next to a tall red-haired girl who was also carrying her lunch. And Rudi uttered, "Hey."

"This, this is Samantha," Maria mumbled, while pointing to the redhead.

"Oh, hey," Rudi said with a smile.

"Hey," Samantha replied, looking just as nervous as Maria, if not more so.

"Well, what are you two standing around for?" Rudi told them.

Both girls smiled at this, and sat down next to Rudi.

"Samantha's actually into punk rock, too," Maria soon said.

"Yeah?" Rudi replied.

"She's even looking to start a band."

"Really?"

"*Maria*," Samantha murmured, with more than just a little embarrassment.

"What?" Maria innocently murmured back.

"You've got a big mouth."

"Well, I can't play or nothing," Rudi interjected. "Or sing. But I'll be the first one there to watch."

ACROSS THE HALL Darlene finally turned her eyes away from Rudi, and she spotted a thin well-dressed boy with long blond hair—a boy who was nonchalantly standing with his back against the wall, not far from the tray collection area.

"I'll be right back," she said—to no one in particular, as she picked up her tray and calmly walked off. Then, once at the collection area, she put her tray down. Though afterward she didn't move. She just stood there facing forward—a short distance from the boy.

"Well?" she whispered.

"No deal," the boy whispered back.

“Shit.”

“But I’m pretty sure I saw some weed in her locker.”

“Pretty sure?”

“I’m sure. A whole bag of joints.”

“All right.”

“And my payment?” he asked.

“You’ll get it,” she replied. “Right after she’s busted.”

The boy smiled at this, and shook his fist just slightly before skipping off—and he wasn’t the only one excited. Darlene was excited, too. And, as she walked back to her table, she couldn’t help think about how good she and Tommy were going to look together at the prom.

All of a sudden—from behind her—the cafeteria doors swung open, and Mr. Gonzalez stepped inside the hall, and he stopped in shock when he saw Maria sitting with Rudi. A mad fury also shot through him, along with a determination to end his daughter’s budding friendship right at this moment—and for good. So, he started marching toward them.

But then something happened—something that again caused him to stop in shock. He saw his daughter laugh. And it wasn’t just an ordinary laugh. It was a wild and crazy laugh—a happy one—one that just amazed 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 her. It was something so amazing to him—a miracle—one he somehow helped create. Though, as the years went on, there was less and less of this laugh—to the point there was none—and he thought it was gone forever. But there it was again, just a short distance away, and he couldn’t help admire it. And, before he knew it, he was smiling.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

RUDI EXITED THE front doors of the school, along with Maria and Samantha—and they came to a stop when they saw Tommy in the parking lot, who was once again leaning against his motorcycle—once again with his arms crossed and his head down. Which was something that caused Rudi to sigh a bit.

“So?” Maria uttered.

“So?” Rudi uttered 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 last week talking to me about cowardice.”

“Oy vey,” Rudi muttered, while shaking her head. “That’s really playing dirty.”

“Yeah,” Maria muttered back, with a smile.

“Some friend you are,” Rudi added with faux indignation, prior to slowly heading toward Tommy.

“I’ll call you tonight,” Maria replied, with her smile still on her face—which only got brighter when she turned to Samantha.

NOT FAR AWAY in the detention room Owen sat quietly by himself in the back, watched by Mr. Thompson.

Suddenly, Darlene cautiously entered the room, and glanced warily at Owen before stopping beside the dour teacher and assistant director of security.

“Can I help you?” Thompson asked.

"Can I speak to you for a second?" Darlene whispered, and she subsequently nodded toward the door and added, "Out there?"

Slowly, Mr. Thompson stood up and glared at Owen—and growled, "I'll be just outside, Mr. Connors."

The teacher and Darlene then left—and a curious expression formed on Owen's face, and he soon rose and stealthily moved to the front table, where he leaned forward just enough to be within earshot of the conversation in the hallway.

"What is it?" Thompson asked softly.

"Let's say I knew someone at school was dealing drugs . . ." Darlene began, just as softly.

"Who?" the teacher demanded.

"I'm not sure I should say," Darlene innocently replied.

"Darlene, if you don't tell me, you're just as guilty."

"Well, it's Rudi. Rudi Weiss."

"I can't say 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!"

Right then, Owen jumped out of his seat and hurried to the doorway, where he saw Mr. Thompson leading Darlene by the arm into the school offices. Afterward Owen rushed off to the windows by the side of the classroom, where he saw Rudi way off in the distance, approaching Tommy in the parking lot.

MR. THOMPSON DRAGGED Darlene up to the front desk—behind which sat a heavyset middle-aged woman.

"I need to speak to Mr. Gonthaleth," Thompson told the woman. "It's important."

"He just went over to Ralph's to get a soda," the woman replied. "He should be back pretty soon though."

"This can't wait. Call the police."

"The police?"

"Now!"

Hesitantly, the woman reached for the phone.

RUDI STOPPED IN front of Tommy, who still had his arms crossed and his head down, and who was coughing just a bit.

"Hey," she muttered, as soon as the coughing ceased.

"Hey," he muttered back.

"I guess you must be in the doghouse because of me."

"Actually, I got thrown out of the doghouse."

"What?" Rudi uttered, with obvious concern.

"Or perhaps I just left the doghouse," Tommy continued. "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."

At once an image popped into Rudi's head—an image of a town as wealthy as Newstead. So, she couldn't help smile and say, "Now you're really slumming it."

Tommy also smiled, and finally looked up at her.

"Listen, can we, can we just be friends?" she asked—something that made Tommy cringe. She cringed as well, before adding, "Ugghhh, that sounded really bad."

Tommy shrugged.

"I didn't mean it like that," she went on. "I mean for right 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 by those crazy daydreams—or

whatever they are. This is really new to me.”

“What is?” he asked.

“Getting close,” she mumbled, with her eyes somewhat lowered.

“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 the full truth 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’d never hurt you,” he told her.

“You can’t know that for sure,” she told 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.”

All of a sudden, Tommy brightened up just a little, and he said, “What exactly does that mean?”

“I have no idea,” she replied, with something of a grin. “We’re just gonna have to wing it.”

OWEN LOOKED OUT the window in all directions, and he saw the three geeks exit the front doors of the school not far away—and he opened the window a little and softly shouted, “Hey, guys!”

Abruptly, the geeks stopped—and they looked at Owen with more than a little trepidation.

“Get Rudi for me,” Owen continued, while pointing at her and Tommy in the parking lot.

Uncertain what to do, the geeks turned to each other inquisitively.

“It’s important,” Owen insisted. “Come on—hurry

up!"

A SMILING TOMMY climbed onto his motorcycle, with an equally smiling Rudi watching.

"You want a lift home?" he asked.

"Sure," she replied, before jumping onto the back of his bike. Then, she put her arms around him with her face aglow as he revved up the engine.

"Rudi!" Philip suddenly cried out, from just behind her.

Instantly, Tommy cut the engine, and the three geeks, equally out of breath, stopped in front of them.

"What's wrong?" Rudi asked.

Doug responded by pointing toward the window of the detention room and blurting out, "Owen wants to speak to you."

"He says it's important," Eliot added.

Rudi paused in thought, before getting off the bike.

"It's gotta be some kind of trap," Tommy said.

"Nah," she said back, "not even he is that stupid." She then started off toward the school.

"You want me to go with you?" Tommy asked.

"Just go home," she replied.

Rudi afterward continued on, with Tommy watching her intently. Part of him wanted to jump off the Harley and run after her—and protect her. But the other part was wiser—it knew this would only be counterproductive. Though he wasn't about to go anywhere, either.

RUDI CAUTIOUSLY APPROACHED the school—still a good distance from Owen, who was frantically waving her toward him.

All of a sudden, a police car pulled up in front of the building—and Rudi turned her head toward it, and she

saw two large policeman exit the vehicle and rush toward the doors.

“Come on, hurry up!” Owen cried out.

Feeling a sudden burst of fright, Rudi spun back to Owen, prior to running up to him and asking what was wrong.

“That Darlene girl,” he whispered, after glancing back at the classroom—“she just narced you.”

“Shit!” Rudi cried out, before looking back at the police car and adding, “Fuck!” She also sprinted toward the school doors, while yelling out to Owen: “I owe you big time!”

“Is this the good karma?” he yelled back.

WITH A NERVOUS-LOOKING Darlene standing next to him, Mr. Thompson pointed an index card in the direction of Rudi’s locker, which was surrounded by dozens of students and the two cops—and he said to the policemen: “That’s the one.”

The older of the two cops then stepped up to the locker and said back, “What’s the combination?”

“Wait!” Rudi howled from just behind them—causing everyone to turn around, and she afterward jumped in front of the locker with her arms spread out—before adding, “You can’t do this!”

“Why not?” the cop barked.

“Because there’s something called a Constitution!” she barked back. “And the Fourth fucking Amendment!”

“Who are you?”

“That’s Weiss,” interjected Mr. Thompson.

Angrily, the cop pushed Rudi from the locker and told her: “Get out of the way—before I arrest you for obstruction of justice.” He also asked Thompson once

again for the combination to the locker.

"21-36-18," the man replied, while reading from the index card.

After repeating these numbers, the policeman began turning the lock's dial, and all Rudi could do was lower her eyes. And, when she thought about all the consequences of what was about to happen, she closed these same eyes. Which was just before the cop yanked the handle of the locker.

But it didn't open—the sound of which caused Rudi's eyes to reopen.

"What was that combination again?" growled the cop.

"21-36-18," the teacher repeated. "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."

"Then who does?"

"What the hell is going on here?" a male voice suddenly howled from behind them.

Instantly, everyone turned around and looked at Mr. Gonzalez, who was standing by the front passageway wearing an overcoat—with a Styrofoam soda cup in his hand.

"Weiss has drugs in her locker," Mr. Thompson called out.

"Drugs?" Gonzalez replied, before turning to Rudi, who wasn't looking directly at him, or at anything else.

Here was his chance, the principal said to himself—his chance to get rid of her for good. It was so easy. Perhaps too easy. Then, he thought about his daughter—and her laugh. Perhaps Rudi had nothing to do with it, he further thought, but it was unlikely. He also thought about all the other things that had occurred at the school in the short time Rudi had been there, such as the three

boys he saw at Rudi's table—boys who no longer traversed the halls like terrified chickens. There was Owen Connors, too—who was once considered a convict-in-training but who now was an almost upright citizen. All these things by themselves could be written off as a fluke, but together . . .

Slowly, Mr. Gonzalez turned to Mr. Thompson, and, while pointing at Rudi, he growled, "How do you know she has drugs in her locker?"

"Darlene here saw them," answered Thompson.

"Is that true, Darlene?" the principal asked. "You actually saw drugs in her locker?"

"Well, not exactly," Darlene replied.

"How exactly then?"

"Someone told me."

Mr. Gonzalez right then hesitated for a brief second, before saying to the cops, "I believe that's what's called 'hearsay,' officers."

"I'd still like to search the locker," insisted the cop, who pointed to Rudi and added, "We know all about this one. She's got a long record."

"Then I suggest you get a warrant," replied Gonzalez. "Because there's something called a Constitution, and the . . . what was that amendment I heard you screaming about, Miss Weiss—from all the way out the door?"

"The Fourth?" Rudi muttered.

"That's right—the Fourth—the one that protects us against unreasonable searches."

"I'll get that damn warrant!" screamed the cop, before turning to his younger colleague and hollering, "Come on!"

The two cops then rushed off, with Rudi looking at Mr. Gonzalez in something that was well beyond astonishment. If God Himself had walked into the school she

wouldn't have been more surprised.

"In the meantime, Miss Weiss," the principal went on, "I suggest you tidy up your locker."

"Yes, sir," she told him, in a tone of unmistakable reverence.

"*Sir*," he repeated, with great joy. "You know, I like how that sounds. There may be hope for you yet."

She smiled at him, and he smiled back just a little, before turning around and heading toward the school offices, followed closely by Mr. Thompson. Though the principal didn't get far, because most of the students in the hallway started clapping—causing the man to come to a sudden stop. He also spun around—along with Thompson—and saw that the students were cheering him—him, the biggest bastard principal on earth.

This stunned him, and with an expression mixed with both surprise and pride, he nodded a couple of times and buttoned his coat with his free hand, prior to spinning around and strutting toward the offices—again followed closely by Mr. Thompson.

"But, Mr. Gonthaleth . . ." the teacher implored.

"The name's Gonzalez!" the principal howled, before storming inside the door.

While watching this, Rudi happened to notice Darlene, who was glaring at her. Rudi, in turn, tried to reciprocate. She tried to return the hate. But she just didn't have it in her, and this angered Darlene all that much more—and she soon charged off.

Rudi also moved on. She moved in front of her locker, still surrounded by the dozens of students, who were all staring at her.

"Can you give me some space, guys?" she asked. "You heard the man—I have to tidy up this locker."

The students responded with smiles, and they started

to disperse. After which Rudi quickly unlocked the door, while taking a long deep breath.

TOMMY NERVOUSLY PACED in front of the school entrance.

It took all his strength to stay outside when he heard Rudi was in trouble, and he realized that being patient was going to be a lot harder than he thought.

Suddenly, the doors swung open and Rudi exited—and, just as suddenly, she stopped when she saw Tommy and his nervous expression—an expression she knew was probably even more nervous than the one she had just a few minutes earlier. And it took all her strength not to jump into his arms, because she knew that he had been right—that he would never hurt her.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “Some people were saying the cops were after you.”

“Let’s just go,” she replied.

“Go where?”

“Anywhere.”

She then headed off, with him following, and once again coughing just a bit.

THE HARLEY SPED out of the school parking lot—with Rudi happily draped around Tommy.

Afterward, like the day before, they sped down Valley Street. And, like the day before, they soon passed someone—someone in a red Porsche. Only, unlike the day before, this time Deke saw them.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

THE HARLEY STEADILY rose up South Orange Avenue, toward the endless trees.

“You’re not taking me back to your mom’s house, are you?” Rudi half-jokingly asked.

“I can’t even take myself back,” Tommy answered.

“Then where are we going?”

“You said you wanted to go ‘anywhere,’ so I’m taking you to the best anywhere there is.”

Not long after this, the bike made a left at Crest Drive—a street that cut through the beginnings of the reservation and was, in essence, a long parking lot. And Tommy came to a stop—in front of a narrow makeshift path leading into the woods.

“This is your best anywhere?” Rudi uttered incredulously. “I’ve been here many times, Tommy. It isn’t the best anything. It’s boring.”

“That’s only because you’ve never really looked,” he replied. He also glanced down the road and added, “Man, some of my earliest memories are of this place.” He then pointed to his left and said, “There used to be a deer paddock right over there. I can still remember feeding them Cracker Jack out of the palm of my hand.”

“That must’ve done wonders for their teeth,” Rudi remarked.

Tommy chuckled at this, and got off the bike—and, in the same motion, he took Rudi’s hand and helped her off—something that made her smile for many different reasons. And afterward he led her down the path.

“Now where we going?” she demanded.

“To that special anywhere,” he told her, with neither of them seeing the red Porsche that slowly entered the road behind them.

Soon, the car stopped next to the motorcycle—with Deke gazing at the pair with an expression mixed of inquisitiveness and anger. And jealousy.

TOMMY CONTINUED LEADING Rudi through the forest, and they started hearing the sound of rushing water—something that piqued her interest a little.

“Come on,” she cried out, “where the hell are we going?”

“We’re almost there,” he answered.

“Where?”

“You’ll see.”

“Look, if you haven’t noticed, I’m not exactly the woodsy type.”

“Trust me.”

Tommy then veered off the path and led Rudi deeper into the reservation. He further led her into a clearing, where below them stood a pretty waterfall. Which more than surprised Rudi.

“My God,” she uttered.

“Yeah,” he uttered back.

“I didn’t know this was here.”

“Not many people know about it.”

As Tommy said this, he sat down on a rock overlooking the falls, and he began staring into the roaring white water below—and Rudi joined him.

“I actually come here a lot,” he told her.

“Yeah?” she replied.

“Yeah. It somehow helps me forget things I wanna forget. When my dad was in the hospital, I came here almost every day.”

Instinctively, Rudi wrapped her arm around Tommy, and she pulled him to her—and she also rested her head on his shoulder while murmuring, “You were right.”

“About what?” he murmured back.

“This is the best anywhere.”

“You’re the best anywhere.”

Rudi smiled at this. She smiled at how he could say something so corny and yet somehow make it sound beautiful and honest, and she knew right then that she was his—that there was nothing more she could do about it. And she wasn’t bothered by it at all.

As for Tommy, right then he wanted to tell her something else. He wanted to tell her the words he told his mother the night before. But he was scared—scared that it might frighten her off, and he didn’t want to do anything that could ruin this moment. So, he kept quiet. But he didn’t stop thinking about those three wonderful words—words he desperately wanted to say.

While he did, Rudi reached inside her sack and grabbed the bag of joints, before throwing it as far as she could down into the water.

“What was that?” he asked.

“My past,” she answered.

“Your what?”

“Are you hungry?”

Chapter Forty

THROUGH THE WINDOW of Reservoir sat a girl and a boy perusing menus.

"You know, I meant it yesterday," Tommy told Rudi inside the restaurant.

"What?" she replied, while eyeing the entrees.

"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 said with a smile—one she returned.

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

"We just have nothing in common," he replied.

Just then, a grinning waiter came over to them with a couple of sodas, which he placed in front of the pair while saying, "You guys ready?"

"Pizza?" Tommy asked Rudi.

"I'm not really a pizza person," she told him.

"But this is the best pizza in the world."

"That's what everyone says."

"Trust me. I was right about the falls, wasn't I?"

"All right," she relented.

"One pizza," Tommy said to the waiter. Then, while gazing at Rudi, he added, "With peppers and mushrooms?"

Rudi nodded back, and the waiter took the menus and headed off.

"Tommy!" a deep and accented male voice suddenly called out, from not far away. Just as suddenly Tommy turned his head—toward a stout aging man—a man who was wearing a suit that probably last fit at the end of the

sixties, and who had the hugest of smiles. And Tommy—while offering the man his hand—smiled back and exclaimed, “Mr. Agnellino!”

Unhesitatingly, the man gave Tommy a hearty handshake—almost tearing the boy’s arm off—before saying, “How are you? And how come I don’t see your beautiful mother here anymore?”

“Well, you know,” Tommy replied, after lowering his eyes a bit, “too many memories.”

“I understand,” Mr. Agnellino replied back, with a glum expression. “I understand perfectly.” He then turned to Rudi and looked at her a bit askance, not quite understanding anything about her appearance—or how Tommy could be with such a person. And he soon muttered, “Who’s this?”

“This,” Tommy answered, “this is my . . . my special friend.”

Rudi grinned a little, and actually wouldn’t have minded if he had called her his girlfriend. She wouldn’t have minded at all.

“What,” Mr. Agnellino uttered, still perplexed by everything about Rudi, “are you going to a costume party later?”

“Something like that,” Rudi uttered back, with a smirk.

“Well, enjoy your meal.”

Mr. Agnellino subsequently walked off while shaking his head, and Tommy said to Rudi: “Sorry about that.”

“I’ve heard worse,” she said back. “Much worse.”

“Hey, Tommy!” came another voice, from the other end of the restaurant.

Both of them turned their heads toward the sound, and they saw another waiter smiling and waving at Tommy, who smiled and waved back.

“Everyone knows you here,” Rudi remarked.

“My family’s been coming to this place since the thirties,” Tommy remarked 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 told him, while looking around.

“We used to eat here like once-a-week—even though it isn’t exactly my mother’s style.”

Rudi responded to this by looking down at the table setting, and she said, “Yeah, they only have one set of utensils.”

“She’s really not that bad,” Tommy replied, with a mild smile.

Rudi shrugged.

“It’s just you remind her a lot of herself,” Tommy went on.

“Oh, come on,” Rudi retorted, “what could we possibly have in common?”

“Not everything, that’s for sure. But all the important things.”

THE WAITER BROUGHT the two a thin-crust pizza and left it on the table.

“Thanks, Sal,” Tommy said.

“You betcha, Tommy,” Sal replied, after slapping him on the back. “You need anything, just holler.”

Rudi then reached for a slice, and blew on it a bit—with Tommy staring at her with a big happy grin.

“What?” she muttered.

“Nothing,” he muttered back—and she took a small bite, and couldn’t help look surprised, as she couldn’t believe how good it was—especially the tangy cheese and

the indescribably tasty crust, which just exploded in her mouth.

“This is the best pizza ever,” she afterward uttered.

“Everyone says that,” he uttered back.

Chapter Forty-One

AFTER PARKING HIS bike by the curb, Tommy walked Rudi by the hand to the edge of her front lawn and pointed down the street.

“Did you know Dionne Warwick used to live right over there?” he asked.

“Really?” she asked back.

“Yeah, her son and I played together, in fact. Which was really cool because—even though he was younger than me—he knew everything about the world, especially girls. He actually taught me everything I know.”

“I’ll have to thank him one day.”

Tommy smiled at this, and afterward glanced at Rudi’s house, and—while nodding toward one of the windows—he said, “We have an audience.”

Looking in the direction of his nod, Rudi saw Pam and Stephen standing in the window with their arms around each other, grinning at Rudi like the doting parents they truly were. Though Pam soon dragged a reluctant Stephen away, and Tommy and Rudi turned to each other and gazed blankly.

“Well . . .” he soon whispered.

“Well . . .” she whispered back.

“How do special friends say goodnight?”

Unflinchingly, she fell into his arms, and they hugged each other cheek-to-cheek, much as they had done in that daydream of theirs—or whatever it was. Tommy also closed his eyes, with bliss covering every aspect of his face. And, as he did the day before, he caressed Rudi’s cheek with the back of his fingers—transferring his bliss

to her.

"You know," she muttered, "you're okay."

Once again, he wanted to tell her what he told his mother the night before, and the words even began forming on his lips. But he just stopped himself.

RUDI FLOATED INSIDE her house, and she saw Stephen sitting on the couch in the living room, looking as if he had just eaten a large handful of proverbial canaries.

"Don't say a word," she threatened, though she made this threat through a big smile.

He also smiled, just as Rudi walked toward the stairs.

Suddenly, the phone rang in the kitchen, moments before Rudi headed upward.

"Yeah," Stephen cooed, "before you know it, we'll be shopping for your prom dress."

These last two words caused Rudi to stop and turn to him—and she grimaced.

"Rudi, phone call!" Pam called out.

Thinking it was Maria, Rudi skipped down the stairs and giddily rushed into the kitchen—and with her smile still on her face she said into the phone: "Hey."

But no one answered. Though she could faintly hear traffic in the background, as if the call were being made from a pay phone—and she uttered, "Maria?"

"I've been called lots of things before," Deke replied with a chuckle, "but never that."

"What do you want?" Rudi growled.

"Let's see, what do I want? What could I possibly want?"

"I don't have it right now."

"Then 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'm not 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 fucking 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 fucking *GQ* prick!"

"You're wrong! We're just friends!"

"Don't lie to me! Remember, I'm the one who taught you how! I fucking taught you everything!"

"Look," she told him, "I gotta go."

"Fine," he told her back, "just tell me when and where I can pick it up."

"I just told you—I don't have it!"

"Well, I'm sure your boyfriend does. Maybe I'll have a little talk with him. Who knows, maybe I'll even fuck him a bit—just to see what all the excitement's about."

"Leave him the fuck alone!"

"Then get me my fucking money! Or something better! And tomorrow, you fucking bitch!"

At once the line went dead—and Rudi felt both a panic and a shaking set in—a panic and a shaking she knew could only properly be tamed chemically. But that wasn't something available to her. So, in a complete daze, she exited the kitchen and walked up the stairs—and didn't even hear her foster parents say goodnight.

Afterward, she entered her room and hid under the covers of her way-too-soft bed, and—while clutching her pillow—she went through all her available options. And well into the night she continued going through these options—even though each time she did she could

only come up with one.

Perhaps if she didn't care about Tommy she could've figured a way out—or at least have made a run for it. But, as she now learned, with caring came responsibility, and so she knew there was only that one option. She would have to give Deke what he wanted—what he really wanted.

Chapter Forty-Two

THE NEXT MORNING Rudi—who once again didn’t get much sleep—tried to pretend nothing was wrong.

But she was never particularly good at pretending, and Tommy knew right away there was a problem when he sat down next to her in English class and noticed how cool she was toward him. Though he just thought he had crossed some line that their “special friendship” didn’t entitle him to, and he headed toward his normal seat—feeling not only down but also a little sick—a feeling he had since he awoke. Along with this feeling, his cough was much worse than the day before. But none of this concerned him, and for the rest of class he watched the only thing that did.

As for Rudi, she didn’t notice Tommy. She didn’t notice him sitting next to her—or notice when he got up. She was in another world—one in which she was trying to convince herself that the nightmare to come wasn’t so terrible—that there were worse things. Even if she couldn’t think of any.

She actually couldn’t think of much at all the entire morning, and didn’t come out of her stupor until lunch, when—while standing by the entrance to the cafeteria—she saw a strange amalgamation of people sitting at the back table. Not only were the three geeks there with Maria and Samantha, but so was Owen Connors, and a certain football player, too. And all seven were laughing and telling jokes—and acting as if they had been best friends since birth—when, of course, they were only friends because of one crazy-looking girl from Irvington.

But this girl recoiled from all of them, and turned around and walked off—something Tommy just caught a glimpse of.

RUDI SPENT LUNCH in a far-off corner of the library, where she sat on the floor with her back against the wall.

She actually looked much as she had in the holding cell weeks earlier, only now she had her music with her. Though it didn't help at all, and eventually she just gave up and put the Walkman away.

Afterward, she began a long sleepwalk—one that lasted through all her afternoon classes—right up until the final bell. She then exited the front doors of the school, and saw Tommy waiting for her outside.

"Rudi, what's going on?" he asked.

Involuntarily, she stopped—and her mind briefly came out of its somnambulistic state. But she didn't turn around or reply, and, soon after, she just continued on.

"Rudi!" he cried out.

"Nothing!" she cried back. "Nothing is going on!"

But he rushed up to her anyway and said, "You've been avoiding me all day. What did I do now?"

"Nothing. This has nothing to do with you."

"Come on."

"Listen," she growled, "the world doesn't revolve around you."

"I never said it did," he growled back. "Or implied it. And you know it!"

She responded to this by stopping again. After which she took a long deep breath and turned to him—and, while desperately trying to maintain her composure, she muttered, "Nothing is wrong, Tommy. This has nothing to do with you—I swear. And it has nothing to do with us. I'll talk to you tomorrow, but right now I really need

for you to go home.”

Without waiting for a response, she took off again—this time much faster.

“Where you going?” he demanded.

“I’ve got something to do!” she yelled.

“Rudi—”

“—My God, can’t you just fucking listen for once!”

She suddenly rushed off even faster—toward the intersection of Parker and Valley—and again Tommy was conflicted. Again part of him wanted to protect her while the other part—the wiser part—knew she didn’t want his protection and that it would only drive her away. But something told him that—even if it meant wrecking all he had accomplished the day before—he had to go after her. So, he started running in Rudi’s direction—and, as he got close, he saw a red Porsche 944 stop in front of her. And, soon after, he saw the passenger door open. Then, he saw her get inside—and he ran in the opposite direction, toward his bike.

INSIDE THE PORSCHE Rudi stared blankly ahead, neither noticing Deke’s wry smile nor the New York Dolls blasting on the car’s stereo.

“Well?” he said, after holding out his hand.

She didn’t reply. So, he turned down the music and repeated himself, and, soon after this, he repeated himself once again—this time with a lot more firmness.

“I don’t got it,” she finally told him.

“You know what that means, don’t you?”

“I know what it means.”

“All-righty,” he cooed with a big smile, just before he sped off.

Chapter Forty-Three

THE RED PORSCHE turned onto Route 22 heading east, amidst a sea of traffic. So, neither occupant saw the Harley that turned onto the road after it.

Though Rudi wouldn't have seen Tommy even if he had pulled up right beside her. That's because only her body was there. Her mind was elsewhere—back at the waterfall, trying to forget. But no matter how hard she stared into the roaring white water below, it just wouldn't work.

Soon, Deke pulled into a nondescript and near empty motel on the edge of Newark, and parked by the office.

"I'll be right back, sugar," he cooed, as he smiled at Rudi, who was still elsewhere. "Don't you go nowhere."

"This is it?" she uttered.

"What?" he uttered back.

"I do this and my debt is wiped clean—the whole thing."

"It'll be worth every fucking dime."

"And you'll leave me and Tommy alone forever."

He responded by blowing her a kiss, and he jumped out of the car—and literally skipped toward the motel office.

As he entered the doors, the Harley parked behind the Porsche, and Tommy rushed up to the passenger window, before rapping on it with his knuckles.

Quickly, a surprised and angered Rudi turned to him, and she rolled down her window—and she howled, "Tommy, what the fuck are you doing here?"

"What the fuck are *you* doing here?" he howled back.

“Just go home—I told you, this has nothing to do with you!”

“It does! You know it does!”

Just then, Deke exited the motel office and smirked at Tommy, prior to saying, “Well, if it isn’t lover boy. Hey, you want to join us? She’s certainly gonna have her hands full—as well as lots of other things, but you’re more than welcome to watch.”

Rudi responded by exiting the car, and, after she slammed the door closed, she hollered, “Let’s just get this over with.” She then rushed toward Deke, who himself headed toward a nearby motel room.

“Rudi, what are you doing?” Tommy emotionally cried out.

“I told you before, Tommy,” she cried back, just as emotionally, “I don’t live in your world. I live in a totally fucking different one!”

“But—”

“—Just go home already! I’m fucking trash! Go home and forget me!”

Tommy thought about doing just that, especially when he saw Deke open the door of the room—and when he saw the girl he loved storm inside it.

Just forget her, he told himself. She obviously doesn’t care. She doesn’t care about anything.

“See ya,” Deke told him, as he entered the room, which was right before he shut the door. Afterward, Deke carefully turned the lock, and he sauntered toward Rudi, who was standing by the bed, shivering in both fear and horror—contradicting a face that desperately tried to convey apathy.

As for Deke, this was what he had been waiting for, and he wanted to enjoy every drop of it. So, he slowed more and more—allowing her fear and horror to escalate

even higher. Though, before he knew it, he was in front of her, and he murmured, “You want some blow first? Or maybe some ludes?”

Rudi didn’t reply to this. She didn’t because she was thinking. She was thinking not only about her oncoming nightmare, but also about how she had just lost the only person she ever loved.

“Well?” Deke demanded.

“Give it to me!” Rudi demanded back—knowing here was her escape—even if it were only a partial and temporary one.

“The coke or the ludes?”

“The fucking ludes!” she shouted. “Just give me the fucking ludes!”

Deke smiled, and took out a handful of white tablets from his pants pocket—which she grabbed with her shaking hand. And, after dropping a few onto the floor, she shoved the remainder into her mouth and swallowed hard, before clenching her eyes closed while wishing the pills would kill her—wishing they’d kill her right then.

But they didn’t. So, she hollered, “Do it already!”

“All-righty,” he cooed, as he began to unzip his leather jacket.

While he did, she opened her eyes. She also realized she couldn’t go through with it. She realized there was nothing worse than this, not even death. So, she swung her right leg up toward Deke’s groin, much as she had once done to Owen. But, unlike with Owen, Deke caught her foot just before it reached its destination—and he howled, “I guess you forgot I’m the one who fucking taught you!”

A moment later, he flung her leg into the air, knocking her onto the thin and heavily stained carpeted floor, and he yelled, “I thought you were smart—but you’re

nothing but a stupid fucking bitch!” He then continued removing his jacket, just as she swept one of her legs across his ankles, sending him flying onto the floor. Which was just before she jumped up and threw a punch toward his face—something he easily blocked, prior to throwing his own punch, which connected with her chin, flinging her backward onto the floor.

“You dumb fucking cunt!” he bellowed as he straddled her waist, and, while pummeling her face over and over with his fists, he added, “I would’ve given you everything—fucking everything!”

Now defenseless, all Rudi could do was scream and cry out for help, as her toughness was long gone—leaving only the frightened little girl, which excited Deke all that more. And, once this excitement peaked, he stopped punching and finished removing his jacket. Just as the door to the room broke open.

Tommy afterward flew inside and grabbed Deke by the shoulders—and, while screeching his head off, he tossed the man into a nearby wall, causing Deke’s gun to fall from his waist and bounce onto the floor before landing a short distance from the bed. Though all Tommy noticed was Rudi, and he knelt down beside her and saw her bloody, almost lifeless face—and he clutched her hands.

“Oh, my God, Rudi!” he yelled, with his face contorted with terror. “I have to tell you something.”

But he never got the chance. He didn’t because Deke got up and punched him in the kidney—causing Tommy’s face to be contorted for a very different reason. After which Deke grabbed Tommy by the ears and dragged him onto the floor. He also slammed the partially unhinged door closed and straddled Tommy’s waist, and he started pummeling the boy’s face much as

he had done with Rudi's—only harder. Much harder. Over and over Deke's fists flew—long after the boy was well beyond the point of resistance.

Watching this, Rudi, who was clinging to consciousness, happen to notice the gun lying near her—and she reached for it with her left hand. But it was just beyond her grasp.

Eventually, Deke tired of hitting Tommy, and knew he had to save some strength for something far more important. So, he stopped his punches, and spit into the boy's bloodied eyes—eyes that were barely registering anything.

"I'd kill you, kike-boy," he growled, "but I want you to see me fuck your girl!"

Right then, Deke jumped up, and he whipped off his shirt and belt, and unzipped his Sasson jeans—all with a big smirk on his face. And he said to Rudi: "It's show time, babe!"

With all the remaining force inside her, Rudi lunged forward—and she just grabbed the gun. And, in the same motion, she lifted it toward Deke's head and mumbled, "It's show time."

Then, she pulled the trigger.

Chapter Forty-Four

RUDI WAS HAVING a strange uncomfortable dream—one in which she was stumbling through a hospital corridor in agonizing pain. Every step hurt, all over her body. She also felt oddly weightless, and without strength.

In this state, she wandered through the halls while looking into rooms—rooms that were without exception empty. Soon, she started feeling even worse, as she started feeling intense loneliness. Along with this feeling, she came upon the door to a supply closet—one that was unlocked.

Quickly, she entered it and saw a glass cabinet filled with all sorts of pill bottles—and she just as quickly opened the cabinet and grabbed a bottle at random. And tore off its top. But it was empty. So, she flung it onto the floor and grabbed another bottle. But it, too, was empty—and so was the one after it, and the one after that. And, once she had fruitlessly checked a dozen or so, she screamed in frustration and shook her fists—with the pain even worse than before. Then, she knocked over all the remaining bottles and rushed back into the hallway, and continued searching through the empty rooms.

Eventually, she came to the end of the corridor, and there was but one room left to check—and she looked inside and saw Tommy lying on a bed, with his face badly battered. Also there was Darlene, who was sitting on the bed holding Tommy's hand while lovingly looking down at him—and he looked up at her just as lovingly. Mrs. Goodwin was in the room, too. She was sitting in a chair

nearby and smiling warmly at the two. Suddenly, though, the woman turned her head toward Rudi, and she glared at her, before shouting, "What do you want here?"

"Tommy?" Rudi uttered by the doorway. "I'm so sorry."

Unmoved by her words, Tommy glared at her as well—and uttered, "Why don't you just go away. I don't want you anymore."

"No!" Rudi called out, before rushing to his bed, where she fell to her knees—at which time she took his free hand and yelled, "Don't do this, please!"

But he just yanked his hand away and said, "This is all your fault. You put me in here. You! I wouldn't have even been here before if it wasn't for you!"

Suddenly, Darlene started to laugh, and as she continued to do so, she told Rudi: "What a joke you are, thinking you could have someone like Tommy. Why, you're not anywhere near his class—trash like you. You never were and never could be. You're a nobody—just a druggie whore from Irvington!"

"That's not true!" Rudi insisted.

"You think you're like Helena," Mrs. Goodwin interjected, "but you're nothing like her! You're a piece of filth! Now, get out! Get out and never come back!"

"No!" Rudi replied.

"Get out!" all of them replied back, and afterward they started chanting this, over and over.

Get out! Get out! Get out!

"Noooooooooooo!" Rudi screamed.

Then, she awoke—in a darkened hospital room, and she looked up at the ceiling. She also felt her hand being swallowed by something enormous. So, she turned her battered face, and she saw her stepfather hovering over

her while holding her hand. She further saw he was looking as if he were about to cry.

“Dad?” she mumbled, with great surprise.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled back.

“For what?”

“What am I not sorry about?”

Reflexively, Rudi pulled her hand away, and her eyes, too.

“I don’t blame you for hating me,” he went on.

“I don’t hate you,” she replied. “I’m not really sure what I feel.”

“I know how you feel,” he replied, right before he grimaced and added, “Boy, that sounded like a really bad pun.”

“Yeah,” she told him, with a slight smile—one that caused her immeasurable pain.

“You, you look so much like your mom,” he continued. “Apart from the bruises, of course.”

“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 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 said, after a brief pause. “And I hated you, too. I hated you because I made myself believe she only left because of you. But I always knew she really left because of me.”

“That’s not true,” Mr. Reese insisted. “Don’t think

that for a minute. 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.”

Rudi responded to this by turning back to her stepfather, and she smiled again—again with lots of pain. And she took his big paw in her hand.

“Your records are in good shape,” he remarked.

“That’s good,” she remarked back.

“I didn’t want you to kick my ass.”

Rudi couldn’t help chuckle at this—and she winced as well, prior to uttering, “Oh, that hurt.”

“Sorry,” he said. “Hey, I even bought a rack for them.”

“My records?” she asked.

He nodded, and added, “I also talked to Mr. Cross. Actually, I talked to both of them. They seem real nice.”

“They are,” she replied.

“They, 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 said 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 told him.

Mr. Reese then started out. But as he reached the divider separating Rudi from another patient, he stopped and turned back to her—and while pointing toward the darkened corridor with his thumb he whispered, “This is probably none of my business, but there’s a boy sitting

outside your room on the floor.”

“A boy?” she whispered back.

“Yeah, and by the looks of him, I’d say he was hit by the very same train.”

TOMMY HAD LOST track of how long he had been sitting outside Rudi’s room.

All he knew was that when he first arrived it was pitch black outside, which he could tell by looking through the window of the room across the hall. And now, now a faint glimmer of light was slowly rising behind the night. He wasn’t even certain how long he had been in the hospital. He could remember the gunshot, and that was just 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 them where Rudi was.

Not long after this, he was sitting by her door in his gown, trying to think of what he was going to say to her, which wasn’t easy—as his head just throbbed, and he kept losing his train of thought. To make matters even worse, he felt much sicker than before. He was feverish—and his cough had become dry and hacking—and he had a running nose, too. What’s more, he was also having a little trouble breathing—something Mr. Reese heard when he exited the room.

Just then, their eyes met—and the large man smiled briefly before heading down the hallway. After which Tommy heard shoeless footsteps coming toward him from inside the room.

Soon, these footsteps came to a stop somewhere nearby—and Rudi along with them. She subsequently glanced at the old woman she was sharing a room with prior to looking down at Tommy and his lowered eyes—

and his battered face. She looked with an expression caked with guilt, and almost wished he wasn't there. She almost wished her dream had been true.

"It must be long past visiting hours," she told him.

"I've never been real good at following rules," he told her back.

"Since when?"

"Since I met you."

After saying this, he coughed a few times—and, while checking her gown, she slowly slid down the wall and sat next to him. Though he didn't react. He just kept staring at the floor, and eventually she blurted out, "Well, now you must finally hate me."

He shook his still lowered head.

"What do I have to do then?" she demanded.

Again, he shook his head.

"Look at yourself, Tommy," she went on, with her voice well beyond the breaking point. "*Just look*. Look at how I've fucked you up."

But he just kept shaking his head, over and over—and uttered, "It's not true."

"You probably wouldn't have even lost your spleen if you weren't trying to show off for me," she uttered back.

"No," he insisted, with yet another shake of his head.

"You're such a stupid motherfucker!" she quietly hollered.

"You know, I, I was really scared—back in that motel."

"Yeah, well, so was I."

"No, I was scared I was gonna die before . . ."

"Before what?"

"Before I could tell you I love you."

Hurriedly, Rudi turned away from him, while trying to control her emotions. But she wasn't doing a very

good job of it, as those were three words she never expected to hear—words that lifted her off the floor. After which she gasped, “You love me?”

“You were right the other day,” he said in reply, after wiping his running nose—“when you called me a ‘momma’s boy.’ You see, I even told my mother that I loved you. But I didn’t have the courage to say it to you. And I almost never got the chance. But I’m not afraid anymore. I’m not afraid of anything. And I love you.”

“Yeah, well,” she softly spoke, “I love you, too.”

Tommy wasn’t sure if he misheard. So, he looked up at her, and he saw himself in her watery eyes—the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

“I didn’t want to love you,” she went on. “I didn’t want to love anyone, 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. You, you’re my fairy tale.”

These words alone took Tommy’s pain and sickness away, and he took Rudi’s hand—and she flew right up toward the heavens, bringing him along with her. And when they finally reached where they were going, she turned to him slowly—at which time they both smiled just a little before leaning toward one another almost imperceptibly.

Eventually, their foreheads met, and their noses touched—and did so painfully, causing them both to wince. After which she whispered, “Just don’t expect me to wear a dress.”

He smiled at this, and gently kissed her—with his lips barely touching hers, and she kissed him back just as gently. And back and forth they went—until “Moonlight Serenade” began playing in both their heads.

“You hear that?” he asked.

“It would only be weird if I didn’t,” she told him, before wrapping her arms around his shoulders and stretching her legs across his lap, while hoping the music would never end.

Chapter Forty-Five

SOON AFTER THE hospital corridor lights went on fully a small group of nurses broke up the kissing couple—and sent them back to their respective rooms. Though neither could sleep, and neither could stop smiling. Which was the last thing Stephen and Pam expected to see when they walked into their foster daughter's room later that morning.

“You okay?” Pam asked.

“I’m better than okay,” Rudi mumbled. “I’m so better. I didn’t even know it was possible to be this better.”

“They must have drugged her up,” Stephen said to his wife.

“There isn’t a drug in the world that does this,” Rudi told him. “Believe me, I would know.”

With a big smile, Pam rushed over to Rudi and took her hand.

“Am I the only person here who doesn’t know what’s going on?” Stephen remarked.

“It’s a girl thing,” Pam told him.

“Yeah,” Rudi said. Then, she looked at Stephen and suddenly felt herself deflating a bit, and she uttered, “So, I guess, I guess I’m in big trouble.”

“Why?” he uttered back.

“Well, for starters I killed someone . . . I did kill him, didn’t I?”

Stephen nodded solemnly, but added, “It was clearly self-defense. The police, they’ll be by sometime today to take your statement, and Tommy’s, too—but my brother said 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 totally 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 said, 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.”

“The man’s been out of sorts lately.”

“And your English teacher also had nice things to say about you as well. You know, the one who hates you so much. So, anyway, after speaking with your stepdad, the judge has agreed to let you return home—though he would like you to remain at Columbia.”

“Oh,” Rudi muttered.

“I know your stepfather would love to have you back,” Stephen went on. “I’ve been talking to him about it.”

“And I’m sure you guys wouldn’t mind,” Rudi replied. “After all, I must be the worst . . .”

“Actually,” Stephen interrupted, before turning to his wife, who added, “Actually, you’re the best we’ve ever had.”

“Maybe you two need to check into a hospital,” spoke Rudi—“a different type of hospital.”

“We didn’t say the easiest,” Stephen continued. “We just said the best. The reason we became foster parents in the first place was because of kids like you.”

“Well, you’re not so bad, either,” Rudi said.

“Really?” Pam said back.

“Sure,” answered Rudi. “So, I, I wouldn’t mind staying a little longer.”

“That’s wonderful!” Pam cried out.

“But I’m thinking,” Rudi went on, “with all those glowing reports, perhaps my curfew could be lifted.”

“Not a chance,” Stephen told her.

Rudi smiled at this, and afterward Stephen said, “Well, I gotta get to school.”

“Can I speak to Pam for a second?” Rudi asked.

Stephen nodded, and left the room—and Rudi afterward whispered to Pam: “You think you could find out what room Tommy is in? I’d ask the nurses myself, but I don’t think they’d tell me after what happened earlier.”

Chapter Forty-Six

AS SOON AS Pam passed on Tommy's room number Rudi sneaked out of her room and into Tommy's private one not far away, where she saw him staring out the window.

All of a sudden, he sneezed.

"Bless you," she said, from right behind him.

Instantly, he turned around and smiled at her, and she sat on his bed and gently kissed him while caressing his face.

"You're burning up," she said. "You know, we just might have to get you to a hospital."

"Funny."

"Seriously, you don't look too good."

"No worse than you."

"Fuck you."

"The truth is," he told her, "I'm flying."

"Yeah," she told him back with a smile, "you must've caught that from me."

"I must've."

Again, she kissed him.

"You're gonna get sick," he warned.

"That's just a hazard of the work, I'm afraid," she replied, before kissing him again—and again once more.

Just then, a nurse came in with a tray of medicine—a nurse from the same group that broke them up before, and this woman brusquely ordered Rudi out of the room.

But Rudi refused. Though, after much arguing, they agreed to a compromise, and Rudi sat next to Tommy on a chair. And, while holding hands, they started talking

away—only to be interrupted by the police, who took both their statements at the same time. Then, well into the afternoon, the two continued their talk, despite Tommy getting sicker as the day went on. They talked about everything and nothing. They especially talked about music and books and politics—of which little did they agree on. But because they at least had the same interests they never ran out of things not to agree on—and they did so so loudly that it wasn't long before the entire hospital staff knew exactly where Rudi was. They even brought her lunch and medicine to Tommy's room. And this was how Maria was able to find her when she visited after school.

At first, Maria was horrified at what had happened to both of them. But when—from the threshold of the room—she saw how happy Rudi was, she couldn't help crack a joke: "Well, now you look really punk."

Instantly, Rudi turned to Maria and smiled, and just as instantly she jumped up and rushed over to the girl—and afterward she hugged her and whispered, "Thank you for coming."

"Next time you're in trouble," Maria whispered back, "maybe you let your best friend know."

Rudi's response was to hug Maria even tighter.

Watching this was a balding middle-aged man—one who was standing in the doorway with a big frown on his face.

"Hey, Barry," Tommy called out.

"Hey, kid," Barry replied, while still frowning.

"This is my uncle," Tommy said to Rudi.

"Oh, hi," Rudi said back, with a mild smile.

"And this is Rudi," Tommy added, while pointing at her.

"Nice to meet you," spoke Barry, in a tone of voice

suggesting it was anything but true—and, sensing this, Rudi took Maria's hand and told her: "Why don't we take a walk."

As they did, Barry rushed up to Tommy's bed, and he uttered, "Jesus, Tommy—what are you still doing with that chick?"

"What do you mean?" Tommy asked, clearly surprised by the question.

"Look at what she's gotten you into. And I'm not just talking about your face—the whole thing with your mother, too."

"She didn't get me into anything," Tommy insisted. "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 sighed, and shook his head—and subsequently said, "Well, I'm sorry, kid—but if you don't break it off, I can't let you back into my house."

"What?" Tommy gasped.

"I'm sorry, but I've got my own family to look out for. They can't be involved in this kind of crap."

"I, 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, kid—then you're on your own. Hopefully, hopefully this will be the very worst thing that'll happen to you."

WHEN RUDI RETURNED to Tommy's room she was by herself, and she saw Tommy again staring out the window—and she could hear his labored breathing, which had been getting steadily worse that day along with his cough.

"It didn't go so well, I guess," she softly spoke.

He shrugged, and added, "You think Mr. Cross has room for one more?"

"*Tommy*," she muttered. She then sat next to him on the bed and asked, "What about your mom?"

"What about her?" he asked back.

"Still no word?"

Tommy didn't answer—he just kept staring.

"Maybe," she went on, "maybe we should just lay low awhile."

Angrily, he spun toward her and uttered, "What?"

"I don't know," she replied, while looking away from him, "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!"

Rudi responded to this by taking his hand, and this made both of them feel better—though not quite enough.

“I love you,” she afterward said, while still not looking at him.

“I love hearing you say that,” he said 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 told her.

“I love hearing you say that,” she told him back.

Suddenly, he started coughing—much worse than before, and she quickly checked his sweating forehead, and found it even hotter than earlier.

“I’m gonna get a nurse,” she said, before jumping off the bed.

“I’m fine!” he hollered.

But his coughing told a much different story.

Chapter Forty-Seven

AFTER RUDI FINALLY got a nurse to come, the woman gave Tommy some medication, and he drifted off to sleep.

This same nurse told Rudi that it was just the flu—and that he'd be better soon, and Rudi believed her, in spite of rarely believing anyone. She believed her because she desperately wanted to believe. However, Rudi didn't get much sleep that night, and the next morning—when she came to Tommy's room—he was gone. So, she frantically ran up to the nurses station and demanded to know what was wrong.

"Calm down," the nurse there told her.

"I'm not gonna fucking calm down!" Rudi screamed.

"He's in ICU."

"ICU?" Rudi uttered, in something just beyond shock. "Oh, my God—what happened?"

"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 didn't know exactly what she was, but she knew she wasn't a family member. So, she just floated off. It didn't even seem to her that she was walking on the ground.

She told herself that she was heading toward ICU. She told herself that she would see Tommy, rules or no rules. But instead she just went back to her room. She went back there and hid under the covers. She did this because she was frightened. She was more frightened than she had ever been. She was frightened of what she might find out.

This fear only got worse when she returned home, as it mixed with the fear of the unknown and increased every day and every night. Soon, she stopped sleeping and eating. She even stopped listening to music. She was a mess in every way. Then, one Sunday afternoon Stephen came to her open bedroom door, and he saw her clutching her pillow while staring blankly into space.

"I know you don't want to hear this," Stephen said to her, "but there's an NA meeting tonight at seven."

"I can't," she said 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."

"Well, I'm sorry, but you don't have a 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 of them. But if you don't show up tonight, I'm gonna have to tell my brother."

"Fine," she uttered, with great exasperation—"I'll go."

"Great. We'll leave—"

"—I can get there myself," she insisted.

"All right," he replied. "But I'll know if you don't."

Stephen then walked off, and Rudi eventually got out

of bed and got dressed—and she left the house with her bag stuffed with every cassette she had and absolutely no intention of showing up at the meeting.

DURING THE REST of the afternoon and well into the early evening Rudi wandered the streets aimlessly while listening to her music—music that was doing nothing for her.

Suddenly—and perhaps not entirely unintentionally—she found herself in front of the South Orange Recreation Center, where she saw a light coming from a room on the second floor.

She sighed, but reluctantly entered the building, prior to walking up the stairs and approaching the lit room, from which a small group of people were 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 had heard this prayer a thousand times, as they recited it at every NA meeting she attended. But this evening was the first time she actually listened to it—the first time she actually heard the words. And, as the prayer came to an end, she stopped at the door and wished God really had the power to grant those things. Because she needed all three.

Even though she was certain she wouldn't find any of them at the meeting, she looked inside the room anyway, where about a dozen people were sitting, including Stephen. Seeing him there, she got angry—thinking he was checking up on her, and Stephen quickly saw this anger. He even smiled at it before turning forward toward the

aging man leading the group from a chair up front, beside which stood a small table covered in key chains of various colors.

Right then, the man asked if anyone wanted to share something, and Stephen raised his hand—which surprised Rudi. But she really became surprised when her foster dad stood up and moved to the front of the room—and said to everyone there: “My name is Stephen, and I’m an addict.”

“Hello, Stephen,” most of the audience replied.

“I’ve been clean for a while,” he went 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. I awoke in a house I didn’t know, with people I had never met, in a town I had never been. And even at this moment I know that I’m no more than a day from returning there. I know this when I’m at work, I know it when I’m home—I know it when I’m in the arms of my wife. The only difference between this moment and the one eleven years ago is that I’m not alone. And, 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 returned to his seat, and the leader of the group noticed an emotional-looking Rudi standing by the doorway—and, with a gentle smile, he said to her: “Can I help you?”

“That’s my foster child,” Stephen replied.

“Oh, hello,” the man uttered, with his smile a bit stronger—and he added, “Please come in.”

Hesitantly, Rudi entered the room, and she took a seat next to Stephen, without actually looking at him.

“My name is Frank,” the man continued.

“Hi,” Rudi muttered.

"I know you're new here, but perhaps you'd like to share something."

Rudi shrugged, having never shared anything at these meetings before. She had even mocked the whole idea. But on this particular evening she got up and headed to the front of the room, and—with her eyes lowered—she murmured, "My name is Rudi."

"Hello, Rudi," everyone replied.

"Hi. I, I've been clean, I don't know, about a week or so."

"That's fine," Frank told her.

"I was doing real good before that," she said, specifically to him—"almost a year."

Frank smiled at her.

"Oh," she uttered, "I forgot to say I'm an addict."

"It's okay," he whispered.

"I probably didn't say it," she told the rest of the group, "I probably didn't say it because I like to pretend I'm not. I like to pretend 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."

Understanding this well, Frank extended his hand out to her, and she grabbed it tightly.

"I've always been alone," she went on. "I've never let anyone near me. Even when I was all fucked-up. Even then I never let anyone close. Never. 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."

TOMMY AWOKE AND found himself in a strange room—the same strange room in which he had been coming in and out of consciousness for more than a

week.

Suddenly, he could feel all sorts of tubes in his body—including one in his nose, and he could sense the nothingness all around him. He also could feel his own fear, which only got more intense when a short gray-haired man in a white coat entered the room—a man whose cold expression made him look much like Death.

RUDI CAME HOME from school, and she headed upstairs to her room and to the covers of her bed, just as the hospital called her.

At first, she didn't want to take the call. But eventually she came down the stairs. She came down them in a stupor, and, in this state, she picked up the phone—and, while shaking just a bit, she mumbled, "Hello?"

"Is this Rudi?" a deep male voice replied. "Rudi Weiss?"

"Yes."

"My name is Dr. Klein, 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."

"Yeah? 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 told her.

"Then it must be bad."

"I'll be here late into the evening—just ask for me at the front desk. Please come."

RUDI WASN'T THE only person Dr. Klein called that afternoon.

He also called Mrs. Goodwin—and when he did, the woman was sitting on her living room couch staring blankly out into space, much as she had done for more than a week.

All of a sudden, Elizabeth entered the room, and told the woman about the call.

“Just tell them where to send the bills,” Mrs. Goodwin replied, without emotion.

“I already told them that when he first got checked in there,” Elizabeth replied. “This doctor, though, he says he wants to speak to you about Tommy’s condition. He says it’s very important.”

“Really, I don’t want to hear any more of this affair.”

“But—”

“—Please, Elizabeth.”

Reluctantly, Elizabeth walked off, and, as she did, Mrs. Goodwin happened to gaze at 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. At the same time, she felt a strong compulsion to rush to the hospital—the very same compulsion she felt the night she heard about the incident at the motel. Though, just like then, something stopped her—or rather, someone.

“How could he still be with her?” she mumbled to herself. “How can he treat me like this? How can he not even call?”

Quickly, an anger built on her face, and once it boiled over, she knocked over the picture. And started crying.

Chapter Forty-Eight

THE HOUR RUDI had to wait for Stephen to come home from school was never-ending, with her eyes constantly drifting toward the clock on the kitchen wall—a clock that was just torturing her by moving slower and slower, to the point where it didn't seem to move at all. This torture was further compounded by her dark thoughts, which were now not only furiously growing but ramming the inside of her head, looking for any kind of exit.

So, she was in a precarious state when Stephen finally came home, and she stayed that way as she and her foster parents rushed to the hospital in the Volvo. And she was even worse when—in the front lobby of St. Barnabas—Stephen asked a receptionist for Dr. Klein. Rudi then again had to wait, for a small man in a white coat—a man with graying hair and a cold expression—who approached them much like the clock on the kitchen wall, going slower and slower.

Eventually, he stopped in front of the three and greeted them cordially.

“What’s wrong with Tommy?” Rudi demanded.

“Why don’t you come with me,” the man replied, while looking at Rudi and her appearance warily.

“Why don’t you just fucking tell me what’s wrong?” she barked.

Stephen reacted to this by grabbing Rudi’s shoulders to calm her down, and he whispered, “Come on, let’s just do what he says.”

Rudi, though, shook him off. But soon afterward she

uttered, "All right, all right."

THE DOCTOR LED the three down the hall—into an empty and somewhat darkened lounge, and he asked them to sit on a nearby leather couch before grabbing a chair and joining them.

At the same time, Rudi felt as if she were a defendant in a capital-murder trial, waiting for a verdict that was all-too-obvious. So, she couldn't help holding her breath and shaking just a bit.

"How's Tommy?" Stephen asked.

"He's out of ICU," the doctor replied. "And resting."
All of a sudden, Rudi breathed.

"But that's not why I've asked you to come," Dr. Klein went on.

"Why then?" asked Pam.

"Tommy's very sick," he answered.

"But you just said he was out of ICU!" Rudi shouted, with her exasperation so thick that it was scratching her voice.

"Yes," the doctor told her. "Why don't I just start at the beginning. You see, at first we thought he just had an unusually bad case of the flu. But we discovered it was actually pneumonia. Pneumocystis, to be exact—something that was very rare until very recently."

"So, is he all right or isn't he?" Rudi cried out.

"We have the pneumonia under control for the moment."

"For the moment? What the hell does that mean?"

"Rudi, we believe, we believe Tommy has AIDS."

"AIDS?" Rudi uttered—with the word sounding only faintly familiar. Stephen and Pam also seemed unsure about the term.

"Previously," the doctor went on, "that is, until just a

few months ago, they called it GRID—‘Gay-Related Immune Deficiency.’”

Bewilderedly, all three looked at each other.

“You might know it better,” continued Dr. Klein in a hushed tone, “you might know it better as the ‘gay plague’—a quite unfortunate term.”

Now, all three were shocked—because that particular term they knew. Or, at least, they knew the rumors about it. And, once this shock finally began to dissipate, Rudi shook her head over and over—before muttering, “But, but Tommy isn’t gay.”

“That’s why they changed the name,” Dr. Klein replied. “You see, the disease has also been observed in other groups, such as Haitian immigrants and intravenous drug users.”

“But Tommy isn’t any of those things, either,” Rudi replied back, while starting to feel guilty for a reason she couldn’t quite comprehend.

“He may have contracted the disease from the blood transfusions he recently received,” the doctor told her. “A short time ago, a baby girl in California apparently contracted the disease this way.”

“And what happened to her?” Rudi blurted out.

The doctor didn’t reply.

“What happened to her?” Rudi repeated, with panic filling her voice.

“She died, Rudi,” he answered. “She died.”

“So, he, he’s gonna die?” Rudi gasped, with her whole body beginning to hollow out, leaving what remained to shake.

Trying to stay detached, the doctor took a long deep breath, and he afterward said, “All I can tell you is that there’s no cure. We don’t even know what causes it. All we can do is treat the symptoms.”

"He's gonna die," she mumbled, in a voice not her own, while desperately attempting to conjure up the image of the waterfall in her mind.

"Rudi," Dr. Klein uttered, wanting to change the subject, "we need to run some tests. On your immune system."

"Me?"

"You and any other sexual partners Tommy's had in the past month. We believe that's the primary way the disease spreads—through sex, and the transference of bodily fluids."

Barely listening, Rudi just shook her head, and kept shaking it.

"You could be very sick, Rudi," the doctor insisted.

"No," she muttered, 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 screamed, before turning to Pam—and, while feeling herself coming apart at the seams, she added, "He . . . he just kissed me, and told me he loved me."

Soon, Rudi was fully apart, and she started crying—and she hugged her foster mother, who was on the verge of tears herself. Then, while sobbing on the woman's shoulder, Rudi howled, "It's not fair! Not fucking fair! He just told me he loved me!"

"We still should test you, Rudi," the doctor insisted.

"We didn't have sex!" Rudi hollered. "How many times do I have to fucking tell you? I, I've never had sex. I've never had sex with anyone."

"Please," the doctor subsequently said to Stephen and

Pam—again trying to change the subject—“do either of you know Tommy’s mother?”

“I know her a little,” Stephen replied, with his face well beyond bleached.

“It’s very strange,” the doctor told 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,” uttered Stephen.

“They’re fighting!” Rudi shrieked, while continuing to cry on Pam’s shoulder. “Tommy and his mom. And his uncle, too. They’re all fighting—because of me! This is all my fault!”

“That’s not true,” Pam told her, with tears starting to come out of her eyes as well.

“It is!” Rudi told her back. “None of this would have happened if I never showed up here—if he never loved me!”

“Perhaps,” the doctor murmured to Stephen, “perhaps you could talk to her—his mother.”

“I could try,” Stephen replied, “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 demanded.

“When what?” said the doctor.

“When is he gonna die?”

“I can’t tell you that, Rudi. I can’t because I just 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 interrupted.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Stephen told her emphatically, before 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 asked the doctor. "That's the only way you can get it?"

"Anecdotal evidence suggests the disease cannot be communicated through casual contact," answered Dr. Klein.

"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 howled, after removing her teary face from Pam's shoulder. "I'm gonna see him now."

"First," the doctor told her, "first I must take some blood from you."

Chapter Forty-Nine

TOMMY, WHOSE FACE still showed many signs of the beating he received, glanced up at the woman taking his temperature.

She was wearing rubber gloves and had a surgical mask across her face, and she looked down at him as if he were a monster—something subhuman—something out to kill her.

Quickly, she yanked the thermometer from Tommy's mouth and rushed out of the room while reading the device.

Tommy knew he should've been angered by her behavior. But he wasn't. He wasn't because he hated himself much more than she did. And, while trying to forget this, he looked up at the ceiling. However, when he noticed how it strangely acted like a mirror, he glared at it—with his anger rising higher and higher, until finally his hot sweating face was bright red.

You have AIDS, Tommy.

He could hear the doctor's voice echoing inside his head, repeating these words over and over—words he at first didn't even understand. Soon, the words began to overlap, creating a cacophony of horror rattling within his head—a cacophony that only grew and grew.

You're gonna die, Tommy.

These were the next set of words to bounce around his mind—words that weren't the doctor's but his own—words he spoke to himself the moment the doctor left his room.

Everything was over, he knew. His life, his feelings—

his tomorrow. All that was left was the countdown.

Ten, nine, eight . . .

Suddenly, Tommy realized the countdown had already begun—he just didn’t know the exact units of measurement. And, just as suddenly, Rudi came to his door.

As she did, she wiped away her tears—tears that had mixed with her makeup—giving her a nightmarish look. Which was something he really didn’t want to see. Actually, he didn’t want to see her at all, and wanted her to see him even less.

Still, she looked at him, and she saw his pain and anger and hopelessness—and the frightened part of her wanted to run from it. But her legs just wouldn’t move.

“Tommy,” she instead muttered.

As fast as he could, he spun his head as far away from her as possible—toward a window leading out into the emptiness of the night, where he saw that everything was dead, much like him.

She repeated her muttering.

“What are you doing here?” he growled.

“What do you mean?” she mumbled.

“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.”

“Do you have it?”

“Have it?”

“Are you sick?”

“No,” she replied, before shaking her head. “I don’t think so. They, they just took some blood.”

Slowly, she started toward him.

“Go away,” he brusquely ordered.

But she didn't obey. Moving faster, she came up to him and took hold of his cold hard hand. Though he shook it from her and howled, "Don't touch me! Don't ever touch me again!"

"Tommy . . ." she uttered.

"Go away!" he screamed back. "Are you fucking stupid? I'm infected!"

"Tommy, 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 I watch you live?" she asked, with her voice cracking to the point it was barely audible. "Can I?"

"Just 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, you were always looking for an excuse not to be with me. Well, now you've finally got it. Now you've got the best excuse there is. Now, now you can find someone more your speed—someone who isn't a stupid Reagan fuck!"

This made her angry. It made her so angry that she grabbed hold of his arm and hollered, "Stop it! Stop feeling sorry for yourself!"

"Fuck you!" he hollered back, before spinning around and pushing her onto the floor. After which he added, "You're not the one who's gonna fucking die!"

"Tommy . . ."

"You, you did this to me! You fucking bitch—you did this to me!"

"Tommy!" she cried out, with tears once again pouring out of her. "I'm so sorry."

"Get out! And never come back! I never want to see

your fucking face again!”

“Tommy!” she again cried out, while shaking all over. And she kept crying this until two nurses—who were both wearing gloves and masks—grabbed her by the arms and dragged her out of the room and down the hallway.

“Tommy!” she continued screaming—right before adding, “I love you!”

Tommy responded to this by covering his ears and shaking his head—desperately trying to get those three words out of it. But they just wouldn’t leave.

Chapter Fifty

RUDI WAS SO upset after leaving Tommy's room that Pam had to sit with her in the back seat of the car when the three of them drove home, and she practically had to hold her down.

"I'm coming back tomorrow!" Rudi howled, while trying to forget all the things Tommy had said to her. "And the day after that! I don't care how—"

"—No," Stephen interrupted, with fear covering his face—the most that had been there since that morning eleven years earlier.

"What?" Rudi uttered.

"You're not seeing him again ever—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 it were that easy to catch the disease, half the fucking world would have it already!"

"Maybe they do! Somewhere I heard, 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 fucking matter if I see him?"

"You're not seeing him!"

Rudi didn't reply, but not because she had any intention of abiding by it.

WHEN THE THREE got home, Stephen dropped Pam

and Rudi off and sped down the road. Rudi then rushed inside the house and called her best friend, and told her everything—thinking she, of all people, would understand. But Maria was so shocked that she couldn't say anything.

"Are you there?" Rudi hollered.

"I, I can't believe it," Maria muttered. "Do you have it, too?"

"No. They're testing me, but I'm fine."

"How can you be sure?" Maria screamed.

"I know!" Rudi screamed back. "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!"

"Someone on TV was saying, they were saying you can even 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—I'm sorry. How am I gonna tell my dad?"

"You can't tell him," Rudi pleaded—"you can't tell anyone about this. Especially your dad."

"But if I'm sick—"

"—You're not fucking sick! Listen, you gotta promise me you'll keep quiet."

Maria eventually did promise, but it wasn't too convincing—and, after hanging up, Rudi's head started to spin in fright. She also began thinking she was like some character in a bad *Twilight Zone* episode—like she was the last sane person on earth. Soon, she collapsed against the

wall, and then onto the floor, while feeling alone—worse than she had ever felt before. And if there had been any way to numb this feeling right then she certainly would've taken it. But there wasn't. There wasn't anything. Though when she glanced up at the phone, she had an idea. It wasn't a particularly hopeful one, but it was the only one she had. So, after grabbing the device, she called her stepfather and told him everything—not expecting much back. And for a while he didn't say a thing. There was only silence.

“Do you love him?” he finally asked.

“Yeah,” she softly replied. “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 cried out into the phone.

“For what?” he asked.

“What am I not thankful for?”

Chapter Fifty-One

THE FOLLOWING MORNING Rudi cut school and took a bus in the direction of Livingston, which left her off at Old Short Hills Road—within walking distance of the hospital.

Then, once inside the building—as she slowly headed toward Tommy’s room—she told herself that she didn’t care what he said to her—she wasn’t going to leave him this time. Nor would she allow anyone to drag her away again. Moreover, she told herself, if she had to, she would wait outside his door all day long, just as he had done for her.

Though when she got to his room, it was empty. So, she looked around the corridor and spotted one of the nurses she knew from when she was a patient—and she rushed toward the woman.

Recognizing Rudi and recalling the person she had been kissing, the nurse stopped in horror, as if Rudi were some kind of goblin. And afterward she ran off in the opposite direction.

But Rudi easily caught up with her, and uttered, “Where’s Tommy?”

“Just leave me alone!” the nurse uttered back.

Instead Rudi grabbed the woman, who screamed, “Don’t touch me!”

Rudi responded to this by flinging the woman into a nearby wall, and she hollered, “Where the fuck is he?”

“He checked out this morning,” the woman replied, with her hands held up in front of her face. “Thank God.”

“Where did he go?”

“As long as it’s not here, I don’t care.”

A TAXI PULLED up to the curb and stopped in front of a modest home.

At least, modest for Short Hills.

Tommy afterward paid the driver and exited the vehicle, and headed toward the single-story stucco house. And, as he did, he had a strange thought: “Is this what it feels like to die?”

He didn’t feel much different than before—a little sluggish—a little cold—a little lightheaded, and he wondered if this would be how he’d feel when the moment finally came—or whether he’d feel worse—much worse. He also wondered if this were the best he’d ever feel again—and he only stopped wondering when he reached his uncle’s house, where taped to the front door was an envelope with his name written on it.

Hesitantly, he took down the flimsy white pouch and opened it, and read the letter inside—one informing him that his backpack and motorcycle were inside the garage. The letter further requested that he drop the house keys in there and not touch anything else.

Tommy smirked at this, prior to dropping both the letter and the envelope onto the lawn and walking over to the unlocked garage door—and, after opening it, he put on the backpack and climbed onto his motorcycle.

He then started driving, with no actual place to go.

AS SOON AS the bus stopped at the intersection of Wyoming, Rudi jumped off, and she walked back up South Orange Avenue—toward Tommy’s old house—the address of which she had looked up in a phone directory at

the hospital. And, after getting directions at Grunings—a diner abutting the reservation—Rudi was in front of the house—one she never expected to see again.

Nervously, she rang the doorbell—and Elizabeth opened the door, and, while averting her eyes from Rudi slightly, the woman said, “What can I do for you?”

“I guess Tommy’s not here,” Rudi said back.

The woman shook her head.

“Does Mrs. Goodwin know?” Rudi asked. “Does she know that he’s sick—that he, that he’s . . .”

Elizabeth nodded, and afterward added, “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 went on.

“He’s got an uncle nearby.”

“I don’t think he’s there.”

“Well, I don’t know what else I can tell you.”

“Could you do me a favor and let me know if you hear anything about him?”

“I’m sorry, but Mrs. Goodwin—”

“—Please. Tommy’s all alone. And I love him.”

Elizabeth thought it over for a few moments, with an expression that indicated she was trying to control her emotions. Then, after glancing inside the house, she whispered, “Give me your number. Quickly.”

WITHOUT EVEN REALIZING it, Tommy found himself on Route 22 heading east, and before long there it was: the motel where it all happened.

Strangely, Tommy found himself pulled toward it, as if it were a magnet—and this magnet was strong enough to pull him all the way inside the parking lot, where he instantly noticed the door of Deke’s room—a door that

still hadn't been completely repaired. Tommy also realized that the place was as good as any, especially as there was a large liquor store right next to it.

FROM TOMMY'S HOUSE it was a short walk to the waterfall.

So, Rudi headed toward it, hoping Tommy might've been there—and, even though he wasn't, she stayed. She stayed and sat on a rock, and stared into the roaring white water below, hoping it would help her forget.

But it didn't. It might've even made things worse—as it made her remember the wonderful afternoon she spent there—the afternoon in which she learned she no longer belonged to herself.

Still, she kept staring—she kept hoping to forget. She hoped all afternoon, despite it being a bitterly cold day. And she continued doing this until well after the sun fell, with her arms wrapped around herself—arms that were but a cruel substitute for someone else's.

Chapter Fifty-Two

THE FOLLOWING DAY Rudi returned to school, and, as she walked through the front passageway toward her locker, she noticed everyone was acting strange toward her.

They were avoiding her.

Actually, they seemed frightened of her—even more so than they had been when she first came to the school. This fright became even more apparent at the beginning of English class when no one sat near her at the back table. But she tried not to pay attention to this. Which was easy, as her mind was far elsewhere. It was back at the falls.

It was still there a little later on when—about midway through the class—Mr. Krasner began droning on about the evils of the passive voice. So, Rudi didn't see that someone was watching her from across the hallway—a particular someone with a bruised face and a disheveled appearance.

Tommy right then tried to feel hate for Rudi, but the only hate he could muster was directed at himself—and when he remembered all the things he said to her in the hospital, this hate got so intense that he couldn't even look at her anymore. Instead he walked off and hid in a bathroom stall, while drinking vodka from a silver flask.

Then, about lunch time, he finally left his hideout and instinctively stammered toward the cafeteria—and, when he got to the doors, he saw Rudi sitting at the back table by herself, picking at her food—looking even sadder than she had in English class. She was actually looking

sadder than he had ever seen her look before, and this was because she now knew the likely reason everyone was acting so strange: Maria had broken her promise.

She came to this conclusion because not only were Maria and Samantha not eating with her but were sitting as far from her as possible—and they wouldn't even look in her direction. The geeks, too, weren't sitting anywhere near her. Nor was Owen. What's more, all the tables surrounding Rudi were empty. And, if she had any doubts that Maria had told people about Tommy's disease, they were answered when Tommy tipsily entered the lunchroom.

Instantly, students fled from him left and right, which, just as instantly, caused him to come to a quick stop. He also turned his head—toward the table where all the football players sat with the beautiful girls, and he saw that all his so-called friends were looking away from him—and so was Darlene. Though he tried to pretend this didn't matter—that it didn't matter he was alone. He even tried to convince himself that he had expected it. He tried and tried and tried. But when this failed, he shrieked. He shrieked as loud as he could, and he rushed toward the closest table.

Everyone there ran off, and he knocked the table over, sending all the trays to the floor. Then, he knocked the next table over and the one after that, with people frantically trying to get away from him.

"Tommy!" suddenly came a voice from the back of the room.

With lots of reluctance, he looked in the direction of the sound, and saw Rudi rising from her seat, with a hopeful expression on her face. But he didn't want to see this. He wanted nothing to do with it. So, he spun around and rushed out of the lunchroom.

At the same time, Rudi jumped to her feet and ran after him, while screaming out his name—something Owen watched with great wonder from a table by the doors.

RUDI ONCE AGAIN screamed Tommy's name when he ran outside the school into the lightly falling snow, toward his bike in the parking lot.

Not long afterward, Rudi burst through the front doors herself, and, from just outside them, she saw Tommy take off down Parker Avenue, right past the school. And she called out his name one last time.

TOMMY DIDN'T STOP, or even slow down, until he reached the end of the avenue and found himself in Irvington.

Right then, he realized he was only a short distance from Vintage Vinyl. So, he continued on to Springfield Avenue and parked, and, while finishing the rest of his vodka, he headed toward the small record shop—the one that always had twice as many good records as any store twice its size.

As soon as he entered, Butch looked at him—and at his appearance in shock.

"You all right, Tommy?" the man asked.

Tommy shrugged.

"Hey, we just got in a new Yardbirds record," Butch went on. "An old one, I mean."

Tommy nodded and walked over toward the Y's. But, as he did, he noticed something in the B's. He noticed a section dedicated to Black Flag. He didn't know the band at all, but he remembered Rudi wearing a T-shirt with their name on it the day they met, so he decided to check them out. And, after scanning through a few EPs, he

came upon a full-length album entitled *Damaged*—the cover of which depicted Henry Rollins with his head shaved and his bloody fist through a mirror.

Tommy stared at this image awhile, as it not only connected to how he was thinking at the moment, but also to how he had been thinking well before everything went black. Eventually, he took out the record and showed it to Butch—and asked, “This any good?”

“It’s the best,” Butch muttered, still not acclimated to Tommy’s face—not to mention his hair and clothes. “But, but it ain’t the Yardbirds.”

Tommy responded by bringing the album up to the counter—and Butch again asked him if he were all right.

Tommy didn’t exactly reply. He just took out some money and said, “You think you could make me a tape of this?”

Chapter Fifty-Three

AS SOON AS Tommy returned to his new home he bought a fresh bottle of vodka at the liquor store and went to his room—and, after finding his Walkman in the bottom of his backpack, he listened to *Damaged* on his bed while continuing to numb himself up.

Tommy never much liked punk rock before—and never understood it, either. He never understood the crude sounds and nearly unintelligible lyrics—and what he considered mindless hate and violence. But during the afternoon and the night that followed he finally got it. This was because the music from this album was speaking to him—and speaking to him on a level he never experienced before. And the message it was speaking was personal—horrifically so. It was almost as if Henry Rollins had climbed inside his head and was screaming at him—and only at him—screaming everything Tommy was thinking and feeling but somehow couldn't express.

Though Tommy's fascination with the music didn't stop with this, as while the record was full of anger and rage and self-hatred, most of the songs were underlined by something strange and unexpected: a mad desperation for hope. It wasn't just "life sucks," but "life sucks and I wanna do something about it!" And Tommy found this inspiring, even if he didn't realize this was what he was feeling. He only knew he felt something—and felt it hard.

One song, in particular, really got to him—a song called "Room 13." It was about someone in pain—

someone though who refused to give into it—who refused to stop screaming about it. And when Rollins screamed “Keep me alive!” over and over in Tommy’s head, Tommy screamed along with him, while shaking his fists with tears in his eyes.

A little after this, when the tape finally ended, Tommy listened to the whole thing again—and again after that. And by the fourth time all the darkness around him had ceased. There was only the music—and the mad desperation to hope. And, as the days went on, this desperation was the only thing keeping him going, as whenever he wasn’t listening to the music, there was only one thought in his head: suicide. It was the first thing he thought about when he woke and the last thing he thought about when he passed out. What’s more, it seemed not only easy but rational, too.

Why let the disease win? he asked himself. Why give it the satisfaction? Why not choose when and how?

Besides, he told himself, no one would care. Not really. Many would probably even be happy and relieved he was gone, just like the hospital staff was when he left.

However, the music would never allow him to completely sink into his self-pity. It always gave him just enough motivation to continue on—at least until the next day, when the darkness would return anew.

Chapter Fifty-Four

RIGHT AFTER STEPHEN got Rudi's healthy medical report he showed it to Mr. Gonzalez, even though the principal hadn't requested it. Nor had the man heeded the calls from all the "concerned parents" who felt Rudi should've been removed from the school as a precaution.

But this report didn't stop the rumors—nor did it stop the students from treating Rudi as a leper. Though she tried to pretend it didn't matter. She even tried to pretend it didn't matter that her so-called friends had abandoned her when she needed them, or that she was once again alone. But one person saw through all this pretending: Owen. He well knew what it was like to be a pariah, and he knew she had to dislike it as much as he had. He also knew she was hurting. He saw it on her face.

So, one afternoon he went to the local library and asked a librarian in the Reference section to help him get everything they had on this new disease.

"Why?" the woman asked suspiciously.

"Ah, it's for a friend," he replied, which was strangely the truth.

"Your friend has this disease?" she then inquired, now not just suspicious but a little frightened, too.

"No, she, she needs it for a friend."

"Ah-ha," the woman uttered—of course not believing a word.

But she got him the materials anyway—while careful to prevent any part of her body from touching his. Then—even though reading was never Owen's forte—he spent all afternoon in the library doing just that.

THE FOLLOWING DAY Owen entered the cafeteria at lunch, and he saw Rudi once again sitting by herself in the back, picking at her food with her head down. And, after he got his own meal, he walked right up to her table.

Which is when everything got real quiet.

Slowly, he turned around and saw lots of people staring at him in the near distance, and he said to them: "You know, you people think I'm dumb, but you're a whole lot dumber than me." He then sat across from Rudi, and he smiled warmly at her—and she smiled back just as warmly, prior to mouthing, "Thank you."

He responded to this by reaching out his big hand to her, and she clutched his fingers.

"This is the good karma, right?" he asked.

"The best," she told him.

Now both of them were lepers. But they were lepers together so it didn't matter so much, and the two quickly became close. They even hung out together after school—at which time she often helped him with his homework. In turn, he taught her how to ride a motorcycle—and he even showed her how to do some car repair, one of the few things in life he did really well. And it wasn't long before her old self sort of returned, especially during lunch when the two would loudly laugh while telling each other off-color jokes and raunchy stories.

Soon, Owen began thinking Rudi was the perfect girl, as she was not only pretty and fun to be with, but—unlike almost everyone else—had no fear of him whatsoever—quite the contrary. More importantly, she cared about him and respected him. But he also knew he had no chance with her, so he tried to hide his feelings. Though this got more and more difficult with each passing day, and she quickly saw right through him—and one

afternoon while they were uncomfortably studying together in her living room she said, "You know, if it wasn't for Tommy . . ."

"Yeah?" he said, a bit hopefully.

"Yeah," she replied, before giving him a little punch on the shoulder. "You're my only friend," she added. "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 told him. "A lot more."

"No one thought I deserved anything until I met you," he told her back, prior to picking up his things and standing up.

"Where you going?" she asked.

"I better go," he replied, while avoiding her eyes.

"Why?"

"You know."

"So, that's it," she said, before lowering her own eyes.

"Hey, lift up that chin," he told her.

"So you can punch it?" she told him back.

"I'll see you at lunch tomorrow," he stated, with a big smile.

Slowly, she looked up at this smile and smiled back, before saying, "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

OWEN KEPT HIS word.

When she got to the cafeteria the next day there he was, sitting at the back table waiting for her—and he

wasn't alone. The three geeks were there, too—with expressions mixed with both guilt and shame. But Rudi made it easy for them, by acting as if nothing had happened.

Watching this from across the hall was Maria, who couldn't believe Rudi could be that forgiving—and she soon got out of her seat.

“Where you going?” Samantha asked.

“Where I should have been all along,” Maria replied, before taking a small step toward Rudi.

“Are you out of your mind?” Samantha quietly howled.

“I was. But not anymore.”

“You go anywhere near her and we're through.”

This caused Maria to pause. She paused because she had been waiting a long time for someone like Samantha, and knew someone like her might not come along for a long time to come, if ever.

Could she really walk away from that? she asked herself.

But walk Maria did, and she didn't stop walking until she was right beside Rudi. After which she mumbled, “I'm sorry.”

Hesitantly, Rudi turned her head, and she looked up at her former friend, and she knew right away she couldn't so easily forgive her. She felt betrayed by Maria in so many ways, and she almost told the girl off. But then she saw something. She saw Samantha glaring at Maria from the cafeteria doors. She also saw the red-headed girl storm out, and she realized that Maria had given up a lot in order to make amends. She had given this up without even knowing she'd be forgiven. She had risked something for her—something important, and Rudi couldn't help open her arms.

At once, Maria fell upon Rudi, and she hugged her—and, while weeping a bit, she murmured, “You were the best friend I ever had.”

“Sshhh,” Rudi murmured back. “I still am.”

Chapter Fifty-Five

A DOOR SLOWLY creaked open, and a figure vaguely resembling Tommy slithered out of the motel room—a room awash in empty liquor bottles and stray fast-food wrappers. This figure, though, was without wavy brown hair, as Tommy had shaved it all off to match the look of Henry Rollins. He also looked both emaciated and bloated at the very same time.

In this state, he lit a cigarette and checked the half-empty vodka bottle inside his football jacket before walking outside amidst a hail of whitish flurries. Then—while ignoring his hacking cough and running nose—he stumbled through the thick and oddly colored wet slush in the parking lot, and headed toward his motorcycle, where he suddenly saw the holiday decorations everywhere. He also saw how all the stores were closed even though it was the middle of the morning, and he realized it was Christmas.

Even though Tommy's family was Jewish, they celebrated Christmas. They always had a big tree and lots of presents, and his mother would always listen to carols. It was actually her favorite holiday. She liked the spirit of it—a spirit that was missing in a childhood bleaker than most could imagine.

Tommy liked the holiday, too. But right then he couldn't get excited about it. He couldn't get excited about anything. He just took out his headphones from his outer jacket pocket—and, after putting them on, he started playing Black Flag's "Gimmie Gimmie Gimmie" on the Walkman as he gunned the bike. Which was just

before he sped out onto Route 22.

Abruptly, the snow started falling harder. But Tommy didn't notice. He didn't even notice the traffic he was swerving in and out of. All he noticed was the music churning inside his head—music he was singing along with.

RUDI SPENT MOST of Christmas morning under the covers of her bed moping.

Then—out of nowhere—she had this crazy desire to hear a song. Not one she usually listened to, but a much different one—the one she and Tommy often heard when they kissed.

Unfortunately, she couldn't remember the music enough to even hum the refrain, and this made her angry—especially at herself, as it was like not remembering Tommy's name. But she didn't give up trying, and she almost had it when Pam muttered from the doorway, "Hey."

"Hey," Rudi muttered back, with a bit of exasperation, before lifting her head above the sheets.

"Aren't you gonna go down to see what Santa left you?" asked Pam.

"He didn't bring me what I want," answered Rudi.

"Don't be so sure."

"I am."

"Is, is there anything I could do?"

Rudi shook her head, and so Pam started to leave. But just then Rudi uttered, "Wait."

"What?" Pam uttered back.

"Do you know music? I mean, old music."

"How old?"

"I don't know . . . Glenn Miller?"

"That's pretty old," Pam said with a smile. "Before I

was born really. Why?”

“I’m trying to find this song,” answered Rudi. “I think it’s called ‘Moonlight Serenade.’”

“Oh, I know it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Pam replied. “But it doesn’t seem like your style.”

“Actually, it is,” Rudi replied back.

“You know, 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.”

TOMMY SPED THROUGH downtown South Orange and approached the light at Ridgewood Road, which was bright red.

But he didn’t slow at all, even though the snow was now coming down heavily and visibility was limited—and he drove right into traffic, seemingly daring the cars to hit him. And one almost did, right before coming to a sharp stop inches away. Which was just before the car behind it rear-ended it. At the same time, a car coming in the opposite direction had to swerve out of Tommy’s way on the slippery road, causing it to fishtail and hit a nearby vehicle. Tommy, though, was oblivious to this. He just continued up South Orange Avenue—and eventually he turned left onto Crest Drive, by the beginnings of the reservation. And, after parking in front of the narrow makeshift path, he started off into the snow-covered woods.

As he did, he took out his half-empty bottle of vodka—one that soon became even emptier.

THE RECORD COLLECTION in the basement was immense, and seemingly without order.

So, it took Rudi and Pam a long time to comb through it—and while they did manage to find a record by Glenn Miller, there was no “Moonlight Serenade” on it.

“Sorry, guy,” Pam said afterward.

“It’s okay,” Rudi replied. “Santa has always disappointed me. Why should he change now?”

Glumly, Pam put her arm around Rudi and the two headed toward the stairs, with Pam telling her: “I bet Sam Goody has it. We could go there tomorrow.”

“All right,” Rudi said back, without much enthusiasm.

“Is someone down there?” suddenly came Stephen’s voice from the top of the staircase.

“Just us,” Pam replied, as the two women reached the bottom of the stairs.

“What are you guys doing?” Stephen asked.

“We were looking for a record,” answered Pam.

“A record?”

““Moonlight Serenade.””

““Moonlight Serenade”? Why would you be looking for that?”

“Rudi wants it.”

“Rudi? Our Rudi?”

“Yes, our Rudi.”

“Well, I’ve got a copy of it in the den.”

“You do?” Pam uttered, with some surprise.

“Sure. I love that song.”

A DRUNKEN TOMMY sat in the snow, while staring at the roaring white water below with the near-empty vodka bottle in his hand. And, like when his father was dying, he tried to forget his problems.

But neither the water nor the liquor could help him

do this. If anything, he just remembered more—and this made him mad—so mad that he quickly finished what was left in the bottle and tossed the container below, where it smashed against the rocks. Then, for some reason his eyes gazed upward, toward the sky. Actually, toward Heaven.

Tommy had never been particularly religious. He believed in God and went to synagogue when he was supposed to, but he never really gave it much thought. That is, until this moment, and at this moment a rage built on his red hot face, and it kept building and building.

Finally, it exploded—and he howled, “Fuck you! You hear me, you fucking bastard? Fuck you!”

Just then, Tommy realized he was sweating even though it was near freezing. He also felt lightheaded and short of breath.

“I just need to rest a bit,” he told himself—“just a bit.”

So, he laid his body onto the snow. But what came was anything but rest.

PAM PUT THE needle on the phonograph, and a scratchy rendition of “Moonlight Serenade” began to play.

Instantly, Rudi could feel herself returning to that dusty dance hall, and she could feel Tommy’s arms desperately clinging to her. And she wrapped her own arms around herself in imitation.

She did so just as Pam turned around and joined her on the couch, while watching her become more and more emotional as she listened to that gentle but steady trombone. Though Pam tried not to see this, and she whispered, “You must’ve been a good girl this year.”

“What?” Rudi whispered back, not really listening to

her.

“Santa granted you your wish.”

Rudi responded to this with a mild smile, and afterward she rested her head on Pam’s shoulder, before getting even more emotional.

“What’s wrong, honey?” Pam asked.

“This is our song,” answered Rudi, with her smile no longer mild.

“You and Tommy’s?”

“Yeah, we made it together.”

“Oh, baby.”

AN AMBULANCE HURRIEDLY backed up into the road, before speeding into the intersection of South Orange Avenue—exposing both the Harley Sturgis parked behind it and the small group of hikers who had called it from the pay phone outside Grunnings.

Right then, inside the big white vehicle a couple of paramedics—already angered enough about having to work on Christmas—furiously shook Tommy, trying to get him under control. But Tommy, who was only half-conscious and whose football jacket was covered in his own vomit, still was able to sway to the music—music that was playing only inside his head.

“Keep me alive!” he suddenly screamed, while flailing his clenched fists. “Keep me aliiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiive!”

Chapter Fifty-Six

EARLY THE FOLLOWING morning Stephen shook Rudi in her sleep, and when this accomplished nothing, he shook her again—only harder.

Finally, she awoke. Then, after glancing at her foster father in confusion, she looked out the window and saw that it was dark outside—and that a blizzard was roaring. And she uttered, “What?”

“You have a phone call,” Stephen uttered back. “Somebody who obviously doesn’t own a watch. Or a calendar.”

“What time is it?”

“5:30.”

“Who . . . who is it on the phone?”

“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 mumbled, suddenly remembering who the woman was. “I’ll get it.”

She then jumped out of bed in her underwear and ran out of the room—and afterward she rushed down the stairs and into the kitchen, where she quickly grabbed the telephone receiver and cried out into it, “Hello?”

“Is this Rudi?” whispered Elizabeth.

“Yeah,” Rudi replied. “You, you’ve found him?”

There was no answer.

“Is something wrong?” Rudi went on, with rising anxiety.

“I just got in,” the woman told her, again in a whisper.

“And there was a whole bunch of messages on the answering machine. From the hospital.”

“The hospital?”

“They . . . they don’t think Tommy’s gonna make it.”

Instantly, the receiver dropped to the floor, and Rudi ran out of the kitchen—even faster than she had run into it. She also ran up the stairs much faster than she had run down them. Though in the upstairs hallway she came to a quick stop when she saw her foster parents standing there in their matching robes. She further saw that Stephen’s arms were crossed and that he had an angry expression on his face.

“Who was that?” he growled.

“Just a friend,” she muttered.

“It was about Tommy, wasn’t it?”

“What?”

“I was listening!”

“Then why are you fucking asking me?”

Not waiting for a reply, Rudi stormed toward her door. But Stephen jumped in front of her and said, “Where do you think you’re going?”

She didn’t answer. She just pushed him out of the way and entered her bedroom, where she quickly dressed before grabbing her sea bag.

“You’re not going anywhere!” Stephen yelled, prior to noticing that the two boys were peeking their heads out of their room—and he hollered at them: “Get back inside!”

Quickly, they complied, and Stephen turned around and saw Rudi heading down the hallway—and he rushed up to her and grabbed her by the arms while screaming, “You’re not going anywhere!”

“Oh, yes I am!” she replied, before easily flipping the

muscular ex-Marine over her shoulder and onto the carpeted floor. Which was just before she rushed to the stairs and started down them.

"You go see him," Stephen called out from his knees, "and you're never coming back into this house again!"

Rudi didn't reply. She just kept flying down the stairs, and afterward she flew just as quickly through the hallway before grabbing her overcoat from the rack. After which she burst out of the house and into the stormy weather.

It was still quite dark out, but even if it hadn't been she still wouldn't have been able to see more than a short distance in front of her with all the falling snow. What's more, there was at least a foot of the heavy whiteness on the ground. Fortunately, the streets had recently been plowed, so she didn't have too much trouble marching down Lewis or Wyoming, apart from becoming caked in white and ice, and a numbing cold. All of which she ignored—knowing Tommy had faced far worse when he broke into the motel room after her. She just focused her mind on one thing—on getting to the bus stop.

However, once there she wasn't certain whether the buses were running, or how often they were running. So, she decided to walk the handful of miles through the forest—up the steep and slick hill.

It was slow going, even with all her determination, but she steadily moved upward—with the snow blasting down onto her face, and by the time she finally got to Old Short Hills Road she knew she had made the right choice in walking as she hadn't seen a single bus in either direction during the whole trip. There hadn't actually been many vehicles around at all, which wasn't too surprising as it was a quasi holiday. Nor were there many vehicles at the hospital, where she soon arrived with her

hands and feet and face frozen solid, and her hair and clothes resembling something closer to icicles. But none of this mattered to her. All that mattered was what she was going to say to Tommy, especially as she knew she might not get another chance. And, as she walked down the corridor toward his room, she carefully thought about this over and over in her head.

“Rudi,” a deep male voice suddenly called out from behind her.

With just a bit of hesitation, she stopped and turned around, and saw Dr. Klein heading toward her.

“How is he?” she asked.

“Not good,” he told her once he had come 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 nodded.

“Well,” the doctor went on, “you’re the only one I see who can give it to him.”

Again she nodded, and continued on—and eventually came to Tommy’s door, where she could hear him struggling to breathe. Then, she saw him—sleeping unpeacefully in a bed, with a breathing tube through his nose. But even with that—even with his shaved head and his bloated and emaciated appearance—to her he was exactly the same. He was exactly the same boy she fell in love with. Nothing could camouflage this, and so she smiled.

But then she remembered what the doctor told her, and she put on her apathy face and marched right up to Tommy—and, after dropping her bag, she took hold of

his hand. And though it was cold and lifeless, it felt just as good as the first time she held it, and she couldn't help moan just a little. Which was something that woke him.

Afterward, he looked up—at the soaking angel in white hovering over him, and—forgetting everything that had happened to him—he sweetly uttered her name. However, he quickly remembered. He remembered everything. He also turned from her—and squirmed his hand away while growling, “I told you to leave me alone.”

But she just grabbed his hand again—this time angrily, and while he tried once more to squirm it away from her, this time she held on—and told him: “You can't push me away anymore. I'm stronger.”

“Please go,” he mumbled. “Please.”

“Not until you look at me,” she insisted.

At first, he didn't react, but it wasn't long before he realized she meant it. He realized she wasn't going to let him go until he obeyed. So, he turned to her, and looked up into her ferocious brown eyes—eyes that seemed to be glowing with fury.

“There are gonna be some changes around here, dickweed,” she barked, while desperately trying to control her emotions. “From now on you're gonna take care of yourself. And you're gonna do what that doctor tells you!”

Suddenly, all her ferociousness escaped her, and all that remained was the frightened little girl, who—with a breaking voice—cried out, “And, and you're gonna fucking love me!”

Then, with her whole body falling apart, she collapsed onto him—and she clutched his gown while howling, “Because I fucking love you!” She further started weeping. She wept and mumbled, “God, how I love you!”

Tommy tried to resist her. He tried with everything left in his rotting body. But he simply couldn't, and knew he no longer belonged to himself, nor would he ever want to again. So, he gently put his cold but no longer lifeless hand on the back of her neck, and he shivered with joy. And she shivered right back, prior to calling out his name.

"I can't live without you," he whispered to her. "It's not a figure of speech or hyperbole, or whatever the correct term is. It's just fact."

Chapter Fifty-Seven

RUDI SAT NEXT to Tommy on his bed, wiping his brow with a cold compress while he peacefully slept.

It was now late in the afternoon and he had improved much in the time she had been there. His fever was down and he was breathing a little easier. But he was still weak and tired, and had been coming in and out of consciousness all day.

Suddenly, Rudi started softly singing to him. She sang him the chorus to "You Light Up My Life." And, just as suddenly, he woke. He even smiled a bit, before muttering, "That's not exactly you."

"Actually, it is," she told him. "There's this legend that Patti Smith sang it on some TV show. And if she can sing it, it just can't be bad."

Rudi's last word made Tommy think of something, and his smile began to fade.

"What's wrong?" Rudi asked.

"I said some terrible things to you," he replied.

"What are you talking about?" she replied back.

"The last time I was here."

"Forget about it—I said much worse things to myself."

"I can't forget about it. I promised you once that 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 from now on, okay?"

"What future, Rudi?" he uttered fatalistically.

"Ours. All you gotta do is believe. Can you do that for me?"

He nodded, though not entirely convincingly, and he soon drifted back asleep.

At the same time, a nurse entered the room carrying a tray of medicine—and, like most others who visited Tommy that day, the woman was wearing a mask and gloves—something Rudi sneered at.

“What,” she then quietly snarled, “were there no decontamination suits available?”

“It’s all right, Rudi,” Tommy mumbled after waking once again. “I’m used to it.”

“But I’m not,” she told 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. Maybe a lot.”

“Can I please give him his medicine now?” the nurse nervously cried out.

Rudi sighed, and jumped off the bed—just as Pam came to the door holding a Bamberger’s shopping bag.

This more than just surprised Rudi, and she rushed up to her, with a bit of a guilty expression.

“How’s he doing?” Pam whispered, while pointing at Tommy.

“Better,” Rudi replied.

“I’m so sorry about this morning.”

“I’m the one who should be sorry. Is Stephen hurt?”

“Only his pride.”

Pam then offered the shopping bag to Rudi and added, “Here’s the rest of your things. Stephen actually wanted me to throw them away. Actually, he wanted me to burn them. He doesn’t even know I’m here.”

Hesitantly, Rudi took the bag, and she said, “I guess, I guess you’re not gonna want to go near me either.”

But Pam surprised her again, this time by hugging

her—and Rudi hugged her right back, while Pam murmured, “He’s just being stupid.”

“It’s okay,” Rudi told her.

Pam afterward broke their embrace and uttered, “Well, what are you gonna do now?”

“I guess move back in with my stepdad,” Rudi answered.

“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 rushed past them, and Pam said to Rudi: “Well, I better get home.”

“Thanks for coming,” Rudi said back.

“Call me anytime . . . anytime Stephen’s not home.”

“You got it.”

Rudi subsequently returned to Tommy, carrying the shopping bag—which he pointed at, before uttering, “What’s that?”

Rudi sighed.

“*Rudi*,” he pleaded.

“My things,” she told him. “I got thrown out.”

“Because of me,” he growled, before turning away from her slightly and sighing himself.

“Because of *them*,” she insisted.

“Maybe . . . maybe you should just stay away from me for now.”

“You’re always looking for reasons to keep us apart,” she said with a smile. Which caused him to smile back. Though he soon added, “So, what are you gonna do?”

“I gotta call my stepdad,” she replied. “The judge said I could move back there. So . . .”

“You really want to go back there?”

“I don’t have any choice. But what about you?”

“Me?”

"Where have you been staying?" she asked.

"At that motel," he answered. "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 another 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 uttered.

"What do you mean?" she uttered back.

"From the first day we met I've thought of making love to you. And now, now it can never happen."

"That's not true," she told him, having not only had the same thoughts but also having thought about how she could keep these thoughts alive.

"It is true," he insisted.

"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."

She then turned and rushed out.

"Where you going?" he asked.

"To use one of the pay phones downstairs," she answered.

"But I gotta phone!"

But she didn't want him listening, just in case her stepfather wasn't so cool about it anymore. Though she needn't have worried, as Mr. Reese couldn't hold back

his excitement of having her home again.

"You sure you don't mind if Tommy stays?" she asked.

"I don't mind," he answered, though there was 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 told her. "All I've heard is bits on the news. And some guys at work—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*. Thank you for still calling me that."

WHEN RUDI RETURNED to the hospital room she saw a middle-aged man in a suit sitting next to Tommy—a man she had never seen before. He was tall and well-built, and had a kippah on his head—and unlike most of the people who visited Tommy that day, he wasn't wearing a surgical mask. And, even though he was holding Tommy's hand, he wasn't wearing gloves.

"If you need anything, Tommy," the man said, with a soft gentle voice that belied his appearance, "just let me know."

"Thank you," Tommy replied. "You think, you think you could get me a . . ."

Suddenly, Tommy noticed Rudi by the door, and muttered, "Oh, hey."

The middle-aged man responded to this by turning to Rudi, and he smiled at her—in spite of finding her appearance more than strange.

"This is Rabbi Orenstein," Tommy went on, while

pointing at the man—"from my temple."

Rudi smiled a little, and she walked over to the rabbi, who stood in response.

"This," Tommy then said to the rabbi, while pointing at Rudi, "this is my . . ."

"His girlfriend," Rudi said proudly. "I'm his girlfriend—Rudi Weiss."

Rudi and the rabbi then shook hands, with Tommy watching with a little smile of his own.

"It's nice to meet you," the rabbi said to her, in a tone of voice suggesting he meant every word.

MR. REESE SOON came to the hospital and picked Rudi up in front—and he drove her home. And, after they entered the apartment, Rudi sauntered over to her old room, where she quickly became shocked, as it was all cleaned up and now had a dresser—on top of which stood her stereo and a rack with all her records, alongside a neat pile of cassette tapes. What's more, the floor had been carpeted and the bed replaced—by a brand new one with an oak frame.

"You like it?" her stepfather murmured, from right behind her.

Trying to control her emotions, she turned to him and said, "You, you couldn't have just done all this."

"Well," he replied, "I've been kinda, kinda hoping you might come back one day."

"Oh, Daddy!" she mumbled, before giving him a big hug.

"You always have a home here," he mumbled back, while hugging her with everything he had. "Always."

Chapter Fifty-Eight

ONCE TOMMY WAS well enough to leave the hospital Mr. Reese picked him and Rudi up in the evening and they drove off to Irvington.

However, Tommy could tell that the man was uncomfortable about the whole thing. He could tell this from the moment he saw him. Mr. Reese was polite, but it was a cool polite—a just barely tolerant polite. And, not surprisingly, he made no effort to shake Tommy's hand or to come anywhere near him. But Tommy didn't say anything about this—not then or on the ride home—he just held Rudi in the back seat of the car and hoped everything would somehow work out.

AFTER ARRIVING AT the apartment building, Rudi helped Tommy inside the unit while saying, "It isn't exactly Newstead. Or even Short Hills."

"It's all right," he told her back. "And it's certainly a whole lot better than that motel. Thank you." He then thanked Mr. Reese as well—who nodded with a forced smile and added, "Well, should I order some food or something?"

"I think we're just gonna go to bed early tonight," Rudi replied, with just a hint of a smile, which Tommy both noticed and blushed at a bit.

"All right," Mr. Reese replied back, with more than a little unease.

"Tomorrow I'll make a big meal for all of us," Rudi went 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 smiled at this, and Rudi smiled back, before helping Tommy inside her room and closing the door.

Immediately, Tommy saw his backpack against the wall, which Rudi and her stepfather had picked up the day before. He also saw his copy of *Damaged* next to it.

“That kinda surprised me,” she told him, while pointing at the record.

“It’s the best,” he told her back. “And I’m not the only one who thinks that.”

“Your motorcycle’s parked outside,” Rudi continued. “That is, if someone hasn’t stolen it already.”

Tommy chuckled.

“I’d say it’s fifty-fifty,” she added, with a chuckle of her own. “No one even locks their car doors around here, as people would just smash the windows.”

“How’d you get it here?” he asked.

“The bike?” she asked back. “I drove it.”

“You can drive a motorcycle?”

Rudi responded by wrapping her arms around Tommy’s waist and grinning—and telling him: “What do you think?”

“I think I should be well beyond doubting anything about you,” he replied. He then leaned down to kiss her, and, seeing a gift-wrapped package on the bed, he pointed at it and uttered, “What’s that?”

Without even looking, she said, “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.”

Slowly, he walked over to the bed and sat down on it—and, after gently removing the gift wrap so as not to

tear it, he exposed her crumpled drawing of him set inside a plain black frame.

Seeing this made him smirk—and he told her: “You know, I’ve always wanted a picture of Lee Ving.”

She laughed at this, and pushed him back onto the bed—and, after straddling his waist, she caressed his chest and cooed, “So, are you gonna make love to me or what?”

“I don’t know,” he answered, before shaking his head.

“I told you, I’m gonna do the knowing for both of us from now on. And don’t worry, I’ll take it easy on you. For tonight.”

She then leaned down and kissed him, and afterward for many minutes they just held each other and enjoyed each other’s warmth.

“I’m scared,” he eventually murmured.

“Me, too,” she murmured back. “It’s a great feeling, isn’t it?”

Soon, she started undressing him. She unbuttoned his wrinkled button-down blue Oxford shirt and kissed his bare smooth chest—and she caressed her cheeks against his torso. And, once she rose a bit, he carefully pulled off her white T-shirt. Then, they just stared at each other before she reached back to undo her bra, which she did while saying, “I sure hope you weren’t expecting Dolly Parton.”

Unintentionally, he giggled at this—and she giggled right back, just as she let the fabric drop to the bed. Which caused him to smile. He smiled at her beauty—a beauty unlike anything he ever imagined. To him, it was as if Michelangelo had carved her out of ivory. She was perfection, and this just awed him—and put him in an almost hypnotic state. Which he only came out of when she took hold of his hands and placed them on her.

In near unison, they moaned, almost inaudibly—and they closed their eyes while wishing they could live this fragment of time forever.

When it finally did end, Tommy replaced his hands with his cheeks and then his lips—and he kissed her for what seemed like hours. At the same time, his fingers and hands found her back and spine—and they meshed with them as he played his own personal concerto, which sent her drifting into a thoughtless rapture that continued on and on. She was barely conscious at this point, and it was instinct alone that removed the rest of her clothes and his. After which their bodies entangled and entwined—with their arms and legs and mouths in perpetual discovery of each other. They even made their song again, while returning to that dusty dance hall, over and over and over.

By the end of their wondrous night together nothing of them had gone untouched or unkissed or unloved. And, while they may not have been lovers in a very common sense of the word, they were now lovers in all other senses. All the important ones.

“I told you we could make love,” she whispered into his ear early the following morning, with a big contented smile on her face.

“I think I should be well beyond doubting anything about you,” he whispered back, with his smile even bigger than hers.

“It’s gonna be like this every night forever,” she added, “only better.”

She soon fell asleep, while desperately clinging to his body. And to him, to him this was the best part of the whole night—the best part of his whole life—holding her and protecting her and feeling her breathe against him. It felt so good that he never wanted to sleep, and

this was actually the greatest motivation he had to keep on living—so he could keep feeling her body clinging to his.

“I’m never gonna die,” he told himself as the sun began to rise through her window, and he kept telling himself this again and again until he believed it.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

WHEN TOMMY AWOKE early in the afternoon Rudi was gone, and for a moment he thought she was gone for good—and this just horrified him.

Then, he came to his senses a bit, and also heard sounds coming from the living room. And, after dressing himself, he stepped out of the bedroom and saw 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 uttered when he saw Tommy. “Is it too loud for you?”

“No, not at all.”

“Rudi went food shopping. She should be back soon.”

Tommy nodded at this, and Mr. Reese returned his attention to the TV—and Tommy joined him, sitting on a couch a safe distance away, where he immediately felt the cool politeness once again.

“Thanks for letting me stay here,” he eventually said, after being unable to come up with anything better.

“No problem,” Mr. Reese said back.

“If you want, I could help with the rent.”

“That’s okay. It’s not much. I mean, 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 fell silent—and Tommy looked around the room, and he saw a bunch of rock

posters on the wall. And, after noticing one in particular, he asked, "You like Zeppelin?"

"Oh, yeah," Mr. Reese replied. "They're my favorite, actually. Seen them like a dozen times."

"I'm actually a big fan of the Yardbirds."

"Really?" the man said with some surprise. "I just figured you liked the same stuff as Rudi."

"I like a little of it," Tommy replied. "But the Yardbirds—I'm kinda obsessed with them for some strange reason."

"No kidding."

"Yeah, I have like every album and bootleg and single. Once I even bought a 'best of' collection just because it had one song I had never heard."

"I saw them once," Mr. Reese uttered, "you know, back in the sixties."

"No way," Tommy uttered back.

"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 said with a big smile, "when those religious people come up to me and annoy me about Heaven and stuff, I just smile and say, 'Brother, I've already been.'"

Tommy laughed at this, and so did Mr. Reese, who then—while pointing at the TV—said, "You know, if you wanna watch something else, it's okay with me. Or we could just turn it off."

"I actually like football," Tommy told 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 asked.

"Yeah, I do," Tommy answered, 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."

Just then, the front door opened, and Rudi entered carrying a shopping bag—and, when she saw the two smiling, she smiled, too. Hers was even bigger than theirs.

Chapter Sixty

DURING THE NEXT few months—in spite of Rudi's care—Tommy spent nearly as much time in the hospital as in Irvington, and the constant shuffling back and forth was wearing on everyone, especially Rudi.

Noticing this one morning during his regular hospital rounds, Rabbi Orenstein decided to pay Mrs. Goodwin a visit, and the woman—not knowing the reason for the visit—greeted him cordially, and they had tea and cookies in the living room. Then, after some small talk, the rabbi mentioned that he had just seen Tommy at St. Barnabas.

"Oh," Mrs. Goodwin replied, before turning away from the man slightly—and, while feigning disinterest, she added, "How is he?"

"I suppose as good as can be expected."

"Is he, is he still with that . . . that girl?"

"Rudi?"

Mrs. Goodwin nodded.

"Yes," the man answered. "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," uttered Mrs. Goodwin.

"Guilty?" the rabbi uttered back.

"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?”

The rabbi then explained the couple’s situation and asked Mrs. Goodwin if she could possibly rent them an apartment near the hospital.

“There’s a place across the street,” Orenstein told her. “I don’t think it’s too expensive.”

“So, that’s what this is all about,” Mrs. Goodwin remarked, 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 responded to this by thinking about it awhile, and afterward she said, “I’ll make the arrangements. Now, if that’s all, Rabbi, I’m not feeling too well right now.”

“I understand,” the rabbi said back, before rising. After which he started out. But at the entrance to the living room he stopped and turned back to the woman—and he told her: “I know Tommy misses you.”

“He knows where to find me,” she told him back.

“And now you know where to find him, too.”

Chapter Sixty-One

RUDI HAD MIXED feelings about moving to Livingston, especially as she didn't want to leave her stepfather alone. Just as importantly, she didn't want to accept help from Mrs. Goodwin—a woman she disliked for many reasons.

However, there was way too much logic in the move for them to turn it down. Even Mr. Reese saw it, and he told Rudi this while all three discussed it in his living room. He further told her that she'd be stupid not to accept the offer.

"I don't know," she said, while shaking her head.

"Well, if I can be totally frank," he said back, "you guys, you're kinda interfering with my love life."

Rudi chuckled at this.

"Besides," the man added with his own chuckle, "this gives me a place to visit now and then."

"It better be more than just 'now and then,'" she insisted.

"I can certainly see myself stopping there for dinner once a week or so."

"You'll always be welcome," Tommy told 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 then reached out his big paw, and Tommy grabbed it.

Chapter Sixty-Two

THE SUMMER CAME, and Rudi graduated high school—though she didn't go to the ceremony knowing Tommy wouldn't have been welcomed. Nor, of course, did she give any thought to the prom—and only briefly went to Maria's small graduation party.

Unsurprisingly, Rudi didn't feel she sacrificed anything because of all this. But Tommy felt differently. He also felt that he was the only reason she wasn't going to an Ivy-League college. Instead she was to attend Seton Hall in the fall—a university on the edge of Newark a short distance away—and she was only doing that because he insisted. So, Tommy really wanted to do something special for her upcoming 18th birthday. He thought about it often and hard, trying to come up with a present that would really blow her away. But nothing ever came.

Then, one afternoon Mr. Reese had a day off and visited Tommy, who was happy for the company, as he mostly spent his days—whether in his 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 had been getting of late, Mr. Reese took Tommy out to lunch at a diner he liked in Irvington, where the two talked almost exclusively about the approaching football season. And afterward, as they were not far from Vintage Vinyl, they went inside the record shop and Tommy said hello to Butch.

"You're looking much better," Butch told him.

“You’re a liar,” Tommy told him back, with a grin.

“Yeah, maybe,” Butch said, with his own grin.

“Rudi’s having a birthday soon,” Tommy went on.

“Yeah?”

“And I don’t know what to get her.”

“Well, 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 perform live,” Butch replied, without any hesitation.

“They’re good?” Tommy asked.

“They’re good.”

“Are they playing around here?”

“I don’t know. But I think I have the schedule for CBGB somewhere here.”

Butch subsequently started searching under the counter, and he soon found a set of fliers, but Bad Brains weren’t listed on them.

“Anyone else good?” Tommy asked.

“They’re all pretty good,” Butch replied, while looking down at the schedule.

Tommy looked, too, and he was surprised to see a particular performer—someone who would be at the club in a few weeks. Though he kept quiet about it—and didn’t say a word even to Butch, and he planned meticulously. Then, on the day of the performance—after Rudi came home from her job at a local drug counseling center—Tommy led her outside their apartment door.

“What’s going on?” she demanded, with a bit of exasperation, as she was feeling tired.

"You'll see," he told her—and he kept leading her until they were outside the building, where waiting for them was a big white limousine—the kind she might've ridden in if she had gone to her prom.

"What's going on?" she again demanded, though with a lot less exasperation.

But he just opened the back door of the vehicle and said, "There's only one way to find out."

Reluctantly, she complied. But she kept asking him their destination all the way to Lower Manhattan—and he kept refusing to answer. Nor would the driver tell her.

Eventually, they pulled up in front of CBGB, and, after she glanced out the side window, she said to Tommy: "Why are we stopping here?"

He responded with a smile, and pointed to a poster outside the club—one announcing that Richard Hell was performing that night.

With lots of surprise, Rudi turned to Tommy, who wished her an early happy birthday—and, in return, she wouldn't stop hugging and kissing him. Though she finally had to when a police car came behind them and rang its siren. Which was just before the two jumped out of the vehicle and headed toward the famous venue hand-in-hand.

INSIDE THE CLUB Rudi spotted a bunch of her old friends by the bar, who were just amazed to see her—and she rushed over and greeted them.

"You missed fucking Bad Brains!" howled Leila—a short pale girl with blue hair, who seemed just as drunk as she was on the night she called Rudi—the night Rudi found something just a little better to do.

Rudi laughed heartily at Leila's remark, and then—when Tommy came up to them—she introduced him to

her friends, who looked at Tommy much like how Tommy's friends and family had looked at Rudi—like he just didn't belong. But Tommy didn't take offense at this. He even smiled, before telling Rudi he'd be sitting in the stage area.

Not surprisingly, she wanted to come with him. But he wouldn't let her leave her friends.

"I've got to go to the bathroom first anyway," he told her.

She didn't believe him, but she reluctantly let him go. Though she couldn't keep her eyes off him as he left.

"Who is that?" asked Leila, with great exasperation.

"I just told you," Rudi replied. "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 chuckled at this. But Leila wasn't joking.

TOMMY POURED SOME cold water on his face in the graffiti-covered bathroom.

He was burning up, and was terribly lightheaded, too. But he also wasn't going to spoil Rudi's night. So, when he exited the bathroom he put a smile on his face, and he took a seat at a table in the back, where he was soon joined by Rudi, who jumped onto his lap.

"*Rudi*," he uttered.

"What?" she uttered back.

"It's your birthday—hang out with your friends."

"They were never really 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. Even though you don't like the same music or hate the same things. You're my friend in spite of it."

She then leaned down to kiss him, and afterward she felt his head, before shaking her own.

"We gotta go home, Tommy," she immediately told him.

"No," he told her 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 kept fighting him, but eventually she realized he wasn't going anywhere, no matter what she said or did. Still, every five minutes or so, she went to the bathroom to make cold compresses out of paper towels. Though he finally stopped her when the great poet of their generation came on stage. And, later on—when he sang his unmatched paean to the feelings and thoughts that brought two lost souls together—if he had only been looking toward the back of the room he might've seen the two with their bodies intertwined, staring at him as if he were singing the most beautiful love song ever written.

Chapter Sixty-Three

THROUGH HIS BEDROOM window Tommy watched the dead leaves fall from the trees. He watched them all day—too weak to do much else, while getting more and more depressed.

“What’s wrong?” Rudi asked, when she came home that night after a full day of both school and work.

He wouldn’t tell her, not wanting to bring her down any further than she already was—and he continued his staring. He did this even after she helped him out of his chair and into bed. At the same time, she kept pressing for the cause of his gloom—and, after she undressed and joined him in bed, as she wrapped her arms and legs around him he finally told her. He said, “I realized today I would never see the leaves grow again.”

This made Rudi want to cry, but she somehow controlled herself. She controlled herself until he fell asleep. Then, after wiping her eyes, she quietly got out of bed—and just as quietly got dressed. And though she was tired and had two midterms the following day she left their apartment, and drove off on Tommy’s Harley.

EARLY THE NEXT morning Tommy awoke to an empty bed—and to lots of surprise. The surprise came not from Rudi’s absence but from all the plants in front of him. The whole bedroom was covered with large pots filled with young and green and growing life. There was actually only one spot free, and this was occupied when Rudi entered with the last of the plants she bought the night before from a nursery a few towns over.

Right then, she was filthy and exhausted, having spent the entire night hauling the pots to their bedroom one by one, but still she smiled. She smiled at the person who made it all worth it. She also told him: "It's spring, and it will always be spring."

Chapter Sixty-Four

TOMMY'S HARLEY SPED out of the entrance to Seton Hall—an entrance sandwiched by huge drifts of snow.

Rudi then flew down South Orange Avenue on the bike, with her white sea bag across her back and her headphones strapped to her ears—headphones that were blasting Tommy's *Damaged* tape into her head.

The year she spent with Tommy fighting his disease had aged her considerably, especially in her face. It also made her look ceaselessly tired around the eyes. But not much else about her had changed. Her hair was still bleach blonde and still spiky, though now it was a bit longer and not quite so wild looking. Her makeup, too, was much the same. And her clothes still screamed defiance, even if they weren't so tattered anymore. Most importantly, her attitude was still there, and her unconquerable will. Which was on display to the whole town that sunny afternoon as she roared through the village center going well past the speed limit.

Suddenly, though, she slowed down, and parked along the curb. And her attitude and will seem to stay behind with the bike when—after waiting for a few cars to pass—she headed across the street to Reservoir and then inside it, where instantly a couple of the wait staff glowered at her for a few moments before turning away.

Pretending not to notice this, Rudi walked up to the counter and politely asked, "You got a pizza for Weiss?"

"Just a second," a man there growled, without looking at her.

Rudi ignored this rudeness, just like she ignored the rudeness that greeted her whenever she came there—and to lots of other places in town. She ignored it because she wasn't there for herself.

Soon, she noticed Mr. Agnellino glaring at her from across the room—glaring at her as if he were trying to send her away with his look alone—something she had seen often in the many months she had been performing this chore. But she ignored the glare, too, and turned away from him—and she saw the rabbi and a few other people sitting at a table a short distance away.

He saw her as well—and he smiled at her. With warmth. With so much warmth that it melted the apathetic expression she was fighting to maintain, and she so wanted to hug him for this seemingly minor gesture of kindness—a gesture that was anything but minor to her. Though right then she heard a banging sound and turned around—and she saw that the man behind the counter had just plopped down a pizza box beside her. And he, too, was glaring.

RUDI PARKED THE bike in the lot by her apartment building, and then she and the pizza headed off—not to her home, but across the street to the hospital, and to Tommy. She did this knowing the pizza would make him happy, as it was one of the few remaining things that connected him with his old life, and with being alive.

WHEN RUDI BROUGHT the pizza to the door of the hospital room she saw Nurse Templeton checking on Tommy—checking his breathing tube. The nurse, who was a thin young woman with long curly blonde hair and pale blue eyes, was one of the few in the hospital unafraid of Tommy, and so she never wore gloves or masks

around him. She also had a smile that made both Tommy and Rudi at ease whenever they saw it—much as it was doing at the moment.

Suddenly, a meek-looking Tommy saw Rudi, and when he saw what she was carrying, he smiled, too. He smiled not because of the pizza, as he no longer cared for that, but because of the person who brought it—a person who was his gateway to a world he was slowly leaving.

Seeing Tommy's smile, Rudi smiled as well—as his smile was one of the few things that kept her going. It kept her going through all the rudeness and sadness, and made her relish every second she was alive. She especially loved his smile because she knew he wanted to do anything but smile, and that he only smiled for her.

RUDI SAID GOODBYE to Maria, who was calling from her dorm at George Washington University, and she hung up the phone.

Afterward, she took a small bite of pizza before glancing at Tommy, who was staring at her while picking at his food. No longer was he the handsome and muscular football player she first met. His hair had thinned and was far from wavy, and he, too, had thinned and become gaunt—with his graying eyes sunk deep inside his head. But to Rudi, none of this mattered. To her, he was more beautiful than ever, and she couldn't stop admiring his beauty—and wanted this image of him to remain locked inside her forever.

Eventually, Rudi picked up a fresh slice of pie and tried to feed it to Tommy. But he turned his head away.

"A few bites," she insisted.

"I can't," he insisted back.

"You don't want them to put back the feeding tube,

do you?"

Feeding tube.

It was bad enough, Tommy thought, needing a tube to breathe, but having one to eat made him seem more machine than human. So, these two hideous words were enough for him to turn to Rudi and gobble down as much pizza as he could.

Unfortunately, the words weren't hideous enough to keep the food down—and he struggled for a long time not to throw it all back up. And she struggled with him. She clenched his hand and grimaced even more than he did, and she wished he could've somehow shared his pain with her. She would've taken all of it if she could.

All of a sudden, Tommy's agony eased—and, with his hot sweating face, he looked at Rudi and grinned. And he shook his head, before mumbling, "I don't know why you go through all this."

"Through what?" she asked innocently.

"You could have just sent me a card," he softly answered, with his eyes tearing up. "No one would've blamed you."

She responded to this by moving the pizza box from his bed onto the nightstand—above which hung a framed crumpled drawing of a handsome boy—one who longed for something he couldn't even describe. She then sat next to this boy and put her arm around him—and she told 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."

Knowingly, Tommy smiled, and he rested his head on Rudi's chest while gently caressing her belly.

Which just amazed her. It amazed her that even then he was trying to comfort her. It amazed her so much that she kissed him on his forehead—and she cradled him in

her arms, and she thought of what she could possibly do to make him as happy as she was right then.

“What would you think if I changed my look some?” she murmured. “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 didn’t answer her, and she thought he might’ve fallen asleep. So, she asked, “Tommy, did you hear me?”

“I fell in love with a punk rock girl,” he told her. “A girl who was no one but her. Nothing less would ever do.”

Now it was Rudi’s turn to tear up. She also squeezed Tommy. She squeezed him harder than she had ever squeezed anything before—and she whispered into his ear: “Remember the time we were by those falls?”

“Yeah,” he whispered back.

“You were wrong. *You’re* the best anywhere.”

“And you’re my fairy tale.”

Chapter Sixty-Five

TOMMY STARED OUT the window—at the apartment building across the street. He stared with an expression mixed with both desire and weary.

As he did, a middle-aged candy striper stopped at his door pushing a cart of decaying books. The woman then looked at the boy—a boy that almost everyone in the hospital warned her to avoid, for her own safety.

“No Rudi today?” she asked, with a thick Hispanic accent.

Slowly and weakly, Tommy turned his head toward the woman, and he forced a smile—and with a barely audible voice he muttered, “I made her take a day off.”

“That was very nice of you,” the woman said, with her own smile—one that was 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 smiled at this—this time for real.

“Would you like a book today?” she went on.

“All right,” he answered, even though he really didn’t want one—and she slowly pushed the cart toward him, and, once she stopped, he looked at the crusty spines. He never much cared for the books she brought, as he found them mostly junk, but he always took one just to be nice—especially as she was one of the few people in the hospital who was always nice to him. Unfortunately, on this particular afternoon he was way too lightheaded to

even select a book at random. So, he said, "Why don't you just pick something out for me."

"All right," she replied, before checking her inventory—at which time she mumbled to herself: "I know you like smart books."

"Sometimes," he mumbled back.

Suddenly, she spotted a certain title and uttered, "Here's something you might like." She then plucked out a thin paperback entitled *Ficciones*, by Jorge Luis Borges, and she showed it to Tommy.

"Is it in English?" he asked.

"Yes, this is a translation," she answered.

"I've never heard of him."

"Some people say that he is the best writer in all of South America."

"Yeah?"

The woman responded by glancing at the book, and, while brushing the tattered cover with her palm, she said, "But not me." Afterward, she offered Tommy the book and added, "I say he is the best writer in the whole world."

This piqued Tommy's interest, and so he took the book—and, as the woman started out the door, he gently turned the cover.

Chapter Sixty-Six

RUDI PARKED THE motorcycle and walked across the street toward Reservoir—and once again prepared herself for the rudeness awaiting her inside the restaurant.

But she never even got there, as the door swung open the moment she reached it—exposing a dour-looking Mr. Agnellino, who was holding a pizza box.

“Oh, hi,” Rudi muttered.

“This is for you,” he stated, without emotion.

“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 uttered, while shaking her head.

“You know,” he uttered back, “for a long time now you’ve come into my restaurant it seems like almost every day, and you buy a pizza from me, even though me and everyone else in here is unfriendly to you. The truth is we were trying to send you a message—that you weren’t welcome. You and your crazy hair and clothes and makeup. You—the person everyone says such terrible things about.”

Rudi reacted to this by lowering her eyes.

“But still you come,” he went 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. And then, then Rabbi Orenstein—God bless his soul—he tells me who the pizzas are for. And he also tells me

all the wonderful things you've done for that poor boy."

With lots of surprise, Rudi looked up at Mr. Agnellino—and while barely controlling his emotions, he added, "And I've never been so ashamed in my life."

"Forget it," she told him.

"I won't," he told 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 different shapes and sizes. And hair styles."

Rudi smiled at this.

"I want you to know," Mr. Agnellino continued 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 was Rudi's turn to control her emotions, and so she was barely able to blurt out, "Thank you." Then, after taking the pizza she started backing up, while adding, "Well, I better be going."

"Tell Tommy we're all pulling for him!" the old man exclaimed.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

RUDI SLOWLY APPROACHED Tommy's room with the pizza box in her hands.

Suddenly, someone called out her name—and she turned around and saw Dr. Klein standing a short distance away—with an ominous expression on his face. It was so ominous that she knew what it likely meant even before she headed toward him.

Though when she came to a stop in front of him he couldn't say a thing. He just stared at her, unable to express the right words.

"What is it?" she finally asked.

"The pneumonia has gotten worse," he replied. "Much worse. If . . . if there's anything . . . any special plans . . ."

"When?" she inquired, while somehow maintaining an apathetic expression.

"I can't say exactly," he told her. "Maybe he'll make it through the night. Maybe."

"Does he know?"

The doctor nodded, and she turned around and headed off.

"There's something I want to tell you," the man uttered, 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."

To Rudi, it was exceedingly small—and small was exactly what she felt as she continued on to the room, where Tommy was lying unconscious on his bed with the thin paperback clutched in his hand.

Seeing him like this, Rudi wondered if it were too late. She wondered if she would never have a chance to say goodbye—and this just horrified her. Part of her didn't even want to know for sure. But the other part walked over to Tommy and put the pizza box on the chair by his bed, and gently pulled the book from him. Which caused Tommy to wake—something that caused Rudi to take a deep and satisfying breath.

"Hey," he murmured, with a little smile.

"Hey," she murmured back, with her own little smile—one that attempted to mask her intense fear. Then, she lifted up the book and asked, "What are you reading?"

"The best writer in the world," he replied, with yet another little smile. "And I'm not the only one who thinks that."

"I've never heard of him," she replied back, while glancing at the cover.

"Come here, I want to show you something."

Rudi responded to this by sitting on the bed next to Tommy, and, after he took the book from her, he started awkwardly sifting through it while telling her: "This is a collection of his short stories."

Soon, Tommy stopped at a page in the middle of the book, and, with a slightly shaking hand, he pointed to a story called "The Secret Miracle"—and he said, "This one, this is my favorite."

"What's it about?" she asked, though she didn't really care—as her thoughts were of far less literary things.

"It's about this playwright during World War II," he answered, while staring happily at the page. "He gets arrested by the Nazis, and is sentenced to be shot. And he's really upset by this."

"I would hope so," Rudi remarked.

"But," Tommy insisted, "he's not upset because he's gonna die. Well, maybe he's a little upset about that. But he's really upset because now 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 just wonderful?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"So I asked God, too," Tommy muttered.

"Asked Him what?" Rudi muttered back.

"I, 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 made Rudi want to cry—and she only didn't for Tommy's sake. Instead she mumbled, "So, so what did He say?"

"He hasn't gotten back to me yet," Tommy replied.

"He must be pretty busy," she replied back, with a forced smile.

"Yeah, and then there was that, that I cursed Him pretty badly a while back."

"He must be forgiving about that kind of stuff."

"I sure hope so," Tommy whispered, before falling gently to sleep.

Right then, Rudi took the book from him, and she wanted to toss it into the garbage—as she wanted Tommy now, and not in what she thought was just some mythical realm, in spite of all those dance-hall interludes. But strangely she was drawn to the story—and the harder she fought against this feeling, the harder it drew her. So, she started reading it.

And it overwhelmed her. It overwhelmed her with its beauty and its sincerity—and somehow she believed every word of it.

It wasn't a short story, she told herself after finishing the last sentence. It wasn't fiction. It was truth. She just knew it—and, what's more, she was determined to make Tommy's wish come true. To this end, even though he was fast asleep, she leaned down and whispered into his ear. She whispered, "You have to fight, Tommy—for one more day. You hear me? One more day—that's all I ask."

Somehow she knew he heard. She also knew he would do it, and, after putting the book down on the nightstand, she marched out of the room—and marched up to the nurses station, where she asked if Dr. Klein was around.

"I don't see him," a middle-aged nurse replied, with unparalleled apathy.

"Then get him," Rudi ordered.

"Excuse me?" the nurse growled.

"I said, get him!"

Quickly, the nurse picked up a phone, and, while she dialed a number, Rudi saw the rabbi way down the hall, and she ran toward him—and, once she finally caught up with him, she breathlessly said, "I need to ask a big favor."

Chapter Sixty-Eight

THAT NIGHT IN her apartment Rudi spent many hours on the phone, as she had a near infinite number of things to arrange—and almost that many people to call.

After finally getting it done, she made one last phone call—to get a status update on Tommy. She then rushed out on the motorcycle to the university library, which was open late at night—and where she collected about a half-dozen books. Which she hurriedly scanned at a table while conducting what was for her the most important research project ever. Though it was difficult to do with so many thoughts pounding the inside of her head at once—thoughts mainly relating to all she had to do the following day. Which were so great in number that she knew she'd forget something. She just hoped it wouldn't be an important something.

In spite of all these pressures, when Rudi came to a certain picture of a smiling and blushing young woman in one of the books, she couldn't help pause. And smile back.

AFTER FINISHING HER research, Rudi quickly returned to the hospital, and she held Tommy's hand all night while doing something she had never really done before.

She prayed.

All night she prayed, hoping she could exchange all her years of unhappiness for one single day of the opposite.

“Just give me this one thing,” she murmured, over

and over.

RUDI DIDN'T GET a bit of sleep. But she didn't care. She just hoped Tommy would wake.

Eventually, the sun began to rise—and, soon afterward, Tommy began to rise, too. He even seemed to have a little more energy than the day before.

"You did hear me yesterday," she told him, with both a smile and an intense sense of relief.

"What?" he replied.

"I gotta go somewhere right now, but you have to promise not to go anywhere."

"Go?"

"Just promise me!"

He thought about it for a moment, and then uttered, "I love you."

"I love you, too!" she uttered back, as she ran out the door.

"Where you going?"

"You'll find out soon!"

Chapter Sixty-Nine

RUDI PULLED THE motorcycle up to the curb and parked, and she walked up to the big white house—the house she once feared—the one that made her so uncomfortable and out of place.

This time, though, she wasn't frightened. This time she was determined—as all her plans depended on having success here. She even told herself that she wasn't going to accept failure. And then she tried to believe it. And then, then she rang the bell.

Elizabeth soon opened the door, and while looking a bit embarrassed—and without directly looking at Rudi—she muttered, “Oh, hi.”

“Is Mrs. Goodwin around?” Rudi asked, in as firm of a voice she could muster.

Elizabeth shook her head, and Rudi immediately felt deflated. But all of a sudden the woman added, “I'm afraid she won't see you.”

“Tell her it's really important,” Rudi replied, suddenly 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.”

Reluctantly, Elizabeth thought it over for a few seconds before even more reluctantly nodding her head—after which she said, “All right. I'll see what I can do.”

“Thank you so much!” Rudi cried out.

“I can't promise anything—but I'll try.”

The woman afterward left, leaving the door ajar, and Rudi turned away from it, and again prayed—this time

with her eyes closed and her fists clenched.

Just give me this one thing.

Barely had she finished saying this when she heard yelling coming from inside the house—and she spun back to the door.

“How dare you talk to me like that!” Mrs. Goodwin screamed.

“Someone has to!” Elizabeth screamed back. “Just talk to her! For God’s sake, talk to her!”

“Tell her to leave!”

“You tell her!”

Suddenly, there was a pause, and, just as suddenly, Rudi heard the angry marching of footsteps—footsteps that got louder and louder. Not long after this, a furious-looking Mrs. Goodwin—with her face bright red—appeared at the door, and she growled, “Well—what do you want?”

“Hi,” Rudi uttered.

“Look, I don’t have time for pleasantries,” the woman uttered back.

“Do you have time for your son?”

“I don’t have a son anymore.”

Mrs. Goodwin subsequently spun around, and she started inside.

“You won’t very soon!” Rudi called out, causing the woman to come to a stop—though without turning around.

“He’s very sick,” Rudi went on.

“You think I don’t know that?” Mrs. Goodwin barked. “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 howled.

"You must think me a fool!" Mrs. Goodwin howled 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 enraged Mrs. Goodwin, and she flung herself toward Rudi—with her face now well beyond red. And, with a strange accent, she hollered, "You fucking bitch! You know nothing about me! You think I was born in this—in this palace? They didn't even allow Jews here when I was your age!"

The woman then took a threatening step toward Rudi—and another. And yet another still. Which caused Rudi to step back in fear—in fear of someone for the first time since Deke died, and she finally understood what Tommy had meant when he said she and his mother were alike.

"I was raised in Flatbush," Mrs. Goodwin continued. "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 afterward spun around again, and she stormed into her house—and she was just about to slam the door when Rudi told 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 didn't reply to this, but she didn't move either.

"Please, Mrs. Goodwin," Rudi pleaded. "Hate me all

you want, but don't hate Tommy. He doesn't deserve it."

Mrs. Goodwin responded by lowering her head, and she stood deep in thought for a long while.

Eventually, she started shaking her head. Though, at the same time, she slowly turned to Rudi—and mumbled, "I'll get my coat." She then continued into her house. But Rudi stopped her. She stopped her by saying: "I need to ask a really big favor."

Chapter Seventy

RUDI PEEKED HER head inside Tommy's hospital room, and she saw him staring out the window at their apartment building—and, with a big smile on her face, she uttered, "Hey."

Slowly, he turned to her and meekly smiled himself, before uttering back, "Hey."

"Close your eyes," she ordered.

"What's going on?" he muttered.

"Just do it."

He sighed a bit, but closed his eyes—and softly said, "Well?"

"You can open them now," she told him.

When he did, to say he was shocked would be an understatement, as standing in front of him was Rudi in a beautiful white lace wedding gown. The sight was so incongruent that his mind couldn't even form words.

"Well?" she asked, while striking a pose similar to the image she saw of herself in Mrs. Goodwin's bedroom more than a year earlier.

"You," he gasped, while shaking his head, "you're wearing a dress."

"It's a one-time thing," she replied. "So enjoy it while it lasts."

"That gown," he went on, "it . . . it belongs to my . . ."

All of a sudden, Mrs. Goodwin entered the doorway with a timid little smile—and she was just horrified at how emaciated and sickly her son looked. But she was also amazed at how happy he looked—more happy than she had ever seen him before, and she knew there could

be only one reason for this all-too-obvious contradiction. Or, rather, one person. And she clutched this person's hand.

As for Tommy, seeing his mother was even more shocking than seeing Rudi in a dress, and so he just shook his head in disbelief, over and over.

Eventually, Mrs. Goodwin released Rudi's hand and took a single step inside the room—and murmured, “Hi, Tommy.”

Finally, Tommy knew it was all real, and he opened his arms and murmured back, “Mom?”

Right away his mother flew at him, and she hugged and kissed him—and he did the same to her.

“I missed you so much,” he whispered.

“I missed you, too,” she whispered 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.”

The two then continued their embrace, and soon some semblance of sense returned to Tommy, and he asked, “How did this all happen?”

His mother responded by releasing him and turning back to Rudi, who hadn't moved from the door. And the woman afterward smiled, prior to saying, “You were right about her. She is a lot like me. Hopefully, she'll grow out of it.”

Tommy shook his head at this, unable to understand his mother's sudden change of heart about Rudi. Though, in truth, the change wasn't quite that sudden.

MRS. GOODWIN WAS aghast when Rudi asked to borrow the gown. For many reasons.

Foremost she was aghast at Rudi wearing anything of hers—let alone her wedding dress. But she was also aghast at her son marrying Rudi, and she was further aghast of his wedding taking place in a hospital—or taking place at all when he was just about to die. So, she brusquely refused the request.

But then she saw Rudi's sad eyes—eyes whose warmth surprised her—eyes so effusive that they were bending her will. And, with great reluctance, she eventually agreed to let Rudi use the gown. But she also told her that she wasn't going to have anything to do with such an outrageous event. She was just going to say goodbye to her son and leave.

Quickly, Rudi acceded to this—and the two marched up the big staircase together, watched from below by Elizabeth, who shook her head in utter bewilderment.

Not long afterward, the odd pair entered Mrs. Goodwin's bedroom, where Rudi couldn't help feel emotion while remembering the magical kiss that took place there. Mrs. Goodwin, of course, remembered the kiss as well. Though right then she was once again surprised by the warmth in Rudi's eyes. This was because in her mind the kiss had been nothing but a precursor to the couple's tawdry tryst. But now she suddenly realized the kiss meant something else to Rudi—something more. Still, she tried to pretend otherwise, and she sat on the edge of the bed with her arms and legs crossed and impatiently waited while Rudi hurriedly changed into the gown.

However, Mrs. Goodwin's disinterest began to fade when she saw how well the dress fit Rudi, as it reminded her of her own wedding day—more than twenty years earlier. She further realized that Rudi was almost the very image of her, at least from the neck down—and, without thinking, she rose from the bed and started making the

few minor alterations the gown needed.

"Thank you," Rudi said to her softly.

Mrs. Goodwin didn't respond. She just continued with the dress. Then, she led Rudi to a full-length mirror—and Rudi smiled and blushed, just like the young woman in the picture she saw the night before. And when Mrs. Goodwin saw this all the remaining coldness around her heart thawed for good, and she whispered, "You're so beautiful."

"Nah," Rudi replied.

"Don't argue with your mother-in-law," Mrs. Goodwin replied back. "At least, not until after the honeymoon."

Mother-in-law.

Rudi was more than just surprised by this word, and it showed when she looked at the woman through the mirror.

"That's how it was with my mother-in-law," Mrs. Goodwin went on.

"Yeah?" Rudi muttered.

"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 then started to cry, and she turned around and hugged Mrs. Goodwin, who hugged her right back and pleaded, "Please, don't—you'll ruin your makeup."

"I can't help it."

"Oh, well—I guess you can't ruin your makeup any more than it already is."

Rudi laughed at this, and so did Mrs. Goodwin. Then, the two women smiled at each other and gripped each

other's hands, just before Mrs. Goodwin said, "We better hurry. We've got a wedding to go to."

RUDI TOOK A step inside the hospital room—and put her hands on her hips, and, with faux indignation, she said to Tommy: "So, are you gonna marry me or what?"

"Marry you?" Tommy replied. "But we, we'd need a . . ."

Suddenly, a smiling Rabbi Orenstein entered the room and uttered, "I believe that's my cue." He then reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a small juice glass, and afterward he promised to return as soon as he completed his rounds.

"Well," Mrs. Goodwin subsequently said, "we've got a lot to do in a short time."

"Like what?" Tommy asked.

"Like your tux, for one thing."

"My tux?"

"And the caterer. And the photographer."

"And the guests will be coming any time," Rudi added.

"Guests?" Tommy mumbled.

"What about music?" Mrs. Goodwin asked.

"That's okay," Rudi replied, while gazing at her future husband. "We'll take care of that ourselves."

MR. REESE SHOWED up first.

Which was only fitting, as he was the first person Rudi called with her plans. Though she was still a bit surprised when she saw him, as it was the first time she had ever seen him wear a suit. But the surprise quickly wore off, and she rushed up and hugged him, and thanked him not only for coming but for all the things he had done for her the past year. And he thanked her right back—for

letting him back into her life. He also hugged her back, and, while thinking about the day he married Rudi's mother, he started weeping a little.

"You're supposed to do that *after* the ceremony," she told him.

"I'm afraid etiquette's never been my thing," he told her back.

He afterward looked down at her gown, and he couldn't stop shaking his head. And, seeing this, she proudly did a pirouette for him.

"Someone must've kidnapped my stepdaughter," he muttered. "Who are you?"

"Very funny," she smilingly growled with a raised fist—and to avoid this fist, Mr. Reese rushed up to Tommy and congratulated him, only moments before the tailor arrived with a trio of different-sized tuxedos, as well as a pair of black dress shoes. Then, while the man fitted Tommy under Mrs. Goodwin's stern direction, Mr. Reese and his future son-in-law did what they usually did when they got together. They talked football.

PAM SHOWED UP next—along with Stephen, and both were stunned by Rudi's gown, and by how beautiful their former foster child looked.

As for Rudi, she looked a bit bashful when Stephen slowly approached.

"You still mad at me?" she timidly asked him.

"I'm surprised you'd ever want to see me again," he replied, just as timidly—"much less want to invite me to your wedding."

Unhesitantly, Rudi gave him a big hug, which he happily returned while whispering to her: "I didn't know. I was just scared."

"Lots of people are," she whispered back. "Even in

this hospital. You have nothing to be ashamed about.”

He didn’t really believe her, but he nodded his head anyway, and afterward he walked right up to Tommy and gave him a hearty handshake.

Watching all this was Mrs. Goodwin, who couldn’t believe how wrong she had been about Rudi. She also felt a little guilty, while remembering how people once prejudged her—by where she was from and how she talked.

At the same time, Tommy noticed how warmly his mother was looking at Rudi, and he motioned her toward himself.

“What is it?” the woman whispered, after she leaned down to his ear.

“Take care of her, Mom,” Tommy whispered back. “She so needs a mother. She won’t say it, but she does. Please take care of her.”

Mrs. Goodwin answered him by clutching his hand, and by kissing his forehead—and he smiled. He smiled knowing Rudi would be loved.

Suddenly, Rudi brought Pam up to them and said, “Do you know my mother-in-law?”

The two women then introduced themselves, just as another visitor arrived—Rudi’s former probation officer, who called out her name from the doorway.

She responded by rushing up to him, and she grabbed his hands while saying, “Well, it’s not exactly my graduation.”

“But it’s just as amazing,” he uttered, not quite believing how she was dressed. “Maybe even more so.” He also hugged her, and murmured, “Man, I knew I was right about you.”

“No, you didn’t,” she murmured back.

He chuckled at this, and added, “I at least hoped I was

right.”

At this moment, a deep male voice came from behind them—one that yelled out, “Sweet Rudi Brown Eyes!” And Rudi broke her embrace with Paul and hugged Butch, who looked rather odd wearing a suit—especially one way too small for all his muscle. Though this wasn’t what she really noticed. What she really noticed was that he was holding a record—and she pointed at it while demanding, “What’s that?”

“A gift,” he replied.

“I told you, no gifts.”

“This isn’t for you—it’s for Tommy.”

Butch afterward walked over to the groom and he handed him the record—*Live Yardbirds: Featuring Jimmy Page*. Which Tommy looked at in surprise, as he had never even heard of it.

“It’s really rare,” Butch told him. “It was only out for like a week.”

“Yeah?” Tommy uttered.

“It’s even got some early Zeppelin songs on it,” Butch added.

Tommy smiled at this and thanked him, before handing the album to Mr. Reese and saying, “Will you listen to this for me?”

“Sure thing, Tommy,” Mr. Reese replied, while choking on his words a bit. “I’ll listen to it tonight. I promise.”

EVENTUALLY THE PHOTOGRAPHER arrived, and the rabbi returned from his rounds—and even Nurse Templeton showed up.

A little after that, Maria—wearing a blue silk gown—came to the door with a short young woman in a yellow dress—a woman who had long auburn hair and dark rimmed glasses, and the look of someone about to meet

her in-laws for the first time. A woman named Sandra.

All at once Rudi and Maria screamed, just before hugging each other—and afterward, while staring at Rudi's gown, Maria cried out, "Oh, my God—you look so incredible!"

"So do you," Rudi replied, while clutching her best friend's hands. "I'm so glad you made it!"

"We almost didn't," spoke Sandra with a smile. "You should've seen her drive. I don't even remember passing Delaware."

"It's easy to miss," replied Maria, before introducing the two most important women in her life.

"It's nice to finally meet you," Rudi said to Sandra, as she shook the woman's hand—a woman Maria had been raving about during their regular phone conversations. She was actually pretty much the only thing Maria ever talked about. "Thank you for coming to my wedding," Rudi added. "And on such short notice."

"Thank you for inviting me," Sandra replied. "I've never heard of anything so romantic. And you look so totally awesome."

"I hate to be a spoiler," the rabbi interjected, "but I really need to be leaving soon."

"All right," Rudi said, while looking all around—"I think we're ready."

"Wait for us!" suddenly screamed the voice of a boy from just outside the room. Which was just before the three geeks rushed inside—all wearing suits.

"My favorite Quincy Punks!" Rudi howled.

The three were now seniors and had grown a bit, and were no longer so geeky—though it was a far more natural transition than the one that took place the day after they met Rudi. More importantly, they now had something of an attitude—one of self-confidence.

Following them was Owen, who—with Rudi's help—finally graduated high school, and who was working as a local mechanic with dreams of one day opening his own shop. Which was just one of his many dreams.

Hurriedly, Rudi hugged all four of them, and afterward she turned to the rabbi and said, “Okay—let's do this.”

With a big smile, Orenstein looked around the crowded hospital room—and he blinked a bit when the photographer's flash went off. Then, after collecting his thoughts, he said, “Well, 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 really 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 stood up, and Rudi took her place. While she did, the rabbi gave Tommy a kippah, and Tommy—who looked like he was beginning to fade—awkwardly put the suede yarmulke on his head.

Noticing this, Rudi prayed once again.

Just give me this one thing.

“So, Rudi,” the rabbi went on, “you are Jewish, right?”

“Excuse me?” Rudi replied, not quite hearing the question.

“I've always assumed from your last name . . .”

“I could be Jewish,” she muttered, more than a bit bashfully.

“Could be? I, I know this is kind of an un—”

“—She's Jewish,” interrupted Mrs. Goodwin, before

putting her hand lovingly on Rudi's shoulder.

Just as lovingly, Rudi put her own hand on top of Mrs. Goodwin's—and she smiled at her, before saying to the rabbi: “You heard the woman.”

But the rabbi was still hesitant.

“Well,” Mr. Reese uttered, “I can tell you for a fact Rudi's mother was Jewish.”

“Yeah?” Rudi said in surprise.

“I only wish she was here to see this,” he replied.

Rudi replied back by reaching out her hand to her father, who took it in his big paw—and she told him: “It's okay, Dad. All my real family is here.”

Watching this, the rabbi became visibly moved, and he even had to take out his handkerchief and use it. Then, he murmured, “So, where was I? . . . Yes, we need the rings.”

Rings.

The word hit Rudi like a cliff on top of her head, as it was the one thing she forgot. She had planned to pick them up after getting the dress, but she got so overwhelmed at Mrs. Goodwin's house that they flew out of her mind.

“Someone does have the rings?” the rabbi went on.

“We, we don't have any,” Rudi mumbled, after lowering her eyes.

“Oh, yes you do,” Mrs. Goodwin said, before taking off her gold wedding band. “At least, you have one.”

The woman subsequently offered the ring to her son, who shook his head and told her: “I can't take that, Mom.”

“Nonsense,” she replied, with tears forming in her eyes. “Your dad would've wanted you to have it. He would've been so proud of you right now. *I'm* proud of you.”

Tommy responded to this by gently taking his mother's hand, and the ring along with it.

"So, Tommy," continued 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 struggled mightily with the ring. But eventually he got it on Rudi's finger—and he then tried repeating the rabbi's words, which was an even harder task, as he was so lightheaded and weak. Though, after a couple of false starts, he finally got through it—and the rabbi afterward turned to Rudi and began to say, "Now—"

"—I know what comes next," she interrupted. "I looked it up last night in the library."

Unfortunately, she didn't have a ring for Tommy. So, instead she wrapped her finger around his—a finger she would never unwrap as long as he lived. And, with swelling emotion, she told her groom—" *Ani l'dodi, ve dodi li*: I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine."

"Well," the rabbi soon after said, "now we just have to break the glass."

Once again, he took the juice glass from his jacket pocket, and he covered it in his handkerchief before placing it on the bed between the post and Tommy's right shoe. And Tommy tried to break it. Without success.

"Perhaps I could find a light bulb," the rabbi said. "It would be easier."

"I can do it!" Tommy insisted—and he tried and tried. But still he couldn't break it.

"Is it really that important?" Rudi asked.

"Yes!" Tommy cried out. "Yes, it's that important. It signifies that joy must always be tempered. And no one knows that more than us."

Both looking and feeling overwhelmed, Rudi grabbed

Tommy's free hand, and she gripped it tightly—and whispered to him: "You can do it, baby. I know you can."

Right then, Tommy clenched his eyes closed, and, with all the strength remaining in his body, he pushed. He pushed and pushed and pushed. And there wasn't a single person watching this that wasn't crying, including the photographer, who had to stop taking pictures.

Soon, a tear was also falling down Tommy's cheek—one that dropped onto his pillow just as the glass cracked.

"*Mazel tov!*" the rabbi yelled. Which caused the entire room to erupt in cheers—cheers that did nothing to subside everyone's tears. This was particularly the case for Mrs. Goodwin, whose face was just bathed. She was so out of her mind with both happiness and sadness that she had to rush out of the room—and she ran down the hallway while crying out for her son.

At the same time, Mr. Agnellino arrived with a large stack of pizzas, and when he saw all the tears he asked, "Am I too late?"

"You're just in time," Tommy answered, with just about all his energy spent. "Just in time."

"Well," the rabbi said 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 uttered, with a nod of his head.

Hesitantly, the guests started to exit while shaking the hands of the newlyweds. For Tommy, this was extra emotional, as he knew he wasn't just saying "goodbye," but "farewell." So, he gripped each hand as warmly as he could—something he hoped they could remember him by.

MARIA WAS THE last to exit.

She had been crying since the beginning of the ceremony and was still crying when she hugged her best friend and muttered, "I love you so much!"

"I love you, too!" Rudi muttered back.

Maria then reluctantly backed out of the room, and Rudi told her: "I'll be down shortly."

Afterward, Maria left, closing the door behind herself—and Rudi slowly turned to Tommy, who looked barely alive. Yet he smiled at her—he smiled at her even then. And she smiled back, before taking a deep breath and murmuring, "Just look at us. Who would've ever thought?"

"Me," he murmured back 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, they started moving toward one another, and soon they gently kissed—and, just as gently, their bodies met. And "Moonlight Serenade" began to play one last time. Though for Tommy it would never end.

Suddenly, he found himself back in that dusty dance hall, surrounded by all those shabbily dressed dancers—with his arm draped around his beautiful blushing bride, who, in turn, had her finger wrapped around his. What's more, he was no longer sick or emaciated. He was once again handsome and muscular, with wavy brown hair.

And he was indomitable.

This Tommy eventually turned to Glenn Miller, who, as usual, was leading his orchestra—and the tall bespectacled man put down his trombone and smiled at Tommy, and gave him a big welcoming wave.

Tommy waved back, prior to brushing the back of his

fingers against Rudi's cheek. After which he heard her softly moan. Which caused him to close his eyes, with bliss covering every aspect of his face.

And he knew right then that God had granted him his wish.

the end