

COLIN COHEN

**EVEN PUNK GIRLS
CRY**

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2016 by Colin Cohen

cohen@evenpunkgirlsblush.com
evenpunkgirlsblush.com

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in any part in any form.

“Love makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place.”

—Zora Neale Hurston

Chapter One

THE DOOR TO the hospital room burst open, and Rudi stumbled out.

She was a paradox, with her spiky bleach-blonde hair and punk makeup contrasting with the beautiful white-lace wedding gown she was wearing. Which in itself contrasted with the hopeless tears streaming down her face—tears for her husband of not even ten minutes, who had just died in her arms.

She thought she'd be ready for this moment, with more than a year to prepare for it, but she knew now that—even if she had a hundred years—it wouldn't have been enough. When he first stopped breathing so did she. What's more, she told herself she wouldn't breathe again until he did. Then, she shook him over and over, trying to restore life to both of them. Though, after many seconds of this, only she was restored, and an anger rose inside her—an anger greater than any she ever felt—and she started pounding her fists onto Tommy's body, unleashing a fury against the one thing she couldn't conquer: his disease.

Again and again, her fists fell upon him and the evil lurking within, until her arms could punch no more. After which she tumbled off the bed onto the floor, before rising to her feet and rushing out into the hallway. There her whole body started convulsing, and her heart beat so hard that it sounded as if someone were banging a big bass drum inside her chest. Along with this came an irresistible desire to escape—from everything, including herself. Which sent her rambling down the corridor—

without any direction, with her sore arms flailing about wildly. She rambled until she saw a nurse push an empty medicine cart into a supply closet.

Hurriedly, she flew toward the man, getting there just as he was closing the door—which she grabbed and pushed open just enough to slither her petite frame inside the small room.

“What are you doing?” the nurse barked.

Ignoring him, Rudi slammed the door closed behind herself, and, after lifting the cart up and turning it on its side, she placed one of its rails between the door and the knob in order to jam it.

“Open up!” yelled the nurse, as he knocked on the door while quixotically yanking the knob.

Once more Rudi ignored him, and she turned around—and saw a glass cabinet filled with all sorts of drugs—something she instantly tried to open. But it was locked. So, without any hesitation, she flung her right fist through the glass, and with her unscathed hand she pulled out a full bottle of morphine. Afterward, with multiple people now banging at the door and shouting with increasing desperation, she shuffled through some drawers and found a hypodermic needle, right before collapsing onto the floor against the cabinet.

There she hesitated for a few seconds prior to rolling up her sleeve—and, once she unwrapped the needle with her bloody hand, she drew morphine into the syringe until it would draw no more.

“Don’t do this!” suddenly came a voice from nearby—a familiar one.

At once, Rudi spun her head in its direction, and she saw Tommy—standing in his wedding tuxedo just a few steps away. More incredibly, he wasn’t the sickly Tommy she left minutes earlier. In front of her was the boy she

first met—handsome and muscular, with thick wavy brown hair—and eyes so piercing that they were cutting her apart.

“Tommy?” she mumbled, in something many degrees beyond shock, with her head shaking to the extent that she couldn’t focus her eyes. She even felt around her arm—to make sure she hadn’t already given herself the injection.

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

“I’m coming to you, baby,” she told him, just as an ax blade ripped into the door from outside of it. “I’m coming.”

“Not like this!” he insisted.

But she didn’t listen to him. Instead she drove the needle deep into her flesh and thrust down the plunger with her thumb, causing her to loudly gasp—and she soon slipped along the floor.

“Rudi!” he cried out. “Rudi!”

She didn’t reply. She just gazed at the broken door as it got more and more blurry—and barely saw all the hands pushing through the shards of wood. Which was just before her eyes began to flutter.

Chapter Two

RUDI AWOKE WITH the rising sun.

At first, she wasn't sure she was still alive, as the morning light gave the sparse white room in front of her a strange glow, making it appear ethereal. Then, even when she looked down and saw the bandage on her right hand she wasn't sure of her existence, and only became so when she saw her mother-in-law sleeping peacefully in the odd-looking chair by her bed—a chair seemingly without hardness or sharp edges.

"Mrs. Goodwin?" Rudi muttered, not really wanting to wake the woman, but way too curious about her being there.

Despite the hushed tone of Rudi's voice, Mrs. Goodwin slowly opened her eyes, and she warmly smiled at the young woman she despised only a few days earlier.

"Hi," she afterward spoke, with her smile remaining on her face.

"What are you doing here?" Rudi asked.

"The same thing you did for my son."

This embarrassed Rudi, as she felt far from deserving of anyone's care, and—while trying to control her emotions—she turned from the woman and looked straight ahead at the plain wall.

"Where am I?" she inquired.

"The hospital," her mother-in-law replied.

Rudi responded by looking around the room, and she saw that there was almost no furniture, and what was there was odd like the chair next to her and its twin a short distance away, which had a dark blue dress lying

across it. Furthermore, there was no television anywhere or even a mirror, and there was also no handle on the window, which was made of thick plate glass.

"It doesn't look like the hospital," Rudi said.

"It, it's the psychiatric ward," Mrs. Goodwin softly said back.

"So, they think I'm crazy."

"They think you're sick."

"What's the difference?"

Moments after saying this, Rudi stared out the window and saw the frozen and lifeless trees in the distance, and again wondered if she really were among the living.

"They can help you, Rudi, if you let them," Mrs. Goodwin went on.

"How would you know?" Rudi uttered.

"I know."

"How?"

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

With a look of great surprise, Rudi spun toward Mrs. Goodwin.

"Remember when I told you how I grew up poor?" continued the woman.

Rudi nodded, and her mother-in-law added, "Well, it was worse than just that. Much worse. I was into, I was into some terrible things. Maybe worse than you. Definitely worse. Then, then came Tommy's father, literally out of nowhere. He was like some knight on a white steed—the kind you perhaps read about in fairy tales when you were little. Only I never even had fairy tales when I was a girl, which made it all that more unbelievable. He saved me, Rudi. He saved me mostly from myself—and he made me his queen. And so when he . . ."

"Tommy never told me . . ." Rudi mumbled. "About

you being here.”

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

“How?”

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

Just then, Rudi shook her head, for no particular reason.

“There’s a bereavement group that meets at our temple,” continued her mother-in-law. “Of course, most of the people are my age and older, but you’d be welcome there. I’d see to it.”

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

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

“So he told me.”

“He told you?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Your stepfather was here a short time ago.”

Rudi shrugged.

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

“He’s a nice man.”

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

“It was nothing.”

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

“No.”

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

Ignoring this remark—or at least trying to ignore it—Rudi pointed to the blue dress and said, “What’s that?”

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

“To wear for what?”

“The funeral.”

Once again, Rudi turned to the window—this time much faster.

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

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

“Jews don’t wear black at funerals.”

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

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

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

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

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

“They just want to observe you for another day. Though they would like you to seek help. And so would I.”

Rudi shook her head, over and over and over.

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

“Do?” Rudi bewilderedly asked back, as if she didn’t

quite understand the question.

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know. I can't even think about it. The future—the word has no meaning."

"Well, I was planning on picking up Tommy's stuff at the apartment later today. I could pick up yours, too."

Like a few minutes earlier, Rudi spun her head toward the woman with great surprise—before saying, "And take it where?"

"I, I know you don't particularly care for that 'palace' of mine, but . . ."

"I couldn't," Rudi retorted emphatically, and with lots of fear—a fear that had many sources.

"You'd actually be doing me a big favor," the woman insisted, while choking up a bit. "I'm all alone there, and I'm hurting just as much as you, believe it or not. The very moment I get my son back he, he's gone again."

Hesitantly, Rudi put her hand on Mrs. Goodwin's, and, even more hesitantly she told her: "I'll think about it."

"Thank you."

"No promises."

"All right. Well, I've got a lot to do today . . ."

With just a bit of reluctance, Rudi released her hand from Mrs. Goodwin's, and the woman stood up. Rudi then noticed the gold wedding band on her right index finger.

"Wait," she said, as she grabbed the ring and started taking it off.

"What?" her mother-in-law said back.

"Let me give you back your ring."

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

"You, you sure?"

“It’s yours and yours alone.”

Uncontrollably, Rudi started tearing up—at the kindness of a woman she once hated so much that she couldn’t imagine hating anything more. And, while barely able to get out the words, she stammered, “Thank you. I promise, I promise it’ll never come off my finger. They won’t even be able to get it off my rotting bones.”

All Mrs. Goodwin could do in response was nod, as she was tearing up herself and was unable to come up with words, even in her head. Then, she turned to pick up her purse off the chair—and uttered, “That reminds me—I’ve something to give you.”

“You’ve already given me too much,” Rudi insisted, with tears starting to roll down her cheeks. “And after all the things I—”

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

“Give me what?”

Mrs. Goodwin replied by grabbing her purse—and, after sitting down on the edge of the bed, she took out an old jewelry box and opened it—exposing a thin and inexpensive gold Chai necklace.

“What is it?” Rudi asked, as she gazed at the strange pendant.

“It’s the Hebrew word for ‘living,’” the woman answered—“the most precious word there is.” She further took out the necklace and placed it around Rudi’s neck, while saying, “My mother gave me this when I was about your age—maybe a little younger. Just like her mother gave it to her.” Mrs. Goodwin then clasped the chain, and she whispered, “You know, I always hoped one day I’d give it to my daughter. And now, now I am.”

Rudi no longer had any control over her emotions,

and she clutched Mrs. Goodwin before crying out, “Oh, Mom!”

“I never thought I’d ever hear that word again,” Mrs. Goodwin cried back, with tears pouring down her face as she hugged Rudi with every bit of strength she had.

“I never thought I’d ever say it!”

Chapter Three

RUDI SAT EMOTIONLESSLY in one of the odd-looking chairs wearing the dark blue dress, looking so lifeless that she seemed more like a wax figure than a real person.

Which Mrs. Goodwin couldn't help notice when she entered the room wearing a dress not much different than Rudi's and carrying Rudi's white sea bag.

"You ready?" the woman asked.

"I guess," Rudi replied.

"How about some makeup?" Mrs. Goodwin asked, while offering Rudi the sea bag. "You're almost unrecognizable without it."

"It doesn't seem appropriate."

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

Rudi shrugged, and then blurted out, "I don't even have a mirror."

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

A PLAIN BLACK limousine sputtered up the steep hill along South Orange Avenue before veering right onto Irvington Avenue.

In the back of the vehicle sat Rudi, looking much as she had in the hospital, apart from her makeup, which she had applied far more modestly than usual. If it weren't for her hair, she would have looked something approaching normal, which was quite abnormal to Mrs. Goodwin, who was sitting next to her—providing her

support, both physical and emotional.

"I, I still don't know if I can do this," Rudi murmured, prior to leaning against her mother-in-law even more than she had been.

"You'll be fine," Mrs. Goodwin murmured back, just as the vehicle made a right turn onto the large parking lot of Congregation Beth El. It then continued toward the entrance of the synagogue, where waiting outside was a group of people quite familiar to Rudi, especially as they had all been at her wedding days earlier. This group included her stepfather Mr. Reese, along with her former foster parents Stephen and Pam. Her best friend Maria was there, too—along with Maria's girlfriend Sandra, Owen, and the three geeks. Even Mr. Agnellino was there.

Seeing them all made Rudi feel happy, but only for the briefest of moments. That's because she soon saw something else not far from them—a dark oak coffin right next to Rabbi Orenstein, who was desperately trying to feign strength when he was feeling anything but, especially as this was one of the few times in his life that he couldn't help question his faith.

The limo soon parked a short distance from the curb—and the chauffeur exited the vehicle and opened the back door. First, Mrs. Goodwin stepped out, followed by Rudi, who couldn't take her eyes off the coffin and all the horror it represented. It meant death—not just Tommy's but her own as well, and, much like before her attempted suicide, her whole body began convulsing.

"I can't do this," she uttered. "I just can't!" She subsequently turned around and started running—away from the coffin, and away from death.

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

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

Eventually, she reached the end of the lot and made a left turn, and headed down the hill.

RUDI SAT ON the edge of a cliff inside South Mountain Reservation, and she watched the endless water fall, with her arms tightly crossed against the coldness of both the late afternoon and her emotions.

For hours she had been staring at the water, just as Tommy often did when he was sad and troubled—and as she also did one miserable afternoon more than a year earlier—an afternoon that was all-too-similar to this one.

“I thought I might find you here,” suddenly came Mrs. Goodwin’s voice.

Rudi didn’t respond, and so the woman came over to her, prior to putting a heavy wool coat over her—doing so without Rudi seeming to notice.

“How’d you know I was here?” Rudi asked, while continuing to stare at the water.

“I knew Tommy came here,” the woman answered.

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

Mrs. Goodwin replied by sitting next to Rudi, and she wrapped her arm around her.

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

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

“How was it?”

“The funeral?”

Rudi nodded, and Mrs. Goodwin told her: “Fine, I suppose.”

“And the reception?”

“The same. Everyone was asking about you.”

"They, they must think I'm horrible for missing my own husband's funeral," Rudi mumbled, while again starting to lose control of herself.

"Nonsense."

Slowly, Rudi turned to the woman and explained, "I just couldn't do it."

"I understand. I've been there, remember?"

"But you at least went to your husband's funeral."

"What makes you say that?"

All of a sudden, a single set of tears fell down Mrs. Goodwin's face—and seeing this, Rudi hugged her.

"Come on—let's go," the woman afterward insisted.

"Go where?" Rudi inquired.

"I'm taking you home."

Chapter Four

MRS. GOODWIN LED Rudi inside the big white house—the one that once represented everything she hated. But now, now she suddenly saw that it was the last link to everything she loved.

At once, she saw Elizabeth staring at her a short distance away in her pristine white uniform—and she ran up to the tall woman and hugged her, with her eyes full of tears.

“What’s the matter, child?” Elizabeth murmured, while gently caressing Rudi’s back.

“It was all because of you,” Rudi uttered, with her voice past broken.

“What was?”

“There wouldn’t have been a wedding if it hadn’t been for you.”

“I—”

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

“I really didn’t do anything.”

“You did everything! For a nobody like me.”

“Hush now. Don’t you ever say that again. You think a fine boy like Tommy would’ve wasted his time with a nobody? He could’ve picked any girl he wanted, and he picked you. And don’t you ever forget that.”

“I won’t forget what you did for me. Not in a billion years.”

These words made Elizabeth want to cry herself, and to avoid this she looked at Mrs. Goodwin, and she saw

her smile.

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

RUDI EXITED THE bathroom and entered the adjoining bedroom wearing a pink flannel nightgown, watched by her smiling mother-in-law.

“It fits,” the woman exclaimed, while feigning astonishment.

“What a surprise,” Rudi remarked, with a little forced smile. Then—with actual surprise—she walked up to the wall by the bed, where hanging there was her crumpled drawing of Tommy set inside a plain black frame. And she put her slightly shaking hand on it and gazed into the boy’s penetrating eyes.

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

Rudi nodded, and added, “Pretty terrible, eh?”

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

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

“I very much doubt that.”

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

“Are you sure you want to sleep here?” the woman afterward asked. “There are lots of empty bedrooms in

this house. Ones that come without memories.”

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

“Still . . .”

“I want to stay here.”

“All right.”

Mrs. Goodwin then walked up to the bed, and, without thinking, she pulled the covers up to Rudi’s neck.

“Just look at me,” she subsequently said, while shaking her head.

“What?” Rudi asked.

“Tucking you in like you were five years old.”

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

Mrs. Goodwin nodded at this a bit sadly and headed to the door, where she turned and looked back at her daughter-in-law before saying, “Is there anything I can get you?”

“Do you have a stereo?” Rudi inquired.

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

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

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

Rudi nodded, and the woman said, “I suppose I have a copy somewhere. Or I can get one. But why would you want it?”

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

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

"I just want that one song, please."

"All right. Anything else?"

Rudi shook her head, and Mrs. Goodwin asked, "Should I turn off the light?"

"Yes, please."

The woman responded to this by flicking off the switch, and the two said their goodnights before Mrs. Goodwin left, closing the door after herself.

Right then, Rudi clutched both the pillows and the sheets—and she inhaled the small but ever-present remnants of her husband—something that made her smile and smile.

"Oh, Tommy," she whispered, as she felt him touching her everywhere. "I'm never gonna leave you again."

Chapter Five

THE FOLLOWING MORNING Rudi, while still in her nightgown, opened the door of Tommy's closet and saw his stereo. She also saw something even better: his blue and white football jacket hanging nearby, with his name stitched into it.

Quickly, she took the garment off its wooden hanger, and—much like the night before with the pillows and the sheets—she smelled it and caressed it with her body. Eventually, she fell to the floor with it as well, where she wrapped her arms around it and called out Tommy's name, again and again.

LATER THAT SAME morning Mrs. Goodwin took a trip to the local Sam Goody and bought Rudi a copy of Glenn Miller's greatest hits as well as a blank cassette tape, which she brought to her daughter-in-law's room.

"Thank you," Rudi told her with a mild smile, before getting out of bed and slowly heading toward the woman, wearing Tommy's jacket over the nightgown.

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

"Dressed for what?" Rudi uttered back.

"You do realize that it's almost noon, don't you?"

"So?" Rudi stated, prior to taking the items toward the stereo she had set up earlier next to Tommy's old trophy case. "It's not like I have anywhere to go," she added.

"What about school? When are you planning on going back?"

"I'm not."

"Why not?"

"What's the point?"

"I—"

"—I only went before because Tommy made me."

"Don't you think he'd want you to continue?"

Rudi didn't reply. She just peeled the shrink-wrap off the album, and, after taking out the vinyl record, she placed it on the turntable. Then, after opening the cassette tape and inserting it into the stereo, she put the needle at just the right location of the record and turned on the player, before pressing the Record button.

At once, the sweet sounds of "Moonlight Serenade"—with its gentle but steady trombone—filled both the room and Rudi's soul, and she closed her eyes as she wrapped her arms around herself, before slowly dancing with a soft and contented grin.

Watching this, Mrs. Goodwin shook her head over and over, as the scene to her was almost as incongruent as when she first saw Tommy and Rudi together. For here was this wild-looking punk girl, with a helpless angel inside her. And she so wanted to cradle this angel and make all the unhappiness go away. Though she well knew she was powerless to do so.

BY THE TIME the song came to an end, Mrs. Goodwin had reluctantly left the room.

But Rudi hadn't noticed. All she noticed was the music—music she restarted by bringing the needle back to the beginning of the song while letting the tape continue to roll. Then, later on—once the first side of the tape had almost reached the end—she took it out and turned it over before also filling the other side with the song.

Afterward, she returned to bed with the tape and put it in her Walkman—and she listened to it for hours and

hours, only stopping when sleep finally overtook her—accompanied by a beautiful dream of a dusty dance hall. In this dream, Tommy's arms were desperately clinging to her, just like they were in all the unexplainable experiences they once shared. And, just like then, his cheek was pressed firmly against hers.

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

"I never left," Tommy insisted.

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

Suddenly, they were back in her old bedroom in Irvington—back in the same bed where they spent their first night together. Like then, he kissed and touched her everywhere—only now it really seemed to continue on infinitely, through days and weeks and years. And lifetimes.

Chapter Six

FOR MONTHS RUDI rarely left Tommy's room, and she refused to see all the many people that came to visit her, including her stepfather and former foster mom, as well as her friends. She also took all her meals in bed—meals she barely touched, quickly realizing that the weaker she was the easier it was to fall into her dream state and remain there. And whenever she was awake she never dressed. All she ever did was listen to “Moonlight Serenade” again and again and again.

Eventually, she became almost as gaunt as Tommy was when he died. What's more, her hair became long while returning to its natural color—and this, along with her lack of makeup, made her look like a completely different person than before—and not a better one. It got so bad that Mrs. Goodwin pressed Rudi to see a doctor. But she kept refusing. So, one morning the woman arranged for a doctor to come see her. Though she ignored the man and his questions as he examined her, paying attention only to the music.

Soon, the aging man turned to Mrs. Goodwin, and he nodded toward the door before standing up and heading out into the hallway, followed by the woman.

“What do you think?” Mrs. Goodwin whispered as soon as she left Rudi's room and closed the door behind herself.

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

“Consider what?”

“I know of a very good hospital.”

“You mean, an institution.”

“They could help her.”

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

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

“But—”

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

“No.”

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

AFTER SEEING THE doctor out of the house, Mrs. Goodwin returned to Rudi’s room, and she sat next to her on the bed before shutting off the Walkman.

Without emotion, Rudi turned to her mother-in-law and gazed at her.

“Hi,” the woman muttered.

Rudi responded by reaching for the play button on her Walkman, but Mrs. Goodwin grabbed her hand and said, “I was talking with Pam earlier. She’d love to see you. So many people want to see you, especially your stepfather.”

“Not today,” Rudi mumbled.

“Tomorrow?”

“No.”

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

“Would you prefer I did it somewhere else?”

“I don’t want you doing it anywhere!”

Angrily, Rudi shook Mrs. Goodwin’s hand away and turned on her player.

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

"I want to die," Rudi replied, with her eyes beginning to tear. "Please just let me die."

Mrs. Goodwin responded to this by ripping the headphones off Rudi's ears—and she howled, "No, I won't! I won't let you die! What's happened to you, Rudi? What's happened to that tough you-know-what who came barreling into my house, shaking it at its very foundation?"

"She's six feet in the ground—along with your son."

"No, she isn't—she's right here in front of me!"

"No."

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

Rudi shook her head, but not too convincingly.

"Then live," her mother-in-law shouted—"live!"

"How?" Rudi shouted back. "How can I live without him?"

"You fight—you fight for every goddamn breath!"

"He was my breath!"

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

"You don't love me. You just feel sorry for me."

"I love you!"

Hearing these words, Rudi started to cry, because she knew they were true.

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

Rudi at first didn't reply. Then, she reluctantly nodded, before saying, "All right—I'll give it a try."

Chapter Seven

WITH THE SUN steadily setting outside, at a table in Reservoir Restaurant sat Mrs. Goodwin with Rudi, who—while still wearing both the Walkman and Tommy’s football jacket—was at least also wearing a plain white T-shirt and jeans along with it.

“You know,” Mrs. Goodwin murmured while perusing the menu with a bit of a sneer, having always disliked the place—especially when her late husband used to drag her there on a weekly basis—“there’s a much better Italian restaurant that just opened—”

“—You said I could choose,” Rudi interrupted, while also perusing a menu, even though she knew exactly what she wanted.

“All right,” the woman replied, before glancing at Rudi and not surprisingly hearing the faint sounds of “Moonlight Serenade” coming from her headphones—and though she promised herself she wouldn’t bring up anything that would cause Rudi to relive the past, her curiosity overwhelmed her. It overwhelmed her so much that she uttered, “That song—it was old when I was your age. Why do you keep listening to it?”

“It’s hard to explain without sounding even more crazy than I must already seem,” answered Rudi. “But this music meant a lot to Tommy and me, just like this restaurant meant a lot. In a way this was our song. In a big way.”

“You know,” spoke Mrs. Goodwin with a slight shake of her head, “every time I think I have a handle on your relationship with my son you throw me a huge curve, like

just now. Perhaps one day, if it's not too personal, you could tell me about it. I'd really like to know."

"It wasn't as wild as you probably thought."

"I've figured that much."

"We didn't even . . ."

"You didn't?" Mrs. Goodwin gasped in shock, while feeling ashamed at how she once thought their relationship was only about sex.

"He, he got sick," Rudi stammered, "before we . . ."

"Oh, Rudi—I'm so sorry."

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

"Oh, Rudi."

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

"If only I hadn't been so stupid, maybe I could—"

"—I always beat myself up like that. If I only did *this*—if only *that* happened. It never helps. Nothing can change anything."

Just then, Pam entered the restaurant, and while pretending not to notice how thin her former foster child looked—not to mention how strange she looked with long brownish hair and no makeup—she smiled and called out, "Hey, guys!"

WHILE THE THREE women waited for their food, Pam reached across the table and took Rudi's hand before saying, "It's so nice to see you."

All Rudi could do in response was force a smile—and a mild one at that.

"So, how's your stepdad doing?" Pam continued.

Rudi shrugged, so Mrs. Goodwin replied for her: "He's doing just fine. He visits every week, in fact."

"That's nice."

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

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

"They understand," Mrs. Goodwin told Rudi. "I'm sure they do."

Suddenly, Mr. Agnellino came over with a big grin and an even bigger pizza, which he placed on the table while proclaiming, "For the three most beautiful women in town."

"Thank you, Vincenza," Mrs. Goodwin told him.

"You need anything else," he told her back—"you just holler."

"Actually, I would like something."

"What's that?"

"The bill."

"Which bill?"

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

"Didn't you get it?"

"No."

"It, it must have gotten lost in the mail somehow," he said bashfully.

"I'm sure that was it," she said back quite unbashfully. "So, you better send me a copy."

"All right."

The man then started off, but Mrs. Goodwin grabbed his big hand and said to him: "Thank you. For everything."

While trying hard to control his emotions, the man nodded and walked off—and both Pam and Mrs. Goodwin pulled out a slice of pie, with Rudi just looking on, lost in her own private world.

“Aren’t you gonna have any?” Pam asked Rudi, once again feeling worried about how thin she looked.

Rudi responded by taking a piece of pizza, and she brought it up to her mouth—with the wonderful smells bringing back even more wonderful memories—memories of her first date with Tommy, and all the moments they shared over pizza just like this. And, for a brief moment of time, she actually felt happy. Though it didn’t last long. It didn’t because before she could even take a bite she saw a young couple a few tables away—a couple who were holding hands and kissing, just like she and Tommy used to do and would do never again, apart from in her dreams.

This realization caused Rudi so much pain that she dropped the pizza and turned away from the two women, and—just like in the hospital—she had an irrepressible desire to escape everything.

WHEN THE TWO women returned home, Mrs. Goodwin took Rudi’s hand and asked, “Would you like to watch some TV with me?”

“No, thank you,” Rudi replied. “I’m pretty beat. I think I’m just gonna go to bed.”

“All right. But tomorrow we’re going out again.”

“All right.”

“Only tomorrow I’m picking the restaurant.”

“All right.”

“And we’re going out the day after that. And the day after that.”

“All right.”

Just then, Rudi started toward the stairwell, while her mother-in-law headed toward the living room. But all of a sudden Rudi stopped, and she turned back to the woman and uttered, “Mom?”

At first, Mrs. Goodwin didn’t react to this. But then, realizing the word was addressed to her, she came to a halt and spun back to Rudi, with a big smile on her face.

“I love it when you say that,” she told her daughter-in-law.

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

“Thank you.”

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

“I know.”

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

“You’re a pretty okay daughter yourself.”

“Well, goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Rudi.”

Again, Mrs. Goodwin started off toward the living room while Rudi again headed toward the staircase. However, once she got to the foot of it, she hesitated a few seconds before glancing around and noticing that not only was she alone but that the kitchen not far away was dark—and calling out to her.

AS RUDI ENTERED the kitchen she turned on the lights. And, after another brief bout of hesitation, she slowly stepped inside the room.

Right then, she wasn’t exactly certain what she was

looking for, and for a while she just randomly opened cabinets and drawers. In one of the latter she found some table knives, and she picked one up and tested its sharpness with her index finger. But it was way too dull for her needs. So, she continued looking around the kitchen, and soon found a butcher's block—from which she took out the largest and sharpest knife. One that cut her finger with ease.

IT WAS LATE at night when Rudi peeked out her bedroom, wearing nothing but Tommy's jacket.

She then looked down the hallway at the door to Mrs. Goodwin's room, and she saw only darkness coming from underneath it. She also noticed that the whole house was beyond quiet. It was so quiet that she felt as if she were the only person in the world.

Not long after this, she returned to her room, and she slowly walked into the adjoining bathroom, where she started the tub, using only hot water. And, after adding a little bubble bath, she went over to the sink and took the large butcher's knife from her jacket pocket, before laying it beside the faucet. She also took off the Chai pendant Mrs. Goodwin had given her and carefully placed it next to the knife.

Afterward, she once again peeked her head out the bedroom, and once again looked down the hallway at Mrs. Goodwin's room—and once again saw that it was dark and silent. And, once yet another round of hesitation passed, she returned inside the bathroom and removed her jacket. After which she picked up the knife with her right hand and got into the tub, where she waited and waited while trying to come up with even one flimsy excuse not to do what she was planning.

However, she couldn't come up with anything, and

with the scalding water now above her chest, she realized no excuses were likely to come even if she waited forever. So, with a slightly shaking hand, she slowly brought the knife down to her left wrist.

"Please don't do this, Rudi," came a familiar voice from nearby.

She ignored it, though—and, with just a bit of a wince, she cut open her wrist prior to dropping the knife onto the floor and bringing her bleeding arm into the water.

"I can't believe you're doing this to me!" an angry Tommy howled while flailing his arms.

Reluctantly, Rudi turned to him, and, like in the hospital supply closet, she saw he was wearing his wedding tux. But she didn't say a word to him. Instead she desperately tried to pretend he wasn't there.

"I thought you loved me," he uttered.

"I do," she uttered back, with the water now approaching the edge of the bathtub. "More than anything."

"Then how can you do this to me?"

"You don't know what it's like being without you."

"I know what it's like to die. I would've done anything to live—anything!"

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry—do something about it!"

"I can't."

"Do you know, do you know why I fell in love with you?"

Over and over, she shook her head—and eventually added, "I never understood. I'm a nobody."

"Because you made me feel alive!" he yelled. "You made me feel so fucking alive! But obviously I didn't mean the same to you!"

"You did! I swear you did!"

"Then show me!"

"I . . ."

"Show me!"

"I can't live without you!"

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

"I . . ." she mumbled, while starting to lose consciousness.

"Live!" Tommy yelled. "Live!"

Meekly, Rudi tried to stand up, but she fell right back into the tub, with the water starting to pour out onto the floor. Seeing this, she reached for the knob of the faucet and tried to turn it off, but she was just too weak. And her hand soon returned to the water while at the same time she closed her eyes.

"Rudi!" Tommy screamed—and her eyes opened a bit. "Tell me you love me!" he afterward added.

"I love you," she insisted.

"Louder!"

"I love you!"

"Tell me louder!"

"I fucking love you!" she screamed.

MRS. GOODWIN SUDDENLY awoke.

At first, she didn't know why, but then she heard Rudi's screams—along with the sound of running water, and she rose up and out of bed, before heading into the hallway. Then, noticing the water was coming from

Rudi's room, she hurried down to the open bedroom door, where she saw liquid flowing out of the adjacent bathroom.

“Oh, my God!” she gasped, before sprinting toward the source of the flood—and she gasped even louder when she found it.

Chapter Eight

WHEN RUDI AWOKE she saw she was back in the psychiatric ward. She further saw there was a bandage around her left wrist and that the Chai pendant was once again around her neck.

She also saw something else. She saw Mrs. Goodwin sitting by her side again. Though this time she wasn't smiling. This time she was angry.

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

"One that's coming to an end," her mother-in-law growled, having finally realized coddling Rudi hadn't helped her at all—and that she needed to try something else, regardless of how difficult it would be.

Rudi didn't reply to the woman's remark. She just averted her eyes even more.

"You were very lucky," her mother-in-law went on. "Lucky I heard you shouting."

"Shouting?" Rudi mumbled, while trying to recall why she had been shouting. Then, as soon as she did, she became a little frightened, because it perhaps meant that she hadn't been hallucinating after all. "Tommy," she whispered, "he . . ."

"What about Tommy?" Mrs. Goodwin demanded.

"Nothing."

"*Rudi.*"

"All that water in the bathroom. I must've ruined your house."

"Fuck my house!" the woman barked, with the same harsh Brooklyn accent Rudi last heard the last time Mrs.

Goodwin had been furious with her.

"I'm sorry," Rudi mumbled.

"Yes, you are sorry—and I'm sick of it."

"Does this mean you're finally throwing me out?"

"Yes. But not because of what you did to my house.

I was speaking to your doctor a little while ago and he thinks it might be a good idea for you to get away from here and from all the things associated with here. So, once you're good and ready to leave the hospital—and only then—that's exactly what you're going to do."

"What bullshit," Rudi retorted. "I couldn't get away from here if I traveled a million miles—if I went to the fucking moon!"

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

"I don't want any."

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

Rudi responded by turning toward the thick glass window, and, at the same time, she pointed out the door while saying with a breaking voice, "Listen, why don't you just walk out of here and be done with me. I'm not worth it."

"Was my son worth it?"

"What?"

"Why didn't you just walk out on him when things got tough?"

"That was different. He was sick."

"And so are you!"

"Just go! I'm not your responsibility!"

"You are!"

"You don't owe me anything!"

"I owe you everything!"

"Just get out of here!"

Instead the woman grabbed the top of Rudi's gown with both fists and she howled, "Shall I start dragging now?"

RUDI TOLD MRS. Goodwin what she wanted to hear, and later on, she even filled out a bunch of college applications with her help. She also attended all her counseling sessions as well as group therapy, and said all the right things, just as she had learned to do during her many stints at rehab—thinking this would lead to her escape. A final one.

Fortunately for her, unlike those times before, everyone saw through her act and they weren't about to let her go anywhere, which made her not only depressed but sullen as well. Then, one morning she got an unexpected visitor: Maria, who was home from college on spring break and who was well beyond shocked when she saw how different her friend looked.

"Shouldn't you be on a beach somewhere?" Rudi despondently asked after turning toward the window, feeling embarrassed that her friend was seeing her this way, especially as she knew Maria had always looked up to her.

"I had something else to do," Maria replied, before sitting on the bed and taking Rudi's hand.

At once, Rudi pulled her hand away and muttered, "Please go away."

"Why wouldn't you see me before?" Maria instead asked.

"I haven't seen anyone. Not even my dad."

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

“Really?”

“Really. He looks so sad.”

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

“No, you haven’t,” Maria insisted.

But Rudi didn’t want to hear this, and so she moved even farther away from her friend.

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

Rudi shrugged.

“Have you picked one yet?”

Rudi shook her head.

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

“I don’t think so.”

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

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

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

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

“You have Sandra.”

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

“I don’t know.”

“Soon, Sandra and I have to pick out a dorm room

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

"I'd be a third wheel."

"You'd be a third friend. And that's something we really don't have that many of."

"I, I'll think about it," Rudi muttered, after turning to Maria, who responded by hugging her friend, who hugged her back however reluctantly—right before saying, "Could you send my dad up?"

THE MOMENT MR. Reese timidly entered the threshold of the hospital room Rudi—with a guilty expression—opened her arms, and he flew to her before giving her a big bear hug.

"Why were you waiting downstairs?" she afterward inquired.

"I thought you didn't want to see me," he replied.

"It wasn't you. It was me."

"I'm so sorry, Rudi."

"You have nothing to be sorry about."

The big man nodded, but it wasn't too convincing.

"I'm the one who should be sorry," Rudi continued.

"No," he told her, while shaking his head.

"I've been so selfish, not thinking about anyone but me."

"I went through that myself once."

Emotionally, Rudi took her father's hand and said, "From now on, you see me. You see me whenever you want. You hear me?"

RUDI WAS THINKING about Maria's offer that night as she wandered through the halls of the ward, after being unable to sleep or even rest her eyes.

Eventually, she came to an open room in which lay a young man in his early twenties. This man was tall and lean, with short light brown hair and sad eyes—eyes that were a few shades darker than his hair. He was also paralyzed from the waist down—with his wheelchair standing a few steps from his bed. Apart from these facts, Rudi knew nothing about him, other than his odd name: Vilem. That's because he never spoke in the group therapy sessions they both attended. He wouldn't even acknowledge questions directed to him. He just stared into space, looking barely alive. Which is exactly what he was doing when Rudi came to his door.

Right then, for a reason she couldn't explain, she found him fascinating, and she couldn't help stare at him, for a near endless amount of time.

"Not much of a prince is he?" suddenly whispered a scratchy female voice from nearby—one belonging to a short blonde-haired patient named Glenda, who was a few years older than Rudi.

"What?" Rudi whispered back.

"I said—"

"—What did you just call him?"

"Don't you know he's a prince?"

"What do you mean?"

"You do know what a prince is, don't you?"

"For real he's a prince?"

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

"What are you talking about?"

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

“Lucky?”

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

Moments later, Glenda walked off, and Rudi continued to stare at the young man, though now she did so with a bit of a grimace, as she now saw the person in front of her as someone she had always despised: an overprivileged spoiled brat—one who deserved every misery coming to him. But strangely there was something else about him—something she at first couldn’t quite categorize. And this feeling got stronger and stronger the longer she stared at him, until it compelled her to do something. It compelled her to enter Vilem’s room. There she quietly sat in a chair next to his bed—and she finally realized what drove her to him: his pain and self-hatred—something she all-too-well understood.

Not surprisingly, Vilem didn’t acknowledge her presence at all—he just kept staring nowhere. He didn’t even acknowledge her hand that gently took hold of his. But Rudi didn’t mind this, as she knew she was there as much for herself as for him. For this same reason, she sat there all night holding his hand, without saying a word. She even held on to it after she fell asleep.

IN THE MORNING Rudi awoke to the sound of crying.

Vilem’s.

He then turned to her, and tried to tell her something. But he just couldn’t find the words, and, even if he had, he would’ve had trouble expressing them—for many different reasons.

“Somehow,” she told him, “somehow it’s gonna be all right. I don’t know how or when, but it will. For both of us.”

He responded by bringing her hand up to his wet face, and he cried even harder.

At the same time, a doctor entered the room, and she dropped her clipboard in shock—shock that Vilem was expressing any kind of cognition—and the sound caused Rudi to spin toward her.

“What?” the doctor afterward mumbled, while pointing at Vilem. “How?”

“I guess he just needed a friend,” Rudi told her. “We all do.”

WHEN RUDI RETURNED to her room, Mrs. Goodwin was anxiously waiting for her.

“Where have you been?” the woman asked, with lots of concern in her voice. “Everyone’s looking for you.”

“I had something to do.”

“What?”

“Penance.”

“Penance?”

“I’ve decided on a school.”

Chapter Nine

A LIMOUSINE REACHED the industrial outskirts of Washington, DC amidst the oppressive heat of early September, and, inside the vehicle, Mrs. Goodwin looked out the window and shook her head.

She then turned to Rudi, who, as usual, was wearing Tommy's jacket and listening to her tape of "Moonlight Serenade" on her Walkman—the one tape she brought with her.

"You sure you want to take those things with you?" the woman asked.

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

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

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

In spite of saying this, Rudi had improved greatly since her days in the hospital. She was not only back to her normal weight, but she also no longer languished in bed all day, and was both social and functional—almost resembling her former self, including her punk makeup and spiked peroxide hair. And there were no more worries about suicide. Still, Mrs. Goodwin couldn't help worry, and this manifested itself when she glanced back out the window and said, "I really wish you had picked a different school."

"What's wrong with GW?" Rudi said back, though she had her own doubts about the place, and had been

having second thoughts during the entire five-hour trip.

“You should be going to an Ivy-League school,” her mother-in-law insisted. “Or at least something like Swarthmore.”

“I don’t have any friends at Ivy-League schools. Or even Swarthmore.”

“I don’t know—I just, I just figured you’d be going someplace reasonably close by, like Columbia or Princeton—someplace within driving distance. I . . . I’m gonna miss you.”

Lovingly, Rudi put her hand on top of the woman’s, and with a gentle smile she told her: “It’s gonna be nice to be missed.”

These words caused the woman to smile herself, before turning back to Rudi—and, while shaking her head a little, she murmured, “Tell me, whatever did my son do to get someone like you?”

“He smiled,” Rudi answered. “It was actually a lot like yours.”

Even though Mrs. Goodwin had promised herself she wouldn’t get emotional, she did just that—and she hugged the only thing in her life that meant anything to her. She also wept a bit.

“I’ll be home for Thanksgiving and Christmas,” Rudi pleaded, while trying to hold back the very same emotions—“and for spring break, too. And for four whole months in the summer. You’ll be sick of me in no time.”

“I very much doubt that.”

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

“Careful,” the woman replied, before breaking her embrace, “I just might take you up on that.”

“You better.”

THE LIMO PARKED in front of Thurston Hall—a large nine-story dormitory housing more than a thousand students in the Foggy Bottom section of the city, which was just a handful of blocks from the White House.

Right then, both Rudi and Mrs. Goodwin uneasily stared through the vehicle's window at the dorm, in which students were shuffling in and out of—with Rudi's unease mostly due to the fact that everyone looked so conservative and well-adjusted. They looked so unlike her. They looked almost as if they were attending the recent Republican National Convention. Rudi had always thought of college as being a hotbed of radicalism and unconventionality, but she now wondered if she were going to be even more out-of-place here than she was in high school. Which made her feel something that was way beyond "second thoughts," and she almost told her mother-in-law to take her home—something she knew the woman would've unhesitantly done.

Instead, she grabbed Tommy's old backpack from the floor of the vehicle, and, after taking a long deep breath, she uttered, "Well, here goes nothing."

"You have the doctor's phone number?" Mrs. Goodwin uttered back.

"I have everything."

"You sure I can't give you some money?"

"I've told you a million times—I'm getting a full ride, including meals."

"But you still need spending money."

"I'll get a job or something."

"But—"

"—Look," Rudi interrupted, "if you want to give away your money, how about giving some to AIDS research." She then pointed to the big white building down

the street and added, "It's not like your dear old pal Ronnie is gonna help—or care."

"It's not true that he doesn't care," Mrs. Goodwin angrily retorted. "It's just that medical research is not the province of the federal government."

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

"You're just impossible!"

"That's why you love me!"

"It's only one of the reasons!"

All of a sudden, the two women grinned at each other, and took each other's hands—and Mrs. Goodwin said, "I'm glad you've gotten some of your spunk back, but I'd still like to give you—"

"—No," Rudi said back.

"Why won't you let me spoil you just a little?"

"You already spoil me, Mom—with the one thing I really need."

RUDI EXITED THE limousine, and immediately discovered that—along with the heat—the air was so thick she could barely breathe it.

Ignoring this—or at least trying to ignore it—she put on Tommy's backpack and crossed the street, with her unease increasing with every step, as well as her desire to escape. Though she eventually made it to the other side of the road, where she turned back to the limo and—with a slightly shaking hand—she waved one last time at Mrs. Goodwin, who couldn't be seen through the tinted glass. Which meant Rudi couldn't see the woman cry.

Suddenly, the limo took off, and Rudi—after wiping some sweat from her brow—entered Thurston Hall, where, after glancing at a bored-looking security guard sitting nearby, she proceeded to the front desk, where

stood a heavysset woman in her mid-twenties who had glasses and short brown hair.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked with a bit of trepidation, while trying hard not to stare at Rudi's appearance.

"Yeah," Rudi replied, after glancing at all the people waiting at the elevator bank a short distance away. "I'm supposed to be living here." She afterward gave her name, and the woman looked it up in a nearby file cabinet before saying, "You really cut it close. Registration closes today. Most people came last week."

"I was wavering," Rudi said back—"up to the very last moment."

"About the dorm or the school?"

"Both."

The woman smiled a little at this and took out two packets—and, while handing Rudi the larger one, she said, "Inside you'll find a bunch of information about the dorm and its rules, and you'll also find your meal card." She then opened the smaller packet, which was labeled with the number 931, and she pointed to the three keys inside it while stating, "To your room, to the mailbox around the corner, and to the front door, which is locked after dark. And you'll find your room on the ninth floor."

Right after saying this, the woman peeked her head out at the crowd in the lobby and she said, "You can take the service elevator. It's past that door over there, which you can open with the key to the front door. Then, just go to the end of the hallway and hang a left. You can't miss it."

RUDI SLOWLY ROSE in the grimy steel elevator, and, as she approached the ninth floor, she started hearing sounds. The sounds of Van Halen's "Unchained," which

became almost deafening when the car finally came to a stop and its door opened.

The music made Rudi grimace, and it also made her pause in the back of the cabin while contemplating returning home. And this feeling only got stronger when she saw a small and thin and well beyond drunk boy fly past her down the hallway, screaming along with the song as he played air guitar—wearing nothing but a pair of tight red Calvin Klein briefs and even redder lipstick.

“What . . .” she muttered to herself while shaking her head over and over.

Despite this, she stepped out of the elevator, where—while holding the door open with her right hand—she look down the corridor to her left. There she saw that almost every door in view had a Reagan/Bush ‘84 bumper sticker on it—something that made her grimace that much more. But what made her really cringe was seeing a tall guy down the corridor chugging a large pitcher of beer, cheered on by the throng surrounding him. She cringed at this mostly because—though she expected college kids to drink and do some drugs—she never really thought about how seeing it on a daily basis would affect her and her ability to control the demons that were always lurking just beneath her surface.

Not wanting to think about this, as the sounds of Van Halen began to fade, she turned up the volume of her Walkman and looked down the other side of the hallway, where, near the end of it, a boy and girl were not only kissing but mauling each other. Seeing this was actually worse than watching the drinking—or even hearing Van Halen, and Rudi felt a burst of fright—along with a lack of breath, which not even her music could ease. And this quickly caused her to utter, “I can’t do this.” It also caused her to reenter the elevator and hit the button for

the ground floor.

At once, she could breathe again, and she did so deeply as she watched the door slowly close. However, just before it could do so fully, a hand reached in and slammed it open.

“Fucking asshole!” Rudi hollered, before marching out into the corridor to confront the person responsible for this rather lame joke. But there was no one anywhere nearby, which both confused her and made her question her sanity a little, and, while she was doing this, the elevator door behind her closed.

Furiously, Rudi spun around and loudly cursed, and she also punched the call button multiple times.

Hearing Rudi’s voice, Maria and Sandra rushed out of their corner room at the end of the right-hand corridor, both wearing white T-shirts and shorts. And Maria, who had a plastic beer cup in her hand, tipsily called out, “You made it!”

Reluctantly, Rudi lowered the volume of her Walkman and slowly turned to the voice, and she forced a smile, just before Maria finished what was in her cup and ran up to Rudi. Which was just before the girl jumped into her friend’s arms while crying out, “I’m so happy to see you!”

“You saw me a few weeks ago,” Rudi replied.

“Yeah, but that was not here.”

Maria subsequently began dragging Rudi toward her new home. Though she soon came to a stop at the open door of a room, from which people were shouting out numbers. Right then, both women peeked their heads inside, and they saw a shirtless boy on his knees—one who had beer flowing into his mouth from an open tap—watched by a half-dozen drunk people who were keeping time.

“That’s Brad,” Maria whispered, while pointing at the boy, who was of medium height and build, with medium-brown hair and eyes. She afterward pointed at the boy holding the tap—a boy who could’ve been Brad’s twin—both in terms of appearance and mentality—and she added, “And that’s his roommate Pete.”

“Uh-huh,” Rudi whispered back, not quite believing what she was seeing.

“Forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine . . .” the spectators shouted as Brad continued taking the hit from a nearby keg. Then, a fraction of a second later—just before the crowd could reach fifty—beer started shooting through Brad’s nose, and Pete pulled the tap away and turned it off before proclaiming, “A new world record, people!”

The “people” cheered at this, and Maria couldn’t help chuckle a little. But Rudi just shook her head in both dismay and disgust.

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

“I can fix that,” Rudi angrily said back, prior to stepping into the room with both fists clenched. Though Maria quickly pulled her away—with Rudi crying out, “Fucking idiots!”

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

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

“Oh,” Brad remarked back, right before collapsing onto the floor.

At the same time, Rudi and Maria came upon the kissing couple—and again Rudi felt all kinds of unease.

Suddenly, the two came up for air, and the female

component of the pair sneered at Rudi and her appearance, causing Rudi to come to a quick and instinctive halt.

"That's our next-door neighbor Vicki," Maria whispered to Rudi, as she fruitlessly tried to lead her friend away. "I know it's difficult, but just ignore her."

Vicki was tall and beautiful, and had worked as a fashion model from the time she was fourteen. She also had golden blonde hair almost as big as her—along with gaudy makeup and a pair of even gaudier Guess Jeans, which were at least a couple of sizes too small. Her sneer, though, was anything but small—and in addition to it she started giggling and whispering with her male companion.

Rudi glared at them, but this did nothing to stem their giggling and whispering—all of which was infused by something much stronger than beer. Rudi's glare may have even made their snickering worse—snickering that was only partially muted when the couple entered Vicki's room and closed the door behind themselves.

"What a fucked-up place this is," Rudi mumbled to herself as she and Maria continued on and approached Sandra by the door to their room—the only one on the entire floor that had a Mondale/Ferraro sticker on it.

"That's one of the reasons why they call it the Zoo," Maria said with a chortle as she stopped next to Sandra, not sensing Rudi's perturbation—mostly due to her own inebriation. She afterward pointed to her girlfriend and said, "You remember Sandra, don't you?"

"Of course," Rudi smilingly answered, before giving Sandra a brief hug.

"We're gonna have so much fun together!" Maria exclaimed.

"I don't know," Rudi replied, while shaking her head.

“What do you mean?”

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

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

“Speaking of which . . .”

“I’ve only had a few.”

“It’s not even noon.”

“Is it that late?”

“Since when do you drink?”

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

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

“Awesome,” Rudi muttered, while thinking a bit about what this would mean for her demons. “Boy, college sure has changed you.”

“Whoo-hoo!” Maria yelled, before suddenly falling silent while looking uncomfortably at something behind Rudi.

Sensing her discomfort, Rudi turned around and saw a man in his early twenties frowning at Maria a short distance away. This man was a little taller than average and had—underneath his expression of melancholy—a handsome face, with unkempt dark brown hair and similarly colored eyes—as well as a light scruffy beard. He also had a slight but muscular build—one that was somewhat hidden by his long plaid shirt. But what Rudi really noticed about him was the dog-eared Bible in his hand.

“You got a problem?” she growled.

The young man responded by turning his frown toward Rudi—which was somewhat softened by his obvious fear of her.

“Did you hear what I just said?” Rudi barked, with her fists once again becoming clenched. Though just then she got the feeling that there was something about the man—something both familiar and unusual—something that made her feel all kinds of unease.

He didn’t exactly reply to Rudi’s bark. He just turned around and entered the room across the way, before gently closing the door behind himself.

“Who the hell is that?” Rudi afterward demanded.

“The Preacher,” Sandra replied.

“The Preacher?” Rudi replied back.

“He’s just some fundamentalist jerk,” Maria explained.

“*Fundamentalist?*” gasped Rudi, with lots of surprise.

“I told you—the place is called the Zoo. We have just about every species here, and then some—especially with you here now.”

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

“And you should see the huge cross hanging in his room!” Maria blurted out.

“So,” Sandra whispered, before checking to see if anyone was nearby, “you can just imagine what he thinks of us.”

“Well,” Rudi said, after glancing down at the Chai pendant around her neck, “I’m sure he’s gonna love me,

too.”

“Just ignore him,” Maria pleaded. “We all do. Even his roommate does.”

“Another neighbor I have to ignore,” Rudi uttered. “Wonderful. Are there any neighbors I don’t have to ignore?”

Both women shrugged, which caused Rudi to sigh and once again shake her head, prior to saying, “I don’t know about this, guys.”

“You’re gonna love it!” Maria insisted. She then grabbed Rudi by the wrist and dragged her through their open door, before tossing up her hands and exclaiming, “Ta-da!”

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

“Which bed is mine?” Rudi asked.

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

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

“But what?”

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

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

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

“All right,” Rudi muttered, as she took off her backpack and tossed it onto the nearest empty bed—one facing the door. After which Maria came up to her and gave

her another big hug—something that was interrupted by the sounds of two people loudly having sex in the room next door.

“It’s girls like Vicki that give whores bad names,” Sandra remarked.

Rudi grimaced at this and sighed once again, especially as she could hear exactly what the couple were saying—or, more exactly, moaning.

“The walls are kinda thin,” Maria apologetically said.

“You don’t say?” Rudi replied with unmatched sarcasm, before sitting down on her bed and shaking her head yet once again. And, as she unpacked her white sea bag from Tommy’s backpack, she wondered just what she was getting herself into.

Chapter Ten

IN THE BASEMENT of the dorm Rudi swiped her meal card through a reader by the entrance to the cafeteria, and—with her sea bag across her shoulder and her headphones strapped to her ears—she followed her roommates through the large dining hall toward the serving area, still wearing Tommy's football jacket.

Soon, the three approached a table where Brad and Pete and all their drunken friends were not only sitting but also grading passing girls, by holding up scraps of paper numbered 1 through 10. Though when they saw Rudi's glare they suddenly lowered their score sheets, looking more than a bit uncomfortable—that is, until Brad uttered, "Sorry, we'd need imaginary numbers for you."

Brad's friends chuckled at this and afterward continued their little game. At the same time, Rudi clenched her fists and closed her eyes—and she took a deep breath as she tried to keep herself from killing everything in her immediate path. And when this didn't help, she turned up the volume of her player.

AFTER THE THREE friends got their food, they got a table far from their obnoxious neighbors. But the boys were still in earshot, and likely would've been even if the women had been in Maryland.

"Sit on my face!" Brad suddenly yelled out at some hapless girl.

No longer able to control her anger, Rudi threw off her headphones and started to rise from the table—only

to be stopped by Maria, who asked, "Where you going?"

"To do something a little different to his face," Rudi answered.

"Come on—this is college. It's what happens when you mix immaturity with testosterone and alcohol."

"It's one toxic combination," added Sandra.

"But—" Rudi started to say.

"—Let it be. It's not like they're really hurting anyone."

"Just let me hit them once. I beg you."

"No," Maria said, with a little smile. "Sit down."

Grudgingly, Rudi complied, and she started eating—and noticed Jared sitting at a table not far away, looking both sad and lonely—with only his Bible to keep him company. And she couldn't help stare at him. Like in the hallway earlier, she saw something in him she couldn't place—something that told her he didn't fit the caricature her two friends had painted. Unfortunately, she just couldn't figure out what this something was, which only made him that much more interesting.

"You're coming to the party tonight, right?" Maria asked Rudi, while noticing her blank stare.

Rudi didn't answer. She didn't even hear the question.

"Rudi?" Maria uttered.

"What?" Rudi uttered back.

"You're coming tonight?"

"Sure," Rudi answered, though she still hadn't heard a word.

WHEN THE THREE women returned to their room Rudi sat on her new bed and listened to "Moonlight Serenade" over and over and over.

Then, as she turned over the tape, she heard a door

open nearby, and she soon saw Jared—once again carrying his Bible. He saw her, too—and stared at her as he passed.

He's just some fundamentalist jerk.

Remembering Maria's words, Rudi tried to find some kind of hate or intolerance in Jared's eyes. But she couldn't find any. All she could see was the same kind of loneliness she knew all too well, and—even after he was long gone—she kept staring out the door. She kept staring until Maria and Sandra exited the bathroom together, wearing lots of makeup and perfume, as well as short low-cut white dresses. Which Rudi looked at in surprise.

"Does your dad know you dress like that?" she asked.

"Daddy is hundreds of miles away," Maria replied, with a bit of annoyance. "So, you ready or what?"

"Ready for what?"

"Weren't you listening to me at all during dinner? The Sigma Nu party!"

"Sigma Nu? A fraternity party? *Me?*"

"Yes, you!"

"Are you crazy?"

Maria responded to this by marching over to Rudi and lifting her up to her feet while howling, "Come on!"

"Look," Rudi emphatically told her, "I ain't going to no frat party. Not ever."

"It's not what you think. They're the best house on campus."

"Is that supposed to mean something?"

"Sandra and I are even little sisters there."

"Little what?"

"Just give them a chance."

"No."

"Once upon a time, you gave me a chance."

"That was different."

“Why?”

“Because you weren’t mixing immaturity with testosterone and alcohol.”

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

“I don’t believe you.”

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

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

“Only good things. *Come on.*”

“All right,” Rudi uttered, with another of her classic sighs, before picking up her sea bag from beside her bed.

“But I’m not staying long. I’m really, really beat.”

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

With some aggravation, Rudi yanked off her headphones and turned off the device, before pulling it out of her jacket pocket and dropping it onto her bed.

“And the jacket, too,” Maria went on.

“It might get chilly out,” Rudi insisted.

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

Angrily, Rudi flung off the jacket, exposing her plain white T-shirt, and she afterward threw the heavy garment onto the bed while exclaiming, “You happy?”

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

“I love you, too.”

“Can we go now?” Sandra interjected, with just a bit of perturbation in her voice.

THE THREE ROOMMATES slowly walked toward the elevator bank, where waiting was Vicki in a black

spandex outfit that left even less than nothing to the imagination.

She also seemed even more inebriated than before and was draped over a different guy than the one she had been draped over earlier that day—a guy from which she only undraped when she saw the three women approach. She then snickered and whispered into her friend's ear, right before uttering “Dykes!” underneath a fake cough.

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

“But—” Rudi started to say.

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

“She'd certainly be quieter.”

“And probably more hateful.”

“Just let me hit her once. Please.”

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

RUDI, MARIA, AND Sandra followed Vicki and her friend all the way down fraternity row on G Street. They also watched the two enter a three-story 19th-century townhouse—one with lots of drunk people hanging out on the stoop, as well as in the yard and even in the road.

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

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

“They know?” Rudi replied back, with more than a bit of surprise.

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

“Get out of here.”

“That's how we hooked up with them.”

“Actually,” Maria interjected, “they’ve got something of everything in there. It’s like Noah’s Ark.”

THE THREE WOMEN literally had to squeeze themselves through the fraternity house door, but once in the foyer they saw that the darkened house wasn’t nearly as packed as they had expected.

That’s because it was as hot as a sauna.

It was also loud—with Shannon’s “Give Me Tonight” blasting off the walls from a set of speakers the size of a man—and a large one at that. Which quickly gave Rudi an intense headache, and she thought hard about slithering back to the dorm. However, before she could, Maria grabbed her arm and led her to the edge of the main room, where dozens of people were dancing despite the heat, including many guys in yellow Sigma Nu jerseys.

Soon, another of these guys walked by with a bunch of plastic cups of beer in his hands—two of which Maria grabbed.

“A two-fisted drinker!” the boy uttered with a big grin. “If you were only straight, Maria, you’d be the perfect girl.”

“She *is* the perfect girl,” Sandra uttered back, before taking Maria’s arm. Maria then offered one of the beers to Sandra, who shook her head.

Maria shrugged, and chugged the first cup—and she afterward put it under the second cup and started guzzling that one—under the worried gaze of Rudi.

“What?” Maria exclaimed, with a lot of exasperation—and lots of foam around her lips.

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

Right then, the music changed to “The Roof Is on Fire,” and along with it Maria noticed a curly-haired

brother enter the room from an entrance down the hallway. And, while frantically waving at him, she screamed, “Yo, Chuck!”

Chuck instantly screamed back in kind, and added, “Come on—they’re playing our song!”

Maria smiled at this, and she and Sandra rushed into the room hand-in-hand toward Chuck—and they started dancing.

While watching the three, Rudi realized that here was her chance to take off. But she couldn’t stop staring at Maria, who was both wildly dancing and drinking at roughly the same time. And Rudi couldn’t help think about how much Maria had changed in the short time she had known her, and she wondered if all the changes had been for the best. She especially wondered if Maria would’ve been better off if she had been left in the safety of her shell.

At the same time, Rudi noticed Maria had been right—the house really was kind of a Noah’s Ark, as among the sea of yellow jerseys were guys of many races and ethnicities, including some very Jewish-looking ones. But—not wanting to spoil the stereotype she had so carefully crafted in her mind—she pretended not to see this. She did this by looking down the corridor—at the end of which was a lit room, where people were exiting with drinks in their hands. And, feeling more than thirsty, Rudi headed toward the light.

IN THE BACK room, behind a long table covered in plastic cups, stood a young man pouring beer—a man who was wearing one of the omnipresent yellow jerseys, and who was surrounded by four other guys dressed the same. This man was tall and broad-shouldered, with short dirty-blond hair and deep blue eyes set within a

flawless and well tanned face. Every physical aspect of Dennis was flawless—especially the big pearly smile that seemed a near permanent feature of his face.

“So, Den,” matter-of-factly said the guy standing next to him—a guy who was almost as tall and almost as handsome, “who are you gonna do tonight?”

This query made Dennis’s smile somehow even bigger. Though, after taking a long thoughtful breath, he said with a look that approached seriousness: “Don’t be so crude, Johnny. Girls are much like fine wine—you just can’t gobble them down willy-nilly. You have to smell and taste a few before selecting just the right one.”

Everyone around Dennis chuckled at this, and he finished pouring the beer, which he offered to the person in front of him without looking. However, when no one took it, he looked forward and saw the annoyed expression of Rudi, who had both her hands firmly on her hips, and who knew right then that Maria had been wrong after all—that the guys here really were no different from Brad and Pete.

As for Dennis, seeing Rudi and her appearance caused his eyes to widen in surprise, as while he had seen many punk girls before, he had never seen any at GW. Not even close. So, it took him a little time to compose himself. After which he uttered, “Hi, there.”

“Do you have anything besides beer?” Rudi growled.

“Why, yes,” he answered, before pointing to his left and adding, “We have an official alternative beverage.”

With some hesitation, Rudi turned in the direction of his finger and saw a large garbage can full of dark red punch, which had lots of pieces of fruit floating on top of it. And, with a doubtful expression, she took an empty plastic cup from the table and skimmed the surface of the liquid before saying, “Is there any alcohol in this?”

“Just a little,” Johnny replied.

Instantly, Rudi spun toward the boy, and, just as instantly, he grabbed an empty bottle of pure-grain alcohol off the table and hid it behind his back.

Rudi sighed, and, after dropping the cup into the punch, she muttered, “I’ll pass.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Johnny told her, “considering some of us pissed in it.”

“*Johnny*,” Dennis loudly whispered.

“What?”

“What are you guys,” Rudi barked—“like five years old?”

“Hey, I take umbrage at that remark!” Dennis barked back, with a raised finger. “We’re far closer to six.”

Once again, everyone around Dennis laughed. But Rudi just turned around and stormed off.

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

Rudi responded by coming to a reluctant stop by the threshold of the room—and, even more reluctantly, she looked to her right and saw the soda machine, and she walked toward it. Then, once in front of it, she carefully looked over the selection before reaching into her bag for some change.

“Hey!” Dennis uttered.

Against her will, she turned to him—and he tossed her a quarter. Though she pulled out her own quarter and tossed his back, while stating, “I can buy my own soda.” Which she did, prior to marching out of the room—watched in awe by Dennis’s friends, who had never seen a female so immune to Dennis’s charms. And Dennis himself was beyond awed. He was even shaken a bit, as it had been a long time since he had been shot down like that—at least by a woman who didn’t already know him.

He couldn't even remember when it last happened.

Seeing him thus destroyed, Johnny touched his finger with his tongue and then touched Dennis's shoulder while making a sizzling sound—causing the others nearby to laugh.

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

"There's no such thing," Dennis replied, with a confident smile—even if he wasn't quite as confident as he appeared. Which actually excited him.

AS SOON AS Rudi exited the back room she stopped to open the can of Diet Coke, and afterward she took a nice long sip before rubbing the icy can along her hot face.

Though this was interrupted when some guy fell to his knees in front of her and threw up against the opposite wall, prior to passing out on the mess he had just created on the floor.

"Ugghh!" she bellowed, as she stepped over him and rushed toward the exit. Though just before she got there she stopped. She stopped when the song changed—to one she had never heard before—one that seemed way out of place. A song called "How Soon is Now?" Both the voice and the lyrics quickly mesmerized her, and she leaned up against the side of the staircase in something of a daze, wanting only to keep listening to this strange but wonderful song, which somehow seemed to capture her state of mind. Unfortunately, someone interrupted it, by saying, "Hiya."

Against her better judgment, she glanced to her right, where standing there was a drunken boy with glasses

named Tom—a boy who was wearing one of the omnipresent yellow jerseys.

She tried to ignore him, and returned her attention back to the song, but he interrupted her again—this time by asking, “What’s your major?”

“Wow, that’s a real original line,” she replied, with a shake of her head.

“So, you here with someone?” he went on, clueless to her lack of interest.

“Actually, I’m still in mourning.”

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

Furiously, she spun toward him and growled, “My husband died recently.”

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

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

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

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

“Uh-huh.”

“So, you wanna make out now?”

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

“Then you better get going.”

Hurriedly, Tom rushed off, exposing Dennis, who had been standing behind him and whose big smile now had a knowing tinge to it—something that disturbed Rudi, as it reminded her of another knowing smile from her past. It disturbed her so much that—after tossing the half-empty soda can into a nearby garbage pail—she headed out of the house without hearing the end of the song.

As for Dennis, his interest was now more than

piqued. He actually couldn't remember it ever being so piqued. So, he followed Rudi out of the house, and when he saw her skipping down the stairs, he called out, "Wait a minute!"

Rudi, though, wouldn't even acknowledge him. She just started down the block—and he knew he had to swing for the proverbial bleachers.

"You like Black Flag?" he shouted.

At once, she came to a dead stop, before slowly turning back to him and saying, "Did you just say 'Black Flag'?"

"I did," he answered, with another of his smiles—this one so bright that it lit the night sky.

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

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

"Bullshit."

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

"How did you know I like Black Flag?" she then inquired, still smelling a rat.

"Lucky guess," he replied, with a smile now not only bright but warm as well. It was so warm that she had to work hard to suppress her own smile—one that desperately wanted to come out.

Seeing this, Dennis added, "You know, I just bought their latest album from that new Tower Records up the street."

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

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

"This is some kind of gag, isn't it? Maria put you up to this."

"You know Maria?"

"She's my roommate—and best friend."

"Does that mean you're gonna become a little sister, too?"

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

"Sigma Nu honor," he told her, as he lifted two fingers high into the air.

"Is that supposed to mean something?" she told him back.

"It means everything. So, you wanna hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"The new Black Flag album!"

"Hear it where?"

"Up in my room," he said, after pointing up to a third-floor window.

"If this is some ruse," she replied, "I swear I'll throw you right through that fucking window."

If anything this threat only made Dennis more interested—and made him smile even more.

RELUCTANTLY, RUDI REENTERED the house with Dennis by her side, and, as they strode up to the staircase, Vicki drunkenly rushed toward them.

"There you are!" she cried out to Dennis as she opened her arms.

He stopped her, though, with his own arms—just before she could embrace him. He stopped her as if she had some infectious disease, and he mumbled, "Hey, Vick."

Undeterred by this greeting, Vicki grabbed Dennis's hands, and, after saying, "Let's dance," she tried to drag

him into the main room. But he pulled away from her and said, "Perhaps some other time." Then, he started up the stairs, followed by Rudi, who couldn't help notice that Vicki was glaring at her.

"What's her problem?" Rudi asked.

"That even I have standards," Dennis replied.

DENNIS PUT A record needle on Black Flag's *My War*, and afterward he handed the album cover to a surprised Rudi, who was sitting on the floor against his bed.

"You really weren't bullshitting," she said, with a shake of her head.

"And I really have seen them play many times," he said—"even here in DC."

"Yeah?"

"Last spring—in an abandoned church not far from here. Shit, they were as tight as any band I've ever seen. And, I kid you not, the guy who played Bobby Brady on TV opened for them. You should've heard him curse."

"Where else have you seen them?"

"Back home."

"Where's that?"

"Redondo Beach, a little south of LA. I even met a couple of them once."

"Why are you going to school out here?"

"My dad's a congressman."

"Let me guess—he's a Republican."

"How'd you guess?"

"I seem to attract them."

"So, what do you think?" he asked, after pointing back at the spinning record.

"I don't know," she answered, with her eyes downcast a bit as she listened to a sound that mixed punk with heavy metal—a sound that a few years later would be

known as “grunge.” Which sounded foreign to her, and made her feel both uncomfortable and a little lost. Which manifested itself when she uttered, “It’s different than their old stuff.”

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

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

“I could put on something else if you want,” he told her back, sensing her unease. “I’ve got all their records here.”

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

“Which one?”

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

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

“That’s it.”

“That’s the Smiths.”

“You got it?”

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

Dennis then hurriedly took off the Black Flag record and looked for the Smiths’ one while saying, “It’s an import. I picked it up just before I came back.”

While Dennis continued looking, Rudi glanced around the room, and she spotted a *USA Today* vending machine in a corner, underneath a towel and beneath a framed and autographed Patrick Nagel poster.

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

"J. D.—one of the brothers here—he stole it for me," Dennis answered.

"Why?"

"I forget."

All of a sudden, Dennis found the record—and, as he took it out of its sleeve, Rudi noticed a skeet shooting trophy from some country club on a nearby desk.

"You shoot things?" she inquired.

Involuntarily, Dennis paused. He paused in thought.

A BOY SLOWLY and quietly pushed back a branch, and there it was in the clearing: a beautiful doe grazing a short distance away.

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

"All right," his father whispered, from just behind him. "Raise the gun."

With both awe and reverence, the boy glanced up at the towering man, prior to raising the relatively heavy rifle.

"Take your time," his father insisted, in a voice so hushed it was barely audible. "Whatever you do, don't rush your shot."

The boy responded to this by looking through the gun's sight, and, once he had taken proper aim, he gently placed his finger on the trigger.

Then, it happened. The doe suddenly turned toward him, with her big sad eyes—eyes that seemed almost tearful. And the boy started shaking a bit, as this was not what he had been expecting. He had been expecting a game. He had been expecting fun. He hadn't been expecting those eyes.

“Shoot!” his father softly commanded.

But the boy couldn’t pull the trigger. He couldn’t even breathe—even when his father’s command became harsh.

Hearing this, the doe turned and started off.

“You fucking idiot!” his father screamed, prior to raising his own rifle.

“No, Dad!” the boy cried out, as he grabbed the man’s arm. “Don’t do it!”

“Get away from me!” his father howled, before pushing the boy onto the ground, which was just before he shot the deer.

“No!” the boy screamed, with tears starting to pour down his face.

“I’m never taking you with me again!” the man screamed back as he grabbed the boy off the ground and effortlessly brought him to his feet. “You’re a fucking pussy! You’re even worse than a girl!”

All the boy could do in reply was continue to cry, and he only cried harder when the man slapped him hard across his face and began dragging him toward the carcass.

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

“I SAID, DO you shoot things?” Rudi demanded, after getting no response from Dennis.

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

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

"You read?" she went on.

"Yeah," he replied, with his grin suddenly back on his face—"they kinda require that here." He afterward started the record, and, like before, Rudi became mesmerized by it—and she murmured, "I've never heard anyone sing like this before. He sings, he sings like he means everything he says."

"His name's Morrissey," Dennis told her.

"Morrissey what?"

"Just Morrissey."

"Those lyrics, they kinda remind me of something."

"Yeah?"

"I've read a lot of books lately. Didn't have much else to do."

"Yeah?"

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

"—He's actually my favorite writer."

Rudi sneered at this—and at Dennis, who smiled back and said, "That was a joke."

Not believing him, she continued sneering, and so he walked over to his bookcase while saying, "I have all her books."

Subsequently, he plucked out a hardcover copy of *Middlemarch* and tossed it to her, before adding, "I think this is the one you were thinking of. The actual quote from it is, if I'm not mistaken: 'To be born the son of a Middlemarch manufacturer, and inevitable heir to nothing in particular.'"

With amazement, Rudi stared at the book, realizing right then there was more to Dennis than what she could see with her eyes or hear with her ears—and perhaps there was even more than what he could see or hear himself.

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

"You read *Trouser Press*?" she uttered, with her amazement somehow even higher.

"I've got some back issues over there by my bed."

"You know," she muttered, as she looked up at him with something approaching warmth, "I just can't figure you out at all."

"That's not a bug—it's a feature."

Rudi couldn't help smile at this—and, even more importantly, she liked that she was smiling.

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

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

"Come on—let's dance."

"Not to this."

"What about the Violent Femmes?"

"Who?"

"You haven't heard of them?"

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

AS THE SOUNDS of "Add It Up" began echoing off the walls of the room, Dennis lifted Rudi to her feet—and, while starting to pogo dance with her, he sang over the music—and sang as if he had sung this song many times before.

Rudi was amused by this, and by the lyrics of the song—one about a guy desperate to gain the attention of the opposite sex.

Soon, Dennis—while continuing to sing—began bumping into Rudi, over and over again—and harder and harder.

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

"How'd you know?" he inquired, with a sly grin. He also once again bumped into her, and she body-slammed him into a wall—and he collapsed onto the floor. Then, with a dazed expression he looked up at her, unable to comprehend how someone half his size could've done such a thing.

"I've actually gotten thrown out of CBGB a couple of times for that," she explained, seemingly reading his mind and the question it was asking. "You're lucky you're still conscious."

"How?" he mumbled.

She responded by grabbing his hand, and, as she effortlessly lifted him up to his feet, she told him: "It's not the strength you've got, but how you use the strength you've got."

"Remind me not to piss you off."

"I think I already have."

Dennis chuckled at this and while pointing at her, he uttered, "You know what—I like you. I like you a lot."

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

Just then, Dennis picked up a large bong from behind his desk—one that had the Sigma Nu logo plastered on it. And, after grabbing a lighter off the desk, he lit the device and took a huge toke—and afterward he offered the bong to Rudi, who had again sat down by the bed and who shook her head before telling him: "No, thanks."

"You don't smoke?" he asked.

"Nope."

"*Don't drink, don't smoke,*" Dennis sang, "*what do you do?*"

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

This caused Dennis to fall to his knees in uncontrollable laughter, and he had a very difficult time stopping. Though when he finally did, he told her: "I've never met anyone like you, not even in LA. I mean, you—you're totally fucking whacked!"

"Is that a compliment?" she inquired.

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

"I think that's the pot talking."

"*In cannabis veritas.*"

"You speak Latin?"

"Enough to become a pharmacist."

"Is that what you want to become?"

"Actually, I'm gonna be an investment banker."

"I see," she remarked, with a mocking nod.

"Wall Street right now is like the new Wild West," he remarked back, ignoring her irreverence.

"From punk rocker to robber baron in just a few years."

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

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

Recognizing her suddenly altered mood, Dennis jumped to his feet and proclaimed, "I know just what you need."

"What's that?" she asked, as he started looking around for something.

"A little picker-upper," he answered.

"No drugs."

"I've got something even better."

"Yeah?"

Dennis soon found another record and put it on—

and the sounds of the Psychedelic Furs' "Heaven" began rising out of the speakers. Then, he sat down next to Rudi and the two listened.

"Was I right?" he asked.

"I'll say this for you," she replied, as she became more and more lost in the song—one of sincere and unrelenting optimism—"you have good taste in music. Perhaps even better than me."

He smiled at this, and started leaning toward her. But she turned away and murmured, "Don't."

"What's wrong?" he murmured back.

"Didn't you hear what I told your friend downstairs?"

At once, shock crossed Dennis's face, and he gasped, "You mean, you weren't shitting him? You really were married?"

"And he really died of AIDS," she growled—and, when Dennis didn't reply, she added, "You want me to leave?"

"Are you sick?" he breathlessly asked.

"No. Unfortunately."

"Unfortunately?"

Abruptly, Dennis grabbed Rudi's wrists, and with a stunned expression he saw the scar on her left one—and, after a brief moment of hesitation, he touched it. He touched it as if he were checking to see if it were real.

"Shit," was all he could say afterward.

"Do you want me to leave?" she demanded.

"Why would I want you to leave?"

"Aren't you afraid like your pal downstairs—like the whole fucking world?"

"Listen, my mom's a doctor at the hospital over here, and not only has she had AIDS patients, but she gets real pissed off when people treat them differently. So, no—I'm not afraid."

"I wish she had been Tommy's doctor," Rudi soon mumbled while averting her eyes a bit. "It got real bad sometimes. Not the doctor really—but just about everyone else. And no one ever did anything about it. I got so mad . . ."

"I can imagine."

"No, you can't. Nobody can."

With lots of sincerity, Dennis took Rudi's hand—and took it firmly. It was actually the first time a man had done that since Tommy's death, and, while she didn't quite feel the magic she always felt whenever Tommy touched her, it felt good. It felt more than good—so much so that she squeezed his hand. She also looked up into his unflinching eyes and whispered, "You keep amazing me."

"You know," he whispered back, with yet another of his smiles, "sometimes I even amaze myself."

"That I can believe," she told him with her very own smile, just before he put his arm around her and brought her close to him.

"I meant it," she insisted—"I'm not sleeping with you."

"Who said anything about sleeping?" he insisted back.

Suddenly, Rudi burst out into laughter—a happy laughter—one that overtook her and made her forget all the badness in her life, even if it did so only for a few short moments. And she was so full of cheer that she even slapped Dennis's thigh.

"I made you laugh!" he exclaimed, while pointing at her.

"For the first time in a long, long while," she said. "And for that you deserve a reward." She then lifted herself up a bit and gave him a small and gentle kiss on the cheek.

In his short life, Dennis had been kissed many times, and in many ways. Pretty much every way—including some incredibly crude ways. But no kiss felt quite like this. Perhaps because it was the first kiss that had genuine affection behind it—a kiss that meant something more than a means of arousal. So, for a long time he sat there dazed, even more so than when she rejected his overtures downstairs in the back room, or when she slammed him against the wall. At the same time, he felt some weird sensation running up and down his torso and all over his extremities, as if a whole bunch of neurons were firing everywhere at once. He also felt his heart beating fast—faster than he had ever experienced without having physically exerted himself beforehand.

Why? he asked himself. What was so different about the girl next to him? Sure, she was attractive, in spite of herself—but he had had far more beautiful women, in far more intimate ways. Chasing her had been nothing more than a lark—the ultimate goal of which was nothing more than getting another notch in his belt—something he could’ve shown his brothers the following morning in glee. But now, now everything had changed—and without his consent or understanding. And this scared him—it scared him more than just a little. But what really scared him was when he turned to Rudi and saw that not only was she unconscious but that blood was pouring out of her chest.

He gasped at this, unable to form words, let alone get them out of his mouth. Though he quickly regained most of his senses and he put one arm under Rudi’s knees and the other around her back, and he started lifting her up.

“What?” she mumbled.

“It’s all right,” he cried out. “I’m gonna get you to the hospital.”

“Hospital?”

“You, you’re . . .”

Suddenly, Dennis froze. He froze because he now saw there was no blood at all coming from Rudi’s chest.

“What?” he mumbled to himself while shaking his head over and over. Which was just before he gently placed Rudi back on the floor.

Afterward, he spun back to the bong, thinking that perhaps one of his brothers had spiked his stash as some kind of sick joke. But if that were so, he asked himself, why wasn’t he still hallucinating?

He had no answers. He had no answers for anything that had happened to him that night. So, while still feeling a bit shaky, he grabbed a blanket off his bed and put it around both of them. Then, he rested his head on Rudi’s—something that calmed him somehow. It calmed him so much that he soon drifted off into the most peaceful sleep he had ever known.

Chapter Eleven

WHEN DENNIS AWOKE he felt a strange unexplainable fear, and a loneliness, too.

At first, he couldn't understand why—but then he realized Rudi was gone. So, he called out her name—and, when he got no reply, he rose to his feet and opened his door, before calling out her name again—this time louder.

Again, there was no response, and he hurried over to his open window, and, seeing her skipping down the front steps—much as she had done the night before—he stuck his head out and shouted her name as loud as he could.

Just like the night before, she came to a dead stop, prior to reluctantly turning back to him.

“Morning, sunshine,” he told her with a smiling face—one held up by his hands, which in turn were held up by the windowsill.

“Morning,” she told him back—not quite so smilingly.

Right then, a trio of brothers exited the house, and, as they passed Rudi, they grinned at her knowingly. Which caused her to become annoyed—something she expressed to Dennis when she said, “So, I guess I’m gonna have a reputation.”

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

“You didn’t . . .”

“Didn’t what?”

“While I was sleeping . . .”

“I told you—we’re an honor fraternity. And besides,

to be perfectly honest, I really don't need to stoop to things like that."

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

"You must've dreamed it," he uttered, with his smile suddenly gone—something Rudi couldn't help notice. Then, she shrugged and turned around, and headed off down the block.

"Where you going?" he demanded.

Like before, she stopped, but this time she didn't turn around. Instead she uttered, "I'm going home. I've got a lot to do today."

"Such as?"

"Such as registering for classes, and buying books."

"That won't take all day."

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

"So, you're one of those."

She didn't have an answer for this, so she simply started walking.

"You have to eat sometime," he continued—and, when she didn't say anything back, he added, "Come on—have dinner with me. Six o'clock—at the Rathskeller."

Rudi didn't reply, but she did move faster—a lot faster.

"I'm gonna take that as a yes!" he hollered.

"It's a maybe!" she hollered back—something that made Dennis's smile become as big and bright as the sun.

AS RUDI REACHED a neighboring fraternity she saw something that caused her to come to a quick halt. She saw two guys standing on the roof—one of which was holding a frightened cat over the edge.

"I'm telling you," he said to his friend, "cats always

land on their feet.”

“Bull,” his friend said back.

“I’ll show you.”

“You drop that cat,” Rudi barked, “and the next thing dropping off the roof will be you.”

Neither boy said anything back. They just stared at Rudi, unable to comprehend anything about her. Which just made her angrier, and she glared at them with her hands on her hips. She glared until the guy with the cat gently released it on the roof. Then, she shook her head and continued on her way.

Though she was so upset about a whole host of things that she really wasn’t certain whether she was on the way back to the dorm or back to New Jersey, and only became so when she saw a certain smile in her mind’s eye.

DENNIS JOYFULLY SKIPPED down the house stairs with his feet barely touching the wood, and he just as joyfully skipped into the main room, which was stinking from the stench of stale beer coming from both the walls and the sticky floor. It was also occupied by a half-dozen brothers, who were drinking the remains of one of the previous night’s kegs while watching a pornographic video on a big TV in front of the room.

Seeing Dennis and his big smile, Johnny smiled as well, before reaching up to give him a high-five. “You are the man!” he howled.

“I will never doubt you again after nailing that angry punk chick,” added Rich.

“It’s like Proust said,” Johnny remarked, “you can fuck any chick if you’re willing to stay up half the night listening to her bitch.”

“Proust?” Dennis skeptically remarked back.

“So I’m paraphrasing.”

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

"But you at least got a blowjob, right?" Johnny asked hopefully.

"No," Dennis replied. "It's not like that. She's actually—"

"—Then, what were you two doing all night?" Rich interrupted. "Listening to records?"

"Well . . ."

"Say it ain't so, Joe!" Johnny exclaimed.

"Maria's been telling me about this Rudi for a long time," Chuck interjected. "Not even you have a chance."

"Is that so?" Dennis retorted with great indignation, while suddenly forgetting everything he felt and experienced the night before.

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

"Hey, I can be Superman," Dennis insisted, while pointing to himself. "I can be Byron."

"Sure thing, dude."

"Exactly how sure are you?"

Chuck responded by taking out his wallet, and he looked inside before pulling out some cash and saying, "Fifty dollars sure."

"I'll have her by the end of the semester," Dennis proudly proclaimed—"if not sooner. *Way* sooner."

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

"You're on!"

"Can I get in on this?" Rich inquired.

"Me, too!" came the voices of others.

Right then—with even more indignation than before—Dennis turned to them and murmured, "Oh, ye of

little faith. Some brothers you are.”

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

RUDI ROSE IN the service elevator of her dorm, not sure what to think about Dennis, or her feelings for him.

She just assumed there would never be anyone but Tommy. But she never counted on meeting someone like Dennis—someone so unexpected and so unpredictable—someone who made her feel something approaching alive. Still, in spite of his many positive qualities, she well knew he had many not-so-positive ones. She also knew he wasn’t anywhere close to Tommy in any respect apart from looks, and she further knew she couldn’t possibly have the same feelings again, especially with the same kind of intensity. What’s more, she didn’t want to have those feelings again, as she truly believed once was more than enough for a lifetime.

Finally, she asked herself, how could she even be thinking of such things with her husband not even dead a year?

All of a sudden, the elevator door opened on her floor, and she stormed out, bumping right into Jared, who was heading into the elevator—and the two glared at each other for a few moments before each went their way. Though, after only a few steps, Rudi stopped and looked back—and again wondered about him. She wondered until the elevator closed.

Afterward, she headed down the corridor—and she soon heard the sounds of a television playing from inside the closed door of her room and the sounds of sex coming from the one next to it—the latter of which was the

very last thing she wanted to hear. So, after quickly unlocking her door, she burst through it, and found Maria and Sandra watching TV together in their underwear from the empty bed.

"Someone didn't sleep in their bed last night," spoke Maria with a sly grin, while holding an ice pack to her aching head.

Rudi smiled a bit at this, before sitting down next to the two on the bed.

"How you guys feeling?" she then asked.

"Not as good as you, I bet," Maria replied.

"Nothing happened."

"Yeah, I'm sure you two were just listening to records all night."

"Actually . . ."

"You should be careful," Sandra interjected, "that guy has slept with half the school."

"Yeah," added Maria, "and the other half is mostly men."

"There's nothing to worry about," Rudi told them both, as well as herself. "Trust me."

"He's gorgeous, Rudi," Maria insisted.

"He looks like a Ken doll," Rudi insisted back.

With lots of exasperation, Maria turned to Sandra and uttered, "She says it like it's a bad thing. Even *I* had a Ken doll."

"Me, too," Sandra said, with an embarrassed grin.

Maria afterward returned her gaze to Rudi and told her: "You know, if I were straight . . ."

"But you're not," Sandra retorted, before using her index finger to gently lead Maria's face toward her own, so she could sweetly kiss her.

Watching them, Rudi couldn't help smile. Though she well knew she was doing so with a bit of envy. And, not

wanting to feel this, she turned toward the television and saw a middle-aged woman, who had even stranger makeup than her—a woman who was crying in front of a large congregation.

“What the hell are you guys watching?” Rudi asked, while shaking her head with great confusion.

“*The PTL Club*,” answered Sandra.

“The what?”

“Praise the Lord!” Maria explained.

“And why are you watching it?”

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

“A-ha.”

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

“How does her roommates put up with that?” Rudi asked, while staring at the wall separating the two rooms—a wall that was barely blocking the noise coming from the other side.

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

Suddenly, the television camera focused on the audience in the church and Maria pondered, “I wonder if the Preacher is somewhere there?”

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

“Still . . .”

Subconsciously, Rudi turned in the direction of Jared’s room, and while thinking about him, she uttered, “Are you guys sure about him?”

“Why?” Maria uttered back, sounding almost offended.

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

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

“You like him?” Maria gasped.

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

“Well,” Sandra said, as she got up and approached one of the dressers, “I’m gonna try to run some of last night off me.” She then put on a T-shirt and shorts while Maria turned to Rudi and once again grinned slyly, prior to cooing, “So, when are you seeing Dennis next?”

“What makes you think I’m seeing him at all?” Rudi growled—to which Maria gave her friend a look that said, “Are you kidding me?”

All Rudi could do in response was shrug, and timidly add, “What’s a Rathskeller?”

Chapter Twelve

RUDI WAS EXHAUSTED after a full day of running around the urban campus in the oppressive heat and humidity—first to sign up for classes, and then to get and drag her books and supplies home. All of which was only made worse by wearing Tommy's jacket the entire day.

So, the last thing she wanted to do that evening was go out again—and she particularly didn't want to deal with Dennis, and everything this would entail. She even thought about blowing the dinner off, especially as she hadn't given him a firm commitment anyway. But, a little after a quarter to six, she found herself putting Tommy's jacket back on over her plain white T-shirt, and she also found herself looking into the full-length mirror on the back of the closet door. At the same time, she pictured Dennis with her, and she saw they were a preposterous couple—even more preposterous than she and Tommy had been. Which strangely made her more eager to see him that night—so she could put an end to this absurdity right away.

Toward this end, she grabbed her Walkman off her bed, and, after placing it in her jacket pocket, she said goodbye to Sandra—who was reading a book on her bed, and afterward she headed to the door, just as Maria tipsily entered the room with a half-empty wine cooler in her hand.

"Again with the jacket," Maria uttered, with a slight slur. "Do you know how hot it is outside?"

"I think I can dress myself," Rudi replied.

"You're really gonna wear Tommy's jacket on a

date?”

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

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

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

“It must be from all those frat guys.”

“They’re a bad influence on you.”

“And you were a good one?”

Rudi tried to make believe this remark didn’t sting, but she wasn’t too successful—and, in order to think of something else, she pointed at the cooler in Maria’s hand and said, “Again with the drinking?”

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

At once, the two of them glanced at Sandra, who was looking at her book as if she hadn’t heard a thing. Though she couldn’t hide the hurt.

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

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

“Yes, Mom.”

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

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

“That was a joke,” Rudi insisted.

But Maria wasn’t listening. She just rushed out of the room and slammed the door behind herself.

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

“You’re not the one who needs to apologize,” Sandra

remarked, with her eyes still focused on her book, even if her mind wasn't.

AFTER RUDI LEFT her room, she walked down the corridor in the direction of the service elevator, with her white sea bag across her shoulder and her headphones strapped to her ears. But even with her music playing, she could hear the sound of a television coming from Brad and Pete's open room. She also could hear that it was broadcasting a news report about the AIDS crisis—and she further heard the two making a litany of terrible jokes about it. Even worse, they were laughing uproariously at them—at least until they saw Rudi in their doorway, with a red face and eyes full of fire.

Suddenly, she spit onto her hand before wiping it along the door frame.

"What was that for?" Brad demanded.

"You just never know who's infected," she told him, before heading off. "You just never know."

"What the hell's her problem?" Pete uttered.

"She's a fucking psycho!" Brad shouted out into the hallway—"that's her fucking problem!"

ON THE GROUND floor of the dorm Jared stepped into the empty service elevator and pressed the button for the 9th floor.

Slowly, the door started to close. But, before it could do so fully, Vicki slid inside the cabin, with a big smile on her face—one in anticipation of another big night of booze, drugs, and sex. Though her smile dissipated when she saw who was in the elevator with her—someone who had made her uncomfortable from the first time she had seen him. This discomfort made her move as far from Jared as possible, seconds before the elevator started

moving upward.

At the same time, the two exchanged furtive and inquisitive glimpses. Jared, in particular, found Vicki interesting—almost as interesting as he found Rudi. On the surface, Vicki was as vile as anyone he ever knew—or, at least, almost anyone—but he knew from deep personal experience that vileness wasn't always what it appeared. So, he tried to see if there was something else lurking inside her.

As for Vicki, she could tell Jared was probing her—that he was trying to get underneath the veneer she had worked so hard to perfect. And she didn't like it. She didn't like it at all. She even crossed her arms to protect herself against him. But this didn't work. It didn't stop his glimpses—glimpses so different from those of other men. She was so perturbed by him that, when the elevator door open, she flew out—almost smacking right into Rudi, who—still angry from the encounter with Brad and Pete—glared at her. And Vicki all-too-happily glared right back, and the two continued glaring at each other as Vicki started down the corridor.

Rudi then turned around, and she almost bumped into Jared again, who had just exited the elevator himself.

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

He responded with a look of unmistakable hurt in his eyes—something that surprised her—and he afterward rushed away.

“I . . .” she softly mumbled, well out of his earshot, while watching him with an expression of guilt plastered on her face.

Suddenly, the elevator door closed behind her—and she spun around and slammed her fist against it while howling, “God, how I hate this fucking school! And it

hasn't even started yet!"

RUDI STEPPED INTO the cool lobby of the Marvin Center—a large five-story building that served as the campus hub, and she headed toward the elevator bank. There she noticed a bulletin board upon which was pinned a poster for a weekly lecture series taking place in the auditorium a few steps away—something that piqued her interest. The series included presidential candidate Walter Mondale in late October, but that wasn't what piqued her interest. What piqued it was a speaker visiting the school in just a few days: Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges.

Seeing his name, Rudi couldn't help recall the story that had meant so much to Tommy and her. So, she thought about writing down the date and time of the event. However, she quickly realized it would only bring back memories—memories she had come to the school to escape. Besides, she told herself, it would be taking place right in the middle of her Calculus class.

Still, she hesitated for long time before reaching for the elevator button. After which she noticed something just above the poster—an ad written on a scrap of paper—one that offered a job at a community center not far away. The ad stated: "Want to Help People and Earn a Little Cash at the Same Time?"

Rudi almost nodded, before reaching into her bag for a pen and her own scrap of paper.

AFTER ENTERING A dark dining hall on the top floor of the building, Rudi saw Dennis sitting by himself at a table near the serving area.

He saw her as well and waved—before giving her one of his smiles.

Hesitantly, she waved back, and, after taking a deep breath, she turned off her Walkman and started toward him—feeling more and more unsure of herself with each step. Which is why she started moving slower and slower. Though finally she was in front of him and his big smile—and she noticed a pitcher of beer on the table, which she pointed at while saying, “You know I don’t drink.”

“This is for me,” he insisted, before taking a sip directly from the large glass container—after which he added, “I didn’t know what you wanted to drink.”

Rudi grimaced at this, for a reason even she wasn’t certain of.

“What?” he asked, while glumly noticing Tommy’s name stitched in her jacket.

“Nothing,” she told him, and she afterward headed toward a soda fountain a short distance away, where she poured herself a Diet Coke.

“I ordered us a pizza,” he told her, as she walked over to the register. “It should be out any minute.”

She didn’t reply. She just paid the cashier and took a seat across from Dennis, with her grimace still intact.

“Have, have I offended you somehow?” he murmured.

“I’m just in a really bad mood,” she replied.

“Not because of me?”

“Because of just about everything else. Though I have a strong feeling you’re not going to improve it.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Hey,” suddenly came the voice of the cashier, “your pizza’s ready.”

Quickly, Dennis jumped up and paid for the pie, and he brought it back to the table along with a couple of paper plates and lots of napkins.

Right away, Rudi saw that the pizza was covered in sausage, and, after crossing her arms, she uttered, "I'm a vegetarian."

"Did you know," Dennis uttered back, with his smile much bigger than before, "did you know that 'vegetarian' is an old Indian word for 'bad hunter'?"

Dennis chuckled at this, despite knowing he was far from the best of hunters himself. Perhaps he even chuckled because of this. Though Rudi had a much different reaction: she frowned.

"Jeez," he exclaimed, "it was sure funny when I heard it." He afterward moved the sausage from one half of the pie to the other and added, "Sorry, I didn't know."

"You could've asked," she stated, with her arms still crossed.

"Most chicks like it when I order for the both of us."

"Well, I'm not a 'chick.'"

"Sorry."

"I bet you wouldn't eat that," she then remarked while pointing at the meat, "if you knew how they made it."

"I've actually seen them make it," he replied. "My mom's Czech, and a while back she took me to this film called . . . I'm not sure how you would translate it—it's not even a real word in Czech. Anyway, it takes place in this small town and it's about how everyone was shortening things after World War I—hair, hemlines—you name it. And, and they actually showed them making the sausage right on screen. My mom says nobody gets upset about that kind of stuff over there."

"And what about you? Did you get upset?"

"Me? I couldn't eat pig for months."

"Really?"

"All right—so maybe it was closer to a year. But then

I got over it. Life goes on.”

“A nice trite sentiment.”

“Well, *excuse me*. Not everyone is profound all the fucking time.”

“Just forget about it.”

Rudi then took a slice of pizza and blew on it, while noticing Dennis’s attention was on the large projection TV against the wall to the left of her. Which made her recall her first date with Tommy, and how he couldn’t keep his eyes off her, especially when she ate. She also recalled how he often watched her eat well after that first date, even when he was deathly ill—and did so with great joy, as if he were witnessing something special. And only now did she realize how incredible this was, and she only realized it when she was with someone who wasn’t watching her—when she was with someone who didn’t find anything special in her eating—someone who wasn’t Tommy and who would never be Tommy.

Trying to ignore this, she took a bite of pizza, with much displeasure—something Dennis saw when he finally returned his attention to her.

“I know—it ain’t the best pizza ever,” he said. “Maybe one night I could take you up to the Zebra Room in Georgetown.”

Reluctantly, Rudi swallowed what was in her mouth, before dropping the rest onto her plate and growling, “There’s no love.”

“Excuse me?” he uttered.

“There’s this great pizza place in New Jersey where I live. The crust is thin much like this, and the ingredients are probably not that different, either. The difference is that they put love into it, and you can taste it.”

“We can go to the Zebra Room right now.”

“You’re not listening to what I’m saying.”

"I'm not understanding what you're saying."

"You're like this pizza, Dennis—you're just going through the motions."

"That's not true."

"The only thing that interests you about me is that I'm not interested."

"That's not true. You have no idea how much it's not true."

"Then, tell me, what interests you about me?"

"I don't know—everything."

"It's not my looks."

"You're a pretty girl."

"I'm anything but."

"You are. And the fact you can't see that only makes you prettier. What's more, you got something no one else has got."

"What?"

"I can't even describe it. It's like this crazy energy. It just shoots out of you like arrows—like it's doing right now. Shit, you make me feel like a little kid who's trying to grasp a lightning bolt."

"How do you know no one else has this?"

"I know."

"Because you've slept with half the school?"

"That's a *slight* exaggeration."

"How many then?"

"I . . ."

"You can't even count them, can you?"

"I . . ."

"Dennis, you're not a bad guy. In fact, there's this wonderful decency in you struggling to rise through the muck. I can see it, and I like it. I like you. I really do. I like you more than I want to like you. But this isn't happening. Ever."

She then wiped her mouth with a napkin and stood up before walking out.

“Can I call you?” he asked.

She didn’t answer, so he added, “I’m gonna take that as a yes!”

However, unlike that morning, this time she didn’t say “maybe.” This time she just walked out the door. And all he could do was lower his head.

AFTER RUDI RETURNED to her room, as soon as she opened the door, she could hear Maria and Sandra arguing behind the alcove curtain—something that did little to mute their voices.

“You’re such a fucking downer!” Maria howled. “And you wanna bring me down, too!”

“At least, I’m not a rude bitch!” Sandra howled back. “At least, at least I don’t purposely hurt people I love!”

Just then, the two started cursing each other, back and forth—with their voices getting louder and louder.

Rudi sighed at this and went into the bathroom to remove her makeup—and she noticed Sandra’s bottle of prescription sleeping pills in the medicine cabinet—something she wished she never saw.

WHEN RUDI LEFT the bathroom her roommates were still screaming at each other—and, not knowing what to do about it, she just sat down on her bed and started undressing.

Suddenly, the sounds of sex started pouring out from the room next door—and she fell back onto her bed and put her pillow over her head while murmuring, “God, how I hate this fucking school. And it hasn’t even started yet!”

AS DENNIS STRODE up the front steps of the fraternity house he did so feeling rotten—a feeling that was quite foreign to him.

Then, he recalled something Rudi said.

There's this wonderful decency in you.

Over the years, Dennis had heard almost every compliment imaginable from a woman, especially during moments of intimacy. But this one was different. Maybe because it was sincere and wasn't said for something in return. Or maybe just maybe it was because it made him think he could be something more than what he was—a something he only pretended to like. Whatever it was, he was still thinking about Rudi's words when he entered the darkened main room and saw a bunch of people—both men and women—watching a movie on TV.

“So, how'd it go?” Rich asked with a wry smile, sensing Dennis's despondency.

Dennis responded by lowering his eyes, which caused Rich to grin and rub his palms together, right before uttering, “What will I spend all that money on? Beer, perhaps?”

All of a sudden, Dennis forgot all about Rudi's compliment and rose his eyes—and he also forced a smile as he said, “Last time I looked September had just begun.”

“And May will be here before you know it.”

Dennis didn't reply. He just looked around the room and spotted a redheaded girl he had had a few cheap dalliances with—a girl who—while not looking anything like Rudi—at least had a similar body type.

What's more, she was smiling at him—with what could only be described as bedroom eyes.

DENNIS PASSIONATELY KISSED the red-haired girl on his bed. Or, at least, he tried to feign passion.

Unfortunately, no matter what he tried, nothing would work. He just couldn't get excited.

Why? he kept asking himself, as he continued through the motions. She was a beautiful woman—more beautiful than Rudi in every tangible way. Unfortunately, he realized right then that it was the intangible ways that meant everything—and, when it came to these, the woman he was with was no match for Rudi at all.

Though he went on with the act, and she soon started undressing him.

There's this wonderful decency in you.

Hearing Rudi's words again in his head, Dennis abruptly stopped. He not only stopped his act but stopped the woman from undressing him. Which was so alien to his nature that he wondered if he were no longer in control of himself.

"What's wrong?" the redhead gasped, with both frustration and annoyance.

"That's a good question," he gasped back. "A real good one."

Chapter Thirteen

ON THE FIRST day of classes Rudi entered a large, packed, and dimly lit lecture hall in the basement of a building across the street from the Marvin Center, and she took a seat in the back while waiting for her Art History class to begin.

Suddenly, she heard a familiar female voice—one she wasn't too excited about hearing.

"We'll probably meet up in Majorca for Christmas or something," Vicki said to a boy who was sitting between her and Rudi.

"Cool," the boy replied, with both his eyes and mind focused on Vicki's cleavage.

Against her will, Rudi turned to the pair, and, at just about the same time, Vicki saw her, and she sneered. Ignoring this—or at least trying to ignore it—Rudi looked away. But she couldn't even try to ignore the snickering and whispering of the two, especially when she could see them pointing at her through the corners of her eyes.

Finally, she spun toward Vicki and growled, "Did you take lessons in rudeness or were you just born that way?"

Vicki grinned at this while she thought of a comeback, and when one finally came she uttered, "Tell me, is it true you were on death row?"

"I will be very soon."

"How'd you get into this school anyway? What, was it on some underprivileged scholarship?"

"Was yours in whoring?"

"Oooohhhh!" the boy gasped, before trying to hide his smile under his hand.

“Well . . .” Vicki started to say.

“Maybe you can also get a minor in porn,” Rudi interrupted. “Or you could even do a double major. That’s ‘double major,’ Vicki—not ‘double penetration.’”

“Ouch!” the boy cried out with a cackle, right before Vicki angrily slapped his shoulder, causing him to become instantly quiet. She then turned to Rudi and barked, “Fuck you!”

“Should I put my name at the bottom of the list?” Rudi replied. “You must be booked at least until spring.”

Again, the boy cackled—and Vicki angrily spun toward the front of the room. And so did Rudi.

AFTER A DULL hour spent looking at slides of paintings in the dark, Rudi headed downtown to see about the job she read about in the Marvin Center.

As she did, she noticed how the neighborhood changed from upscale to downtrodden right after passing the White House. She also noticed all the hopelessness, and, it was in this environment, she found the small community center—one that had a Help Wanted sign hanging inside one of its dirty and cracked windows.

After taking a deep breath, she turned off her Walkman and put the headphones in the pocket of her jacket, and she walked inside the office, where sitting behind an old desk not far from the door was a woman barking into a phone. This woman was in her mid-twenties, with ebony skin and a short afro—and her name was Jeannine Clark.

“Look,” she hollered, “there are just not enough beds. And I need help. I can’t do this all by myself.” She then noticed Rudi standing in front of her—and she especially noticed the girl’s hair and makeup—and she gave her a look that said, “What the hell are you doing here?”

Rudi responded by turning away from the woman slightly, and she saw hanging on the wall behind her lots of pictures of Jeannine's extended family, as well as multiple diplomas from John Hopkins University.

"Can I call you right back?" the woman soon said, with her eyes stuck on Rudi—and afterward she hung up and growled, "What can I do for you?"

"I'm here about the job," Rudi replied, after returning her attention to the woman.

"What job?"

"The one I read about in the Marvin Center."

"You're the third asshole today. When I find out who put that ad up I'm gonna wring their neck."

"You didn't?"

"Hell no!"

Confused, Rudi turned back to the window and pointed at the Help Wanted sign—before saying, "What about that?"

"I need someone who knows the streets," Jeannine replied—"not some good-for-nothing college shit."

"Then you need me."

"You? *Please*."

"Why not me?"

"Where you from?"

"Irvington."

"Irvington what?"

"Irvington, New Jersey."

"Where in Irvington, New Jersey?"

"Stuyvesant Avenue. It's—"

"—I know where it is. I'm originally from Newark. You trying to tell me you're from the projects?"

"Why wouldn't you believe me?" Rudi growled, while thinking about storming out of the office right then—which was just before she added, "My skin too light?"

Jeannine grinned a little at this—liking Rudi's spunk. She also pointed to a chair by the side of her desk and said, "Have a seat . . ."

Rudi, in reply, told Jeannine her name, and she afterward hesitantly grabbed the chair prior to sitting in front of the woman.

"What's your major, Rudi?" Jeannine subsequently inquired, sounding much like a police detective.

"I haven't decided," Rudi answered.

"You must have some idea."

"I'm thinking math."

"Why?"

"Because they say girls are bad in math."

"Why else?"

"I don't know. It seems like one of the few subjects with objective truth."

"Better answer. But math is far, far removed from what we do here."

"What exactly is that?"

"We're kinda like private social workers, doing the work nobody else wants to do—or even hear about."

"Which is?"

Jeannine responded by pointing to the wall on her left, where hung a large map of the city—one containing many handwritten circle marks. And she told Rudi: "Our prime concern is getting people off the streets. Right now we're in the epicenter of the worst homeless crisis in America, and we need to change this fact before winter. Because, while winter here isn't like it is up north, it's deadly cold enough—especially when you're outside all night. And I can tell you without a doubt that we ain't gonna solve this problem with no parabolic equations."

"And you think you would with something I'd learn in a sociology book?" Rudi retorted. "Or from some self-

important college professor who's never been outside a university?"

"No. That's why I don't want a college kid."

"But—"

"—What makes you think you can help these people?" Jeannine interrupted, while pointing out the window.

"I've worked with troubled people before," Rudi insisted—"at a drug counseling center back home. And I've been there, too. I ran away dozens of times, and . . ."

"And what?"

"And I've had problems with drugs myself."

"You clean right now?"

"Yeah."

"You go to NA?"

"Yeah."

"Let me see a key chain," the woman demanded, before snapping her fingers.

With some exasperation, Rudi dug into her sea bag, and, after scrounging around in it for a few seconds, she pulled out a gray Narcotics Anonymous key chain, which she threw at Jeannine, who both caught it and briefly glanced at it.

"Satisfied?" Rudi barked.

"The pay's shit," Jeannine replied. "Minimum wage. Sometimes it's late."

"I don't care."

"But the question is this, Rudi: *do you care?* Because this isn't like working in the school library or at a cafeteria, you have to care. You can't just sleepwalk through it. You-have-to-care."

"I care."

"I need fifteen hours a week, at least. Sometimes more in times of emergency."

“Fine.”

“That’s not gonna cut into your party time?”

“I don’t party.”

“Fine. Come back Monday—exactly at four. Not four-thirty or even four-ten. *Four*. I’ll take you around town and give you a tryout. You’ll get two or three hours to show me what you got.”

Part of Rudi right then wanted to tell Jeannine to take her tryout and stuff it in a small out-of-the-way place. But the other part—the part that found the job intriguing—nodded, and afterward she stood up and started to leave.

“Hey!” Jeannine called out.

At once, Rudi came to a stop and turned around, just as Jeannine flung the key chain back at her, which Rudi caught just as the woman howled, “And take that damn sign down from the Marvin Center!”

WHEN RUDI GOT home she found Sandra alone lying on her bed, staring sadly up at the ceiling.

“Hey,” Rudi said to her.

“Hey,” she said back, without much emotion.

“Where’s Maria?”

Sandra just shrugged.

“Look,” Rudi went on, “if I’m in any way the cause of the problems you two are having . . .”

“You’re not,” Sandra insisted. “This started well before you came.”

“What started?”

“The drinking and partying.”

“Really? I had no idea.”

“I’m not real sure when it started exactly. Last semester maybe. But it’s getting worse. I’ve tried to look the other way . . .”

"That doesn't help. I can tell you that from experience."

"I guess we need to have a long talk. Oh, before I forget, about an hour ago or so the guard downstairs called. He said some woman was in the lobby wanting to speak to you."

"A woman?" Rudi uttered, before quickly exiting the room and even more quickly heading down the hallway—and, thinking it had been Mrs. Goodwin who had come, Rudi didn't even bother with the elevator and instead ran down the steps. Then, when she got to the bottom of them, she hustled up to the security guard and breathlessly uttered, "Hi—supposedly some woman was looking for me?"

"You Rudi?" the man replied.

"Yeah. Did this woman leave a message?"

"Nope. But she's still sitting right over there."

Turning in the direction of the man's index finger, Rudi saw that it wasn't Mrs. Goodwin waiting for her, but a tallish and elegantly dressed woman about her mother-in-law's age, who had long light brown hair and similar colored eyes. And, with a bit of hesitation, she walked across the lobby to her and said, "Hello."

"Hello," the woman mumbled with a faint accent—clearly unnerved by Rudi's appearance.

"I'm Rudi."

"You are?" the woman gasped, with great surprise.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. Please, won't you have a seat?"

Rudi was now even more hesitant than before, but she sat down across from the woman and said, "What is it you want?"

"My name is Katerina Lobkowicz," the woman replied. "Vilem is my son."

“Oh. So, so, you’re a . . .”

“A princess? Yes, I suppose. But as you can see I don’t wear a tiara.”

“I . . .”

“I would’ve visited you sooner, but—”

“—How did you find me?”

“We hired someone. Unfortunately, you were not that easy to find.”

“But why?”

“So, so I could thank you in person,” the woman said, with a slightly breaking voice.

“I really didn’t do anything,” Rudi insisted.

“That’s not what the doctors say. That’s not what Vilem says.”

“Is he doing okay?”

“Better. He still has a long struggle ahead of him, but now there’s at least hope. You’ve given us hope.”

“Really I . . .”

“The man we hired to find you said that your home is in northern New Jersey. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“So, will you be returning there when you’re not at school?”

“Why are you asking?”

“Perhaps you could come over for tea at our Manhattan apartment one afternoon when you’re back—perhaps during the Thanksgiving holiday.”

“I don’t know.”

“Please. Vilem would be so happy to see you. He talks about you all the time.”

“He does?”

“We’re so thankful that he talks about anything.”

“I still don’t know.”

“Will you at least think about it?”

“I’ll think about it.”

Right then, the princess fell to one knee in front of Rudi—something that more than surprised Rudi, and afterward the woman took Rudi’s hand before gently kissing it. Which was just before she whispered, “Thank you again. Thank you for giving us back our son.”

Chapter Fourteen

WHILE SITTING IN her Calculus class listening to the teacher describe multiple integrals in a dull monotone voice, Rudi glanced up at the clock on the wall and saw that it was just past 3:20.

All that afternoon, in spite of promising herself to forget all about Borges' lecture that day, she couldn't get the details of it out of her head.

2:00 - 3:30. Marvin Center Auditorium.

Eventually, Rudi could think about nothing else, and she stood up and left the room—despite there being more than thirty minutes left in class. And she afterward rushed out into the sweltering heat—in the direction of the Marvin Center many blocks away, getting inside the lobby just as a small group of people were exiting the auditorium.

Right then—while hoping she wasn't too late—she ran into the hall and almost bumped into the person she least expected to see there: Jared. He, too, was surprised to see her, and for a few moments the two looked into each other's eyes unsurely before Jared walked off. At the same time, Rudi rushed toward the podium, where a middle-aged Asian woman with blonde hair was helping a tall old man collect his things—a man whose right eye seemed almost completely shut.

"Mr. Borges?" Rudi called out, as she came to a stop a short distance from him, with sweat pouring down her face.

"Yes?" the man replied with a thick Spanish accent, while looking at Rudi in a way that indicated he couldn't

see her well.

"Hi."

"Hello."

"My name is Rudi."

"That is a pretty name," he said to her with a gentle smile—one that made her feel warm all over.

"Thanks," she said to him back. "Actually, I wanted to thank you for something else."

"Thank me? Thank me for what?"

"Your stories. They were a great comfort to my husband before he died. And to me, too. Especially 'The Secret Miracle.' It, it actually inspired our wedding."

Just then, Rudi lowered her suddenly watery eyes and added, "It also gave us hope. And that's no small thing."

"I gather your husband was very young," the old man uttered, clearly moved by her emotion.

"Yes," she answered, with her eyes still downcast.

"I am sorry for your loss."

"Yeah, well," Rudi replied while wiping her tears, which had mixed with her perspiration to the point that the two were indistinguishable, "I don't want to take up any more of your time. Again, thanks."

Rudi afterward turned around and started rushing off.

"Please wait," Borges called out.

Quickly, Rudi came to a stop and spun toward the man.

"My assistant and I were just about to have an early dinner," he went on, "and if you . . ."

"I couldn't," Rudi told him.

"Please. I do not know anyone in this city, and Miss Kodama here is already terribly bored with my company."

"That is not true," the blonde woman muttered, with just a bit of exasperation.

“Please,” Borges told Rudi. “You would actually be doing me a favor.”

AT THE RED Lion—a quaint brick restaurant a short distance from the Marvin Center—Rudi, Borges, and his assistant had a quiet dinner. It was so quiet that barely a word had been spoken by the time the waiter collected their plates.

Finally, Rudi got up enough courage to ask the great man a question that had long been on her mind. So, after taking a quick sip of water, she uttered, “I’ve been wondering . . .”

“About what?” Borges asked, happy to get some kind of conversation started.

“Your stories—they don’t read at all like fiction, even the fantastic elements. Especially them. They read like you’re retelling actual events—events you have first-hand knowledge about.”

“That, of course, is my style.”

“I realize that, but still . . . I can usually tell when something’s phony. I especially know when what I’m reading is bullshit—excuse my language. I know when something is made up. And I don’t get that feeling when I read your work.”

“What exactly do you want to know?”

“Have the things you’ve written about actually happened?”

Borges smiled. Another gentle one.

“Are you smiling because it’s true,” Rudi went on, “or because you think I’m crazy?”

“Maybe it is a little of both,” he answered. “You see, I am not your typical fiction writer. I do not have the imagination to make up plots and characters and other such things. I write only what I know intimately. So,

maybe I am a little crazy, too. And maybe I am not so ashamed of it."

"The thing is lots of strange occurrences have happened to me over the past few years," Rudi went on. "Unexplainable occurrences."

"Such as?" inquired Borges.

"It's so weird, because I used to be such a realist—to the extreme. I never believed in anything I couldn't see, nor did I believe in anybody—because how can you really see someone—see what they really think? I only believed in fact. The fact that this whole world was rotten. Then, then came along Tommy—my future husband. And with him came these strange visions—and it wasn't just me who had them. He shared them with me."

"What kind of visions?"

"I'm not sure—I guess they were visions of our mutual subconsciousness, as well as visions of our future—in a twisted sort of way. We also saw and experienced—I don't know—perhaps it was even Heaven. At least Tommy thought so. And when we kissed—when we kissed we often heard music."

Once again, Borges gently smiled.

"I'm not speaking metaphorically," Rudi insisted.

"My dear," Borges insisted back, "where do you think the metaphor came from?"

"So, you don't think I'm crazy?"

"That I cannot answer. But do you remember when you were a small child? You probably saw all sorts of fantastic things, especially in the dark of night. Am I right?"

"I suppose."

"Though, when you got older, these visions ceased. But did they cease because they never existed, or did they cease because your mind learned to ignore them?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"Neither do I. As a writer, I ask questions. That is what we are good at. We get into trouble when we believe we have the answers."

"Sometimes," Rudi continued, "sometimes I see my husband. Not all the time, of course. I mean, I don't see him right this minute. I only see him when I hit bottom—when I desperately need to see him—when my life depends on it."

"I have experienced something like this, too," Borges told her.

"You have?" Rudi muttered with astonishment.

"I was very close to my mother. And at times of need I swear I am speaking to her, and she to me. Not only in my dreams, but when I'm awake as well. Of course, a doctor or a scientist would just tell us that we are imagining all this. We are imagining it because we want to imagine it."

"And you believe them?"

"I believe this, whether right or wrong—wise or foolish: I believe when people form a close connection—a very close one—it can form a life of its own. And whether this life is real or only perceived doesn't matter. You should be happy to have formed such a connection. You should cherish it."

Now it was Rudi's turn to smile.

UNDER DARKENING SKIES, the three exited the restaurant and walked down a small set of stairs.

At the bottom, Rudi turned around and hugged the old man, who hugged her right back.

"You've helped me a lot," she murmured.

"I'm glad," he murmured back.

She then started slowly backing up while saying,

“Well, thank you for dinner.”

“No, *thank you*,” he said back, before taking a card from his inside jacket pocket—which he handed to her, before saying, “If you’d like, you can write me.”

“You better be careful,” she replied, right after taking the card—“I just might take you up on it.”

“It would make me happy. You see, when you get as old as me, you begin to wonder about your legacy. I think not just writers or famous people wonder about this—I believe we all do. So, that I’ve touched someone—that I’ll perhaps be remembered a little is important to me.”

“You’ll be remembered,” Rudi told him, a bit emotionally. “And a lot more than just a little.”

WHEN RUDI GOT home she found Maria alone watching TV, sitting on the empty bed with a beer can in her hand.

“Hi,” Rudi softly said.

“Hi, yourself,” Maria replied, just as softly.

“Where’s Sandra?”

Maria shrugged, prior to adding, “I’m not my sister’s keeper.”

“How long are you two gonna keep this up?”

“Can we talk about something else?”

“Like what?”

“Mrs. Goodwin called.”

“Thanks.”

“And she wasn’t the only one who called you. Dennis called again, too.”

“Yeah?”

“That must be the fifth time he’s called you—at least that I know about. And, what’s more, he almost sounded sincere. What did you do to him?”

“Nothing. That’s why he’s calling.”

“Ah,” Maria said with a grin, “I see. It’s all part of your strategy.”

“Nope,” replied Rudi. “I’ve never had a ‘strategy,’ and I never will.”

“Oh, come on—that’s how you get all these gorgeous guys to fall madly in love with you.”

“Can we talk about something else?”

“Like what?”

Rudi was just about to mention Maria’s drinking when she was interrupted by the groans of two people from next door—along with the sound of a banging bed.

“Doesn’t she ever take a night off?” Rudi howled, before picking up a pillow and throwing it at the wall. “I barely got to sleep last night.”

“I bet it’s quieter in Dennis’s room,” Maria cooed with a sly smile, before chugging the rest of her beer.

After doing this, she belched and crushed the can, prior to rising up and heading to the refrigerator to get another.

“How many is that?” Rudi asked, with obvious concern.

“One for every time Dennis has called you,” Maria growled.

Chapter Fifteen

MONDAY AFTERNOON, RIGHT after another boring Art History class, Rudi rushed out of the building, not wanting to be even a minute late for her tryout with Jeannine.

But she hadn't taken more than three steps outside when Dennis jumped in front of her with one of his smiles—causing her to stop, with a loud sigh.

"Hi," he uttered, while continuing to smile.

"Hi," she uttered back, unable to prevent a small smile from forming on her own face.

"You're a hard lady to get a hold of."

Rudi didn't exactly reply. She just walked off, with Dennis following her much like a puppy dog.

"I guess you didn't get my messages," he went on—"as in plural."

"I got them," she replied, while picking up her pace a bit.

"Well?" he replied back, while keeping up with her.

"I guess you don't understand what the word 'no' means. Maybe I should ask your mother how to say it in Czech."

"It's actually very close: '*ne*.'"

"*Ne*," she repeated. "Now have you gotten it?"

"I'm stubborn."

"And so am I."

She then rushed off even faster, but again he smilingly jumped in front of her, causing her once again to stop and sigh—and demand, "Now what?"

"You remembered," he replied.

“Remembered what?”

“That my mom was Czech. Most girls don’t remember anything I tell them. Sometimes they don’t even remember my name. But you, you remembered something utterly insignificant—something I just mentioned in passing.”

“So?”

“So, that means you actually cared about what I had to say. Which means you actually care, period.”

“Just fuck off,” she told him, with a shake of her head—though she said this through another smile.

“I won’t give up,” he told her before walking off, brimming with both confidence and optimism.

While watching him, Rudi couldn’t help wonder why she couldn’t stop liking him—and she only stopped wondering when someone grabbed her shoulder from behind. This caused her to spin around, and she saw the angry expression of Vicki, who had been staring at Rudi and Dennis—and staring with eyes full of jealousy.

“What do you want?” Rudi growled.

“God, you’re embarrassing,” Vicki replied, with an enormous sneer.

“What are you talking about?”

“You really think someone like Dennis would be interested in someone like you?”

“Why wouldn’t he be?”

“I guess you don’t have a mirror in your room.”

“I guess yours is on the ceiling.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“And you’re a whore.”

Vicki responded by trying to slap Rudi’s face. But Rudi easily caught her hand and bent it back, causing Vicki to fall to her knees in pain, which in turn caused everyone nearby to stare at them.

"You ever try to touch me again," Rudi barked while attempting to control her rage—"you even think about trying to touch me again, and it'll be your very last act."

"Let go of me!" Vicki shouted.

Rudi complied, by tossing Vicki's hand away—right before she stormed off.

"You freak!" Vicki screamed from her knees. "Everyone hates you! We all laugh at you behind your back! Even your dyke roommates!"

Rudi seemed to ignore this. But her eyes lowered just slightly, while wondering if what Vicki had said might be true. Which is when she took out her comfort music.

RUDI RUSHED INSIDE the community center, where she saw Jeannine rummaging through a file cabinet not far away.

"Sorry I'm late," Rudi muttered, right after taking off her headphones and putting them in her jacket pocket.

Jeannine at first didn't seem to react to this. She just kept looking through her cabinet. Though eventually—while pointing at a clock on the wall—she growled, "What time is it?"

"4:15," Rudi replied, with a bit of exasperation.

"And what time did I tell you to show up?"

"4:00. Look—"

"—Go home, Rudi."

"Look, I'm sorry—I got tied up beyond my control."

"I said, go home."

And Rudi almost did.

What was so great about this job anyway? she asked herself. Why would she want to work for such a horrible person? But for some reason the job did mean something to her, so she again tried to speak—only to be interrupted once more.

"I told you I need someone who cares," Jeannine uttered.

"I do care," Rudi uttered back. "I do."

Finally, Jeannine turned away from her files, and she looked at Rudi. She looked at her as if she were gauging her somehow.

"Come on," Rudi pleaded, "you said it was just a try-out—so give me a tryout. What do you have to lose? You don't even have to pay me."

AFTER TAKING THE Metro to Union Station, Rudi and Jeannine meandered through a neighborhood nearby, where Rudi couldn't help glance at the multitude of homeless people—and she wondered what it was about train stations that attracted people like this. Then, she remembered how Penn Station in Newark had once attracted her, and she suddenly realized these people likely weren't much different than her. She realized they were probably looking for the very same thing she had been seeking: an escape—regardless of how improbable it was.

Noticing Rudi's glances—and misinterpreting them—Jeannine, with just a bit of a grin, said, "You scared?"

Rudi's response was a look that said back, "You must be joking"—and afterward she added, "What are we doing here?"

"Like I told you before, we're trying to get these people off the streets."

"Are there shelters around here?"

"Not enough. And they have way too few beds."

"Then how are we supposed to help them?"

"The Lord will have to provide."

"Funny, I didn't take you for being religious."

"If I weren't, I'd never be able to come to work. Because this is what I see every day. *Every fucking day*. It just gets worse and worse all the time, and without faith I would never believe it could get better."

Suddenly, Jeannine came to a stop—and Rudi along with her.

"What?" Rudi uttered.

Jeannine replied by pointing down the road at a disheveled girl of fifteen, who was sitting in filth by the mouth of an alley with her head down.

"Who's that?" Rudi asked.

"Our first customer," Jeannine answered.

WITH RUDI A few steps behind her, Jeannine quietly came up to the girl, who was deathly pale with dirty black hair and sad blue eyes.

"Hey, Stac," Jeannine murmured, in a voice so sweet that it surprised Rudi.

Stacey, though, didn't respond to it, or even seem to notice the woman.

"How you doing, sweetie?" Jeannine went on.

Again, the girl didn't respond.

"Have you given any thought to my offer?" the woman then asked.

This time Stacey at least reacted—though only to shake her head.

"I'll get you home," Jeannine insisted. "I promise I will."

But Stacey just shook her head over and over, before adding, "I don't want nothing from you. Just leave me alone."

Instead, Jeannine knelt down in front of the girl and gently took both her hands, prior to saying, "You don't want to get assaulted again, do you?"

Angrily, Stacey pulled her hands away, and she turned from the woman. She also looked as if she were about to cry. Which Jeannine couldn't help see—and, with rising exasperation, she pleaded, "Stacey, please."

All of a sudden, Rudi grabbed Jeannine's shoulder—something that startled Jeannine and caused her to jump a bit. Then, she furiously spun toward Rudi, and, in a hushed tone barked, "What is it?"

"Can I talk to you?" Rudi softly replied, while pointing backward with her thumb.

"Not now!"

"It's important!"

Jeannine sighed deeply, but she stood up and walked with Rudi a few steps—after which she demanded, "What's so important?"

"Let me talk to her," Rudi demanded back.

"No one's stopping you!"

"Let me talk to her by myself."

"Why?"

"She's never gonna open up to someone like you."

"What do you mean, *someone like me*?"

"Someone old."

"I'm 27!"

"That's a million years old when you're her age! Come on, you remember what it's like."

Jeannine paused in thought, prior to shaking her head and saying, "I don't know."

"Just give me fifteen minutes," Rudi begged. "Those fifteen minutes I was late."

Once again, Jeannine sighed. Though she also noticed some other customers across the street—and she pointed at them while saying, "All right—I'll be just over there. But be careful—she probably has some kind of weapon."

"Trust me," Rudi replied, "I can take care of myself."

RUDI SAT DOWN next to Stacey, and noticed Jeannine staring at her skeptically from across the street—and she waved the woman away.

"All right—all right!" Jeannine mouthed with her hands raised, before heading toward the homeless people nearby. Though as she did she couldn't help peek at Rudi in a near continuous manner.

Ignoring this, Rudi turned to Stacey and whispered, "Hey."

But Stacey didn't reply, or even acknowledge Rudi was there. She just kept looking down into the filth.

"You're not gonna believe this," Rudi continued, "but I've been right here. Right where you are now. It was on a different street in a different city, but it was the same exact place."

Stacey shook her head, over and over.

"It's true," Rudi insisted. "I used to hang out on the streets all the time when I was your age—usually strung out on something. I had no mom, no dad. Not really."

"I only wish that were true," Stacey muttered.

"What do you mean?" Rudi muttered back.

No answer was forthcoming, so Rudi added, "Did they do something to you?"

Still, the girl wouldn't answer. So, Rudi said, "Hey, it's cool. You don't have to tell me. To be real honest, I never liked it when people tried to get involved in my shit. So, I sure ain't gonna be a hypocrite and do the same to you. You don't have to tell me nothing. We could just sit here all day long."

"Just leave me alone," Stacey growled, with her voice breaking a bit.

"I'm not doing anything to you."

“You want to send me home to . . .”

“I don’t want to send you nowhere. I told you, we can sit here all day if you want. Or longer. We could even hang together. Trust me—no one will ever lay a hand on you with me around.”

Suddenly, a couple of tears started falling down Stacey’s cheeks.

“What’s wrong?” Rudi asked. “Did I say something?”

At first, Stacey didn’t want to answer, but Rudi kept pressing—until the girl finally uttered, “Lay a hand on me.”

“Did someone . . .” Rudi mumbled.

“Just leave me the fuck alone!” the girl shouted. “You don’t care! Nobody does!”

“I care! I fucking care! Who fucking touched you?”

“My . . . he . . .”

“It’s okay. I get it. You don’t have to say the words.”

“And my mom just let him!” Stacey howled, with tears now pouring down her face uncontrollably.

Rudi, too, looked as if she were about to cry—and she told the girl in a firm voice: “It won’t happen again.”

“I won’t go back!”

“You’re not going back!”

“You’re gonna make me go back! I know it! And I’d rather die!”

“I don’t blame you for not believing me. I wouldn’t believe me, either. But I’m not leaving you, and I’m not letting anyone take you back.”

Hearing not only Rudi’s words but also the veracity of them, the girl stopped crying for just a moment, before hugging Rudi—who hugged her right back.

Watching all this from across the street was Jeannine, who was so shocked that she almost fell over herself.

INSIDE UNION STATION Jeannine and Rudi led a still frightened and well-beyond hesitant Stacey toward a smiling grandmotherly looking woman.

"It's all right, Stacey," Jeannine emotionally murmured to the girl, with her arm tightly around her—"this is Mrs. Simms. She works for that organization I was telling you about."

"Come, child," Mrs. Simms said, while offering her hand. "We don't want to miss our train."

Stacey, though, was even more hesitant—and she turned to Rudi, who mouthed, "I promised."

Stacey nodded, and she took the woman's hand, and the woman slowly led her off while saying to Jeannine, "I'll call you as soon as we get where we're going."

"Thank you," Jeannine replied. She then rubbed her watery eyes and headed out of the station with Rudi, who just then realized that at least one person that day was going to escape. Though, as they headed once again down the sad streets, a whole lot of doubt struck her.

"Is she really going to be all right?" she asked Jeannine.

"She will now," Jeannine insisted.

"You sure? I promised her."

"Don't worry—MARC is really good with these situations. It works a little like the old Underground Railroad. They'll get her away and give her a new identity, and a new family. She'll be safe. You have my word."

Suddenly, Jeannine stopped and said, "So, how does it feel?"

"Feel?" Rudi asked back.

"Helping someone."

"It feels kinda good. More than just kinda."

Jeannine smiled at this, but her smile quickly faded when she saw a heavysset and unkempt middle-aged

woman rambling toward them—a woman who had all her possessions in the shopping cart she was pushing—a “bag lady,” as they were commonly called.

“Oh, brother,” Jeannine murmured to herself, with a shake of her head.

“What?” Rudi murmured back.

The homeless woman was now only steps from them—and Jeannine forced a smile and uttered, “Hi, Thelma.”

Reluctantly, Thelma stopped, and she turned to the woman, prior to uttering back—without any emotion whatsoever—“Fuck off.”

“Nice to see you, too,” Jeannine replied.

Thelma then looked at Rudi and grimaced—and she said, “Your hair’s even more fucked up than mine.”

Rudi nodded at this a couple of times while trying to keep her mouth shut. Which was difficult, especially as there was something about Thelma that annoyed her greatly—something that had nothing to do with the woman’s insults.

“And I’ve seen blind women with better makeup,” Thelma went on.

“Yeah, well, who asked you?” Rudi barked, unable to hold back anymore.

“Mind your mouth, bitch,” the woman barked back—“or I’ll mind it for you!”

“Go ahead and try!”

Angrily, Thelma reached inside her cart, and, after finding a thick wooden stick, she pulled it out and threatened Rudi with it.

Rudi didn’t flinch at this, but Jeannine still jumped in front of the woman and grabbed her wrist, while telling her: “Let it be, Thelma—just let it be.”

After calming a bit, Thelma yanked her arm away and

tossed her stick back into her cart—and she started off—though not without howling, “Just keep that cunt away from me!”

This made Rudi furious—so furious that she clenched her fists and involuntarily started toward the woman—only to be stopped by Jeannine, who said, “Just let it be.”

Eventually, Rudi calmed as well, and she took a deep breath prior to saying, “I’m sorry.”

“The tryout’s over,” Jeannine stated matter-of-factly.

“What?” Rudi uttered, with great shock.

“I said, it’s over.”

“But she . . .”

“The job’s yours.”

“What?” Rudi again uttered, with even greater shock.

“You did real good today,” Jeannine told her with a big smile. “Better than good. You might have even saved a life—and I bet not many people can say that as they’re coming home from work tonight.”

“I didn’t do so well with her,” Rudi replied, while pointing at Thelma as she rambled down the block—with Rudi again feeling annoyed by the woman.

“Please,” Jeannine replied back, “that woman would drive Job to murder. Just stay clear of her. She’s a lost cause.”

“I thought you had faith.”

“Now don’t you be using my words against me,” Jeannine threateningly said while wagging her finger—though she said this with another big smile on her face. Then, she started slowly backing up into the street, toward a decrepit building across the road—a building that had a sign out front that stated: Last Chance Mission. And she said to Rudi: “So, shall I see you tomorrow?”

“At 4:00,” Rudi replied. “Not 4:15. 4:00.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Jeannine told her as she turned around and strode up to the mission’s front door, which she subsequently opened.

“Where you going?” Rudi inquired, with more than just a little curiosity.

Jeannine responded by pointing inside the building and saying, “I volunteer here whenever I have the time and opportunity. And energy.”

“After putting in a full day’s work?”

“People need help 24/7—not just during working hours.”

Jeannine afterward started inside the building—only to stop when Rudi cried out, “Hey, wait up.” Which was just before Rudi rushed across the street and came up to her.

“Don’t you have some partying to do?” Jeannine demanded.

“Actually, I don’t,” spoke Rudi.

“This is *volunteer* work, as in ‘no pay.’”

“I’m familiar with the word.”

Jeannine shook her head a bit at this, prior to motioning Rudi inside and saying, “*Après vous.*”

“*Merci beaucoup,*” Rudi said back.

“Just get in,” Jeannine howled, as she playfully pushed Rudi forward. The two women then stepped into the mission, and saw a line of homeless people in front of a balding man, who had long graying auburn hair and an equally long and graying auburn beard—a man who was warmly hugging an old woman beside a ramshackle chapel.

“Who’s that?” Rudi asked, while pointing at the man.

“That’s Reverend Samson,” Jeannine replied.

“Reverend?” Rudi replied back, with lots of surprise.

Seemingly in response to this, the minister broke his

embrace with the woman, revealing both the large crucifix around his neck and the old peace sign T-shirt underneath it.

"As you can see," Jeannine went on, "he's not exactly an archetypal minister. He was even at Woodstock."

"Really?" Rudi uttered, with her surprise turned up a notch.

"Really," Jeannine uttered back before pointing to a buffet table on the other side of the room, while adding, "Why don't you give them a hand."

"All right," Rudi said back, as she headed off toward a small group of people who were preparing the food. At the same time, Jeannine strode up to the minister, who cried out, "Baby doll!" prior to giving her a big hearty hug—one she happily returned.

"Boy, did I need this today!" she exclaimed.

They soon broke their embrace and the minister told her: "There's always plenty where that came from."

She smiled at this and murmured, "So, how's it going?"

Abruptly, the man's expression turned sour.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"They just keep coming," he answered while shaking his head—"more and more every time I turn around. I don't even know how we feed them all. I feel like I'm Jimmy Stewart in that old Christmas movie—that if there's even one stalk of celery left at the end of the night we're a success."

"Well," she stated, "I brought you some help tonight." She then pointed at Rudi, who the minister looked at with both raised eyebrows and a tilted head, as even to him she was strange looking.

"Her name's Rudi Weiss," Jeannine went on—"she's a student at GW."

“GW?” the minister mumbled almost inaudibly, while continuing to stare at Rudi askance. “I wonder if she knows—”

“—She just started working for me today.”

“Any good?”

“Good? That girl, she’s something else.”

“Like the Eddie Cochran song.”

“Even better.”

AS RUDI SERVED a thick stew to the ever-increasing crowd, Thelma stopped in front of her—and the two glared at each other. And they glared even more after Rudi angrily plopped some stew into Thelma’s bowl—causing it to splatter a bit on the woman’s tray.

“Watch your back,” the woman softly growled.

“I watch everything,” Rudi growled back, not so softly.

“Let it be,” came Jeannine’s voice from behind.

With a bit of a sigh, Rudi turned to her boss, prior to saying, “Sorry. That woman just gets to me for some reason. I wish I knew why.”

“How’s it going otherwise?” Jeannine asked.

Before Rudi could answer, she was interrupted—by the sound of crying, and both she and Jeannine turned their heads and saw—on the other side of the room—a woman in her early twenties sitting on a bench, trying to comfort a shrieking baby. Soon after, to make matters even worse for the woman, her other child—a little girl of about three—started wailing, too.

All this caused Rudi to feel a strange tug. It was strange because she never much cared for kids before, especially small crying ones. So, at first she couldn’t understand where this tug came from. But then she faintly recalled something she had long forgotten. She recalled

when she was the little girl's age, and how she cried and cried after her mother left. She cried for weeks.

"Can you take over for me?" Rudi asked Jeannine, prior to heading toward the crying little girl—doing so as if she weren't in control of her actions. Then, once there, she sat down on the bench and unflinchingly took the child into her arms and cradled her—and the child just as unflinchingly grasped Rudi.

The child's mother, though, was frightened of Rudi and her appearance—and she almost screamed for help. But when she saw her daughter calm a bit in Rudi's arms, she calmed as well.

As for Rudi, out of nowhere an instinct awoke inside her—likely the result of feeling those little fingers clutching her so desperately. It also invoked happiness and warmth all over her—and she realized that the child was almost like a drug, except that the stimulation wasn't artificial—it was real. Along with this came an overwhelming desire: to soothe the troubles of this little girl, which manifested itself when—while gently rocking her—Rudi whispered, "What's wrong?"

"I wanna go home!" the girl hollered through her tears.

Rudi responded by looking at the girl's mother, who looked back at her in embarrassment. After which Rudi told the woman's daughter: "You *are* home."

"This is not our home!" the girl screamed. "I wanna go home!"

"Home is not a place, silly. Home is where people love you. You're always home."

The girl kept crying afterward, but with a little less intensity—and, as the seconds went by, this intensity decreased even further. Soon, she closed her eyes and fell asleep in Rudi's arms, and this made Rudi feel even

warmer and happier. It also made her close her own eyes—and she had a dream of sorts—one not unlike the kind she used to have with Tommy. Only in this dream she was sitting on a floor surrounded by a near endless array of little girls—of various ages and races and ethnicities—who were all looking up at her with such love and affection that she couldn't stop smiling.

"I'll take her now," suddenly came the mother's soft voice, which caused the dream to end, and also caused Rudi's eyes to open. She then saw the woman waiting for her child, with her baby now sleeping comfortably beside her in a bassinet, which itself was next to a set of suitcases.

"Oh," Rudi muttered, as she gently handed the woman her daughter.

"Thank you," the woman muttered back, prior to hugging her child tightly while starting to look as if she herself were about to cry.

"Is there anything else I can do?" Rudi whispered.

The woman shook her head, but also mumbled, "I don't know what we're gonna do."

"Can I help?"

The woman again shook her head, before crying out, "My husband, he walked out on us. And, and I couldn't pay for anything. I've got no job, no skills. I didn't even finish high school. I don't know what we're gonna do—where we're gonna go. I don't even know where we're gonna sleep tonight."

Moved by the woman's plight, Rudi pointed to Jeannine by the buffet table and said, "That's my boss over there—maybe she can help."

Rudi afterward rose to her feet and rushed toward Jeannine, watched by Thelma, who had been watching Rudi ever since she picked up the crying child—and

watching with wonder not even she could hide.

The moment Rudi reached Jeannine she explained the woman's situation—expecting Jeannine to jump. But her response was a big sigh and a slight shake of her head, knowing that helping the family would take many hours—if not half the night.

“Have her come to the office first thing in the morning,” she eventually said.

“Why not now?” Rudi pleaded.

“Because I'm exhausted. I've been up since five, and I'm not superhuman.”

“I'll help.”

“*Rudi.*”

“People need help 24/7.”

“What did I say about using my words against me?”

“Just look how frightened she is. They have nowhere to go *right now*.”

“All right,” Jeannine relented. “I'll go make some calls in the minister's office. But don't you promise her anything yet.”

“All right,” Rudi replied. “What can I do?”

“You can start clearing the tables. There should be someone in the kitchen to take the dinnerware. And do me a big favor: don't help anyone else tonight.”

“No promises,” Rudi said with a grin—one Jeannine couldn't help return, right before she walked off. Then, Rudi picked up a handful of trays and headed off toward the kitchen.

Soon, she noticed the woman on the bench, looking at her with great hope in her eyes, and though she had promised not to make any promises, she couldn't help moving all the trays to one hand and raising her free thumb—something that made the woman smile—and even leap a bit.

Right after this, Rudi backed into the swinging doors of the kitchen, where she heard the sound of running water coming from a nearby sink—and she spun around. She also became shocked, because it was then she saw who was washing dishes a short distance away with his sleeves rolled up: Jared.

Hearing someone enter, he turned as well, and he looked at Rudi with just as much shock as she was looking at him. He was so shocked that he stopped washing the glass in his hand. Though he eventually composed himself, and, while nodding toward the counter by the sink, he told her with a mild Southern accent: “You can leave the trays there.”

Rudi, though, couldn’t move, as she was nowhere near composed. It took her a long while before she could even utter, “You work here?”

“This is my church,” he uttered back.

“*This?*”

“That surprises you?”

“I, I just imagined you belonged to one of those cathedral-like places, like the one on TV.”

“Which one?”

“I don’t know—the show with the woman with even wilder makeup than mine.”

“That would be Tammy Faye Bakker,” Jared said with a bit of a grin. “Along with her husband Jim.” Jared then turned back to the sink, and, as he continued with the dishes, he softly went on: “They’re frauds. Just like most of those people on TV. They, they’re probably the reason you have such a fucked-up view of Christianity.”

“How do you know what my view is?” Rudi growled, while at the same time being surprised at Jared’s language.

“I can see it in your eyes,” Jared explained, prior to

turning toward her once again—this time holding a plate. After which he added, “Just like I see it in the eyes of your roommates. They’re always looking at me as if I were about to burn them at the stake or something.”

“Isn’t that what you’d do if you could?” Rudi retorted. “Don’t you know what they are?”

Suddenly, a flash of anger shot through Jared and he smashed the plate against the edge of the sink—causing it to fly apart onto the floor. And he howled, “Jesus didn’t judge—and neither do I!”

His anger, though, didn’t last long, and he fell to his knees to pick up the shards of ceramic off the floor, while murmuring, “At least, I try not to judge. I’m not always successful, especially when it comes to myself.”

Listening to him, Rudi couldn’t help feel embarrassed, because she now saw Jared was far from his caricature, much as she had suspected but hadn’t tried to find out. What’s more, she knew he was as human as anyone could be, and she found herself heading toward this humanness.

As for Jared, he, too, felt embarrassed—at his explosion, and he hoped Rudi would just leave. So, he felt even more embarrassed when he heard her slowly coming toward him—and when he heard her place the trays on the counter.

Desperately, he tried to ignore her, but, once he had collected all the pieces of plate, he looked up and saw her cupped hands and her expression of compassion—the very last thing he expected from this wild-looking punk girl. It was so unexpected that it took him a few seconds to react and put the shards in Rudi’s hand.

Afterward, he rose to his feet, and, as Rudi threw the remains of the plate into a garbage pail, he picked up some utensils from the bottom of the sink and started

washing them. Though he stopped when he saw Rudi offering him her hand—and he muttered, “What?”

“I’ll dry,” she muttered back, before taking the utensils from him and drying them off with a dishtowel from the side of the sink. The two then continued working in silence—both unsure of the other while at the same time eager to learn more. And this silence was only broken when Reverend Samson entered the kitchen carrying a large stack of trays.

Watching the two, the man couldn’t help smile—and exclaim, “Look at this. Just look at it. And to think people are always telling me that kids today are only interested in having a good time.”

Rudi and Jared responded to this by glancing at each other, right before turning toward the minister.

“I’ll be done soon, Reverend,” Jared subsequently told the man, with obvious reverence.

“Take your time, son,” Samson replied, prior to placing his trays beside the two. “Take your time. And thank you.”

Respectfully, Jared nodded—and the minister turned to Rudi and said, “And thank you, too, Rudi.”

“You’re welcome,” Rudi replied, while feeling a bit discomfited by the minister’s sincerity—a minister so unlike any she had ever known, heard about, or imagined.

“You’re the one who’s welcome,” he replied back—“any time.” He also gave her one of his big hugs and whispered, “God bless you.”

“You, too,” she whispered back, in spite of the words seeming foreign to her.

He soon broke their embrace and headed out of the kitchen, with Rudi’s eyes locked on him—and they remained locked on the swinging doors long after he was

gone.

"He's some character," she eventually uttered.

"He's the real thing," Jared uttered back. "That's why you'll never see him on TV, or in some cathedral-like place."

The two afterward returned to the dishes—and Rudi noticed something about Jared that caused her to become even more shocked than before. She noticed marks on his arms—marks she knew well, having seen them many times before: needle marks. At this moment, not only couldn't she move, but she couldn't breathe, while realizing the young man next to her—the one who had seemed so different from her—so alien—was neither different nor alien. She now knew she probably had more in common with him than she had with anyone else at school.

It didn't take long for Jared to see what she was staring at, and he told her: "They're real, too."

She nodded, not doubting him at all. But still she kept staring, which he misinterpreted as doubt.

"Go on, touch 'em," he went on. "I don't mind."

Hesitantly—and with a slightly shaking hand—she reached out her hand and touched his marks, and her eyes began tearing up a bit.

"I paid a lot for those," he stated. "So much that I'm kinda glad they haven't gone away. Every morning brings humility."

"I know what you mean," she mumbled.

"Do you?" he asked skeptically.

"There, there's an NA group over at GW."

"Yeah?"

"It meets Wednesday nights at the Marvin Center. Room 432."

"I'll have to check it out."

“You’ll be welcomed there. I’ll make sure of it.”

He nodded at this, realizing, too, that she wasn’t nearly as different from him as he expected.

Not long after this, the two continued with the dishes. Though this time, as they handed each other the near endless plates and glasses and utensils, their hands and fingers began to meet incidentally. They also lingered, fulfilling a need both of them had—one of the most basic human needs there is: the need to touch and be touched. So, not surprisingly, this lingering only increased—and so it was late at night by the time they finally finished their work.

WHEN RUDI AND Jared exited the kitchen the mission was almost empty apart from Reverend Samson and a few stragglers, including Thelma.

Not seeing Jeannine or the mother and her children, Rudi rushed up to the minister and said, “There was this family here—”

“—They left with Jeannine a little while ago,” the man interrupted, with a gentle smile. “They’re gonna be just fine.”

Rudi smiled back, seconds before Jared came up beside her. The minister then told the two: “You guys have done way more than your share tonight. Why don’t you get out of here and have some fun.”

“We had fun,” Rudi insisted, before glancing at Jared, who blushed a bit—something the minister both noticed and grinned at.

Soon, the pair headed out together—and Rudi couldn’t help notice Thelma glaring at her from near the entrance, and she also couldn’t help glare back, even though she didn’t know why.

THE TRAIN RIDE back to GW was mostly silent, with Rudi and Jared uncertain what they were feeling about each other, apart from knowing they were feeling something. Though, as they walked up the stairs of the Foggy Bottom Metro station together, Jared noticed the Chai pendant around Rudi's neck, and he said, "I like your necklace."

"Yeah?" Rudi replied. "It's Hebrew for—"

"—'Living,'" he interrupted.

Surprised at this, Rudi came to a stop and looked at Jared in disbelief.

"I'm something of a Judeophile," he told her as he stopped alongside her with a mild smile.

"Get out of here," she told him back, with a smile that was anything but mild.

"I even spent last summer working on a kibbutz in Israel."

"Really?"

"Way out in the Negev Desert. It was amazing. You should've seen the sunsets!"

Not knowing how to respond to this, Rudi just continued up the steps, and so did Jared. But all of a sudden she stopped again, and lowered her head, with lots of melancholy.

"What's wrong?" he softly asked, after once again stopping alongside her.

At first, she wouldn't tell him, but he kept pressing—and she finally mumbled, "I believed all the horrible things people said about you, based on absolutely nothing. Even though people prejudge me all the time."

"It's all right," he insisted.

"It's not. I'm ashamed. I'm so ashamed."

"Don't be. I did the same exact shit to you."

"What?" she uttered, before looking up at him.

“When I first saw you,” he uttered back, “I thought who is this crazy girl? I had never seen anything like you before. I even wondered if you were gonna kill me in my sleep.”

“Get out of here,” she exclaimed with a big smile.

“I’m serious,” he exclaimed back, with his own big smile.

She didn’t exactly believe him, but she soon headed up the steps again—and he followed her.

“So, what do you think of GW?” he inquired.

“Not much,” she answered. “I mean, the classes are okay, but the people . . . not so much.”

“I had no idea I’d have such a hard time fitting in. I haven’t made a single friend.”

“That’s not true,” she told him, right before taking his hand. “You’ve made one.”

This caused Jared’s face to brighten. Though right then he noticed some other things Rudi was wearing—things that made him wonder.

RUDI AND JARED were still holding hands as they walked slower and slower down the hallway toward their rooms.

“They’re gonna pay for medical school, too,” Jared told her. “And then, then they’re gonna send me all over the world to help people.”

Rudi didn’t respond to this, and noticing her blank stare, he said, “I guess, I guess that sounds kind of corny.”

Suddenly, they reached their respective doors and came to a halt—and Rudi told him: “Actually, it sounds kind of wonderful. You’re kind of wonderful.”

Like a pair of magnets, the two started moving toward one another without control. Then, when their lips were

just a short distance apart, they closed their eyes in anticipation of what was to come—just as Rudi's door opened. Which was just before they heard a woman gasp.

Reluctantly, they both opened their eyes, and they saw that a kiss had barely escaped them.

"Well, goodnight," Jared muttered, even though he really didn't want their night to end.

"Goodnight," Rudi muttered back, while wanting the same thing.

"Maybe I'll see you around."

"You definitely will."

He smiled at her and slowly entered his room—and Rudi just as slowly turned around and saw Maria staring at her in shock. She also saw that Maria was well past drunk.

"You," Maria slurred, while unable to stand straight, "you almost kissed the Preacher."

"Don't call him that anymore," Rudi growled.

"But—"

"—And from now on we're gonna be nice to him, and treat him with respect."

"But . . ."

Rudi didn't wait for Maria to finish her sentence. She just stormed into their room and slammed the door behind herself.

THAT NIGHT RUDI barely got any sleep.

Though not because of Vicki, even if she wasn't any quieter than usual. This time Rudi couldn't sleep because her mind was awash in something called hope. And, as she clutched her pillow in the early hours of the morning, she wondered if something she believed was impossible only a day earlier could actually happen. She wondered if she could fall in love again.

Chapter Sixteen

WITH THE DEAD leaves of mid-October blowing down the sidewalk on an unseasonably cold and windy afternoon, Rudi turned down her Walkman and approached a small group of homeless men who were standing around a heating grate.

In the six weeks she had been on the job, she had come to know many such people, and she liked most. And most liked her, too. They also respected her, knowing she wasn't some phony do-gooder, but someone much like them—someone they could relate to.

"Hey, guys," she said with a smile as she stopped beside them—doing so as if it were the most natural thing in the world, without fear or apprehension—and most importantly, without condescension.

All at once, the men called out her name, and they smiled back.

"How you doing?" she then asked, saying it as if she meant it. Which she did.

"We're still hanging around," the tallest of the men replied.

"Speaking of which," she replied back, "there's a new shelter open on 2nd and D Street, with lots of beds."

"Yeah?" another of the men replied, without much excitement—a sentiment the other men clearly shared.

"It's a nice place," Rudi insisted. "I've been there."

"But would you stay there?" the tall man asked.

"I've stayed in worse, believe me. Just take a look at it. You don't like it, you walk out."

"All right."

“And pass it on.”

“All right.”

Just then, Rudi saw an emaciated middle-aged man in an army jacket sitting in a nearby park by himself—a man staring out into space as if he were comatose. And she headed toward him. However, one of the men stopped her, and, while shaking his head over and over, he told her: “Don’t do it.”

“What do you mean?” she replied.

“He’s messed up big time. Dangerous messed up.”

Ignoring this, Rudi continued toward the man—though she did so a bit apprehensively and without paying attention to anything else, and just before she reached the park she bumped into something.

With a bit of fright, she spun around and saw that she was facing an angry-looking Thelma, whose shopping cart was pressed against Rudi’s thigh.

“Look where you’re going!” Thelma howled.

“Sorry,” Rudi replied.

“Don’t be sorry—move!”

Rudi complied, while saying to the woman, “So, how are you?”

“Fuck off!” Thelma barked, as she took off.

Watching her leave, Rudi once again found Thelma fascinating for some unknown reason, and—forgetting both the man in the park and Jeannine’s directive to forget the lost cause in front of her—she began following the woman.

“Hi,” she soon uttered.

“Didn’t you hear what I just said, cunt?” Thelma uttered back.

“Actually, the name’s Rudi.”

“That’s a man’s name.”

“It’s spelled with an ‘i.’”

"I don't care what it's spelled with, I've never heard of no girl named Rudi."

"Well, my real name is Gertrude."

Suddenly, Thelma came to a sharp stop, and so did Rudi just behind her—so she didn't see the woman's blank expression.

"What's wrong?" Rudi asked.

At first, the woman didn't reply, but after a few seconds she mumbled, "What's wrong with 'Gertrude'?"

"What's right with it?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's a horrible name."

"Why, I'll have you know Gertrude Stein was one of the greatest writers there ever was."

"Maybe. But it's still a horrible name."

Thelma shrugged at this, before continuing on—and Rudi continued as well.

"Why you following me?" Thelma demanded.

"I just wanted to let you know there's a new shelter on 2nd and D," Rudi answered.

"I don't stay in shelters."

"Why not?"

"Thieves. The people there—they're a bunch of thieves."

"But—"

"—You can only depend on yourself, missy. And only sometimes."

As Thelma said this, the two came upon a broken-down and seemingly abandoned brownstone. Though, just as they passed it, a young man about Rudi's age and height exited the building wearing an expensive custom-made suit—accompanied by two huge men in their thirties who were almost as well dressed and who were carrying expensive leather attaché cases. The young man,

who had a pockmarked face with light olive skin and dark hair—instantly noticed Rudi and smiled, finding her look exotic. And, after making all sorts of wrong assumptions about her, he called out, “Why, hello there.”

Briefly, Rudi glanced at the man before turning back to Thelma and starting to say, “Listen—”

“—I said, hello!” the man interrupted, in a much louder voice.

“Fuck off!” Rudi howled.

Surprised at this, Thelma looked back at Rudi—and she saw the man angrily rush down the steps of the brownstone and head toward them. So, she whispered to Rudi: “You better watch out.”

“No one talks to me like that!” the man hollered, only steps from Rudi. “No one!”

“I just did, asshole,” Rudi replied.

“You . . .”

With his face now bright red, the man reached out his hand toward Rudi—and he had almost grabbed her when his two goons grabbed him from behind instead, causing him to come to an abrupt stop.

“Let me go!” the young man screamed in Spanish.

“Remember what your cousin said!” the larger of the two goons screamed back, in the very same language.

“Fuck my cousin! He’s not my boss!”

“Hector, please.”

Eventually, Hector calmed down a little, but he still cried out toward Rudi: “You witch! You fucking witch! You will know me again!”

Rudi wouldn’t even react to this, which just made him madder.

“You certainly know how to make friends,” Thelma told Rudi.

“Just like you,” Rudi told her back.

"You can stop following me now."

Reluctantly, Rudi came to a stop. Though not without saying, "You gonna be at the mission tonight?"

"Maybe," Thelma answered. "If I get hungry."

"Maybe I'll see you there."

Thelma didn't reply, and Rudi muttered, "*Oy vey*." Though she also kept staring at the woman—a woman who kept fascinating her.

THAT NIGHT AT the mission Rudi spotted Thelma eating alone at a table, and, after getting a little food for herself, she brought her tray over to the woman and queried, "You mind if I join you?"

Thelma glared at her, but Rudi sat across from her anyway. Which caused Thelma to drop her utensils onto the table—and, with great exasperation, she uttered, "Why?"

"Why what?" Rudi uttered back.

"I'm no lesbian, if that's your game."

Rudi chuckled at this, before saying, "They tell me you're a lost cause."

"They're right," Thelma replied.

"Maybe I like lost causes."

"Well, I don't."

With lots of fury, Thelma rose out of her seat and rambled off with her tray, causing Rudi to sigh and lower her head a bit. Which was just before Jeannine sat next to her.

"You ain't giving up, eh?" Jeannine asked, while eyeing Thelma warily.

"Perhaps some of your faith is rubbing off on me," Rudi answered, before lifting her eyes toward her boss.

"Careful, because once it rubs on you it's not so easy to rub it off."

"I'll take that under advisement. Tell me, what do you know about her?"

"Thelma? Not much. She showed up about a year ago. No friends, no nothing. It took me months just to get her name."

"Do you ever wonder about these people—I mean, really wonder?"

"About what?"

"About their stories. About how they got here and what they were before. Do you ever wonder who they really are?"

"Sometimes. But what about your story?"

"My story?"

"You and that hunky dishwasher. Now, that's an interesting story."

"There's no story," Rudi insisted, though she couldn't hide a bit of a blush.

"Uh-huh," Jeannine muttered, with a knowing nod.

"I'm actually still in mourning."

"You're kidding—at your age?"

Rudi's only response was the averting of her eyes.

"So, that's who Tommy is," Jeannine went on, while pointing to the name stitched into Rudi's jacket. "What happened?"

"It's a long story," Rudi replied, after looking at Jeannine once again.

"You wanna talk about it?"

"Not really."

"All right. But if you change your mind . . ."

"What about *your* story?" Rudi asked.

"My story?" Jeannine replied.

"You married? Or have a boyfriend?"

"The Lord hasn't led me to the right man just yet. Or him to me. But it'll happen."

“You’re sure of it?”

“As sure as I am of the sun rising tomorrow.”

RUDI GIDDILY ENTERED the kitchen and saw Jared washing dishes.

“Need a drier?” she asked.

Smilingly, he turned to her—and called out, “And how!”

Before he could even blink, she was standing next to him, and they began their ritual of slowly passing dinnerware—with their faces expressing all the joy that came from it.

During the previous month and a half, they had become good friends, even if they hadn’t broached their pasts with one another—something both of them wanted to forget, and were finally able to do in the other’s presence. Which was considerable. They spent lots of time with each other—even outside of the mission. They often ate their meals together at school, studied in the library together, and went to NA together. And they usually did this under the surprised gaze of fellow students, who couldn’t understand why a Jewish punk girl from New York would hang out with an evangelical Christian from the South.

With these gazes, frequently came snickering, especially from Vicki. Not that the two cared. To Rudi, Jared was just about the perfect person. He was open-minded and smart and warmhearted, and they shared so much—both good and bad. And to Jared, Rudi was the best friend he could’ve imagined. He could be himself with her, and he felt free whenever she was near. He also had feelings for her that went beyond friendship, especially as—even before he met Rudi—he desperately wanted to love and be loved. However, despite believing she felt

the same about him—and despite their near kiss—there was always something separating them—something he guessed upon when they left the Metro station after their first evening in the mission together. He had always avoided bringing it up, but right then—as they touched and touched by the sink—he decided he could no longer hold back.

So, after work, upon returning to campus he suggested they go to a nearby park—something they often did to get away from the crudeness of the Zoo and all the temptations there—temptations that drew both of them. Then, once there, they sat on a bench and Jared took a long deep breath before saying, “Can I ask you something?”

“What?” she replied.

“If it’s too personal . . .”

“*Jared.*”

“Are, are you married?”

“Did someone tell you?” Rudi asked, with lots of surprise.

“Your ring,” he answered, after pointing at it. “I wasn’t sure, but when I was in Israel I saw women wearing their rings on that finger. And, of course, there’s the name on your jacket.”

“I’m sorry.”

“About what?”

“I should have told you about him.”

“I should have asked.”

“The truth is, the truth is I’m not married. Officially, I never was.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I have all night.”

Rudi didn’t reply.

“Please,” he softly pleaded. “I want to know.”

“Well,” she eventually said, with her eyes drifting upward toward the stars, “it all started when I was in jail . . .”

RUDI WASN’T TOO sure how Jared would respond to her story, especially the parts about Tommy having AIDS and their living together before they were married—and after she finished telling him everything, he didn’t say a word.

So, she looked down from the stars and turned to him, and she surprisingly saw that his face was full of tears. Which caused her to tear up a little herself.

“You all right?” she mumbled.

“That was the most beautiful story I’ve ever heard,” he told her, while unable to stop crying. “I’ll remember it till the end of time.”

With a bittersweet smile, she took his hand and gently leaned her head against his strong shoulder, before looking back up at the sky. Which was just before his eyes did the same.

“But never again say you weren’t officially married,” he added. “Your marriage was as official as any there ever was or will ever be. And it didn’t just last ten minutes. It didn’t. You’ll be married forever and ever.”

Jared’s words made Rudi cry. She cried as hard as he did.

RUDI’S FACE STILL showed the remnants of her tears when she entered her dorm room late that night—and she saw that she and Jared hadn’t been the only ones crying, as lying on her bed was Sandra with a face that was still wet.

In the period Rudi had grown closer to Jared, she had

grown apart from her roommates—to the extent that she really hadn't been paying attention to their increasing problems or to Maria's increasingly erratic behavior. But she now knew she could no longer avoid it.

"Where's Maria?" Rudi softly asked, after checking her alarm clock and noticing it was well past one.

"Out," Sandra growled.

"Out where?"

"I don't know. And I don't care!"

Rudi responded by walking over to Sandra and sitting on her bed—and she murmured, "I don't believe that for a second."

"Every night," Sandra uttered. "Every night she gets fucked up. I've tried talking to her about it, like you said, but . . ."

"Maybe you need to try harder."

"I can't. I'm afraid. I'm afraid I'll push her away for good."

"I understand."

"No, you don't. I'm sorry, but you don't understand. I can't lose her. I just can't. There's no one else out there for me but her."

"You want me to talk to her?" Rudi asked.

"Could you?" Sandra replied, with just a bit of hope in her voice.

"I just don't know if she'll listen to me, either. We haven't exactly been bosom buddies the last couple of months."

"But she loves you."

"She loves you, too."

"But she worships you."

"No," Rudi muttered, with a shake of her head.

"She does," Sandra insisted. "You're her hero. She's told me so."

Rudi didn't know exactly how to respond to this, so she just sighed and turned from Sandra slightly.

"Do, do you think she's an alcoholic?" Sandra continued.

"I don't know," Rudi answered. "But I don't think so. I really don't know what her problem is."

IN AN ALLEY next to a cheap Chinese restaurant Thelma secured both her shopping cart and herself behind a dumpster. Then, after grabbing a worn but heavy blanket from the cart, she sat down in a bed composed of stacks of old newspapers, right before covering herself with the blanket.

For many minutes afterward she just sat there looking bitter, much as she usually looked. Though suddenly she reached underneath her many layers of clothing and took out a small silver locket from around her neck, which she stared at prior to hesitantly opening.

Inside this locket was an old black and white picture—a picture of a smiling baby girl. Which at once caused Thelma's bitter expression to melt away—making her look like an entirely different woman. And she changed even more when she started crying.

Chapter Seventeen

RUDI WAITED UP late for Maria to come home, but she never came home at all. So, after getting Maria's class schedule from Sandra, Rudi went to all her classrooms that day, both before and after. What's more, not only did she skip large parts of her own classes but she skipped work as well.

But there was no sign of Maria anywhere, and feeling a bit desperate, at the end of the afternoon Rudi headed over to the Sigma Nu house, where sitting on the front stoop were Dennis, Johnny, and Rich, who were all drinking beer out of plastic cups.

Seeing Rudi approach, Dennis looked at her warmly—something she noticed but tried to ignore as she stopped in front of them.

"Hi," she uttered.

"Hi," they uttered back, more or less in unison.

"I'm looking for Maria," Rudi went on, while quixotically trying to conceal her fright. "You guys haven't seen her, have you?"

Just then, Chuck exited the house, looking even more frightened than Rudi—and he said, "You worried about her, too?"

"None of you have seen her at all?" Rudi pleaded.

"I saw her a couple of nights back," Rich replied—"at the Black Rooster. She was pretty messed up. We tried putting her into a cab, but . . ."

"If you see her again, could you call me?"

"Sure."

"Maybe, maybe you can ask the other guys, too."

“We will,” Dennis told her, with a seriousness that surprised Rudi. It surprised her almost as much as the concern everyone there clearly felt for Maria.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING Sandra shook Rudi awake.

“What’s wrong?” Rudi groggily mumbled. “Did you find her?”

Sandra replied by pointing at Maria, who was passed out on the empty bed in her clothes, with both her arms and legs sprawled out.

“When did she get in?” Rudi whispered.

“I don’t know,” Sandra whispered back. “I tried to wake her—she’s got a midterm later this morning. But . . .”

“It’s okay. Why don’t you take off.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

Sandra afterward hesitantly started out. Though she couldn’t help glance at Maria one last time before leaving. After which—with a loud sigh—Rudi rose off her bed and slowly walked over to Maria, prior to shaking her. She shook her hard, as hard as Sandra had shook her, and when this didn’t work, she shook her even harder while calling out her name.

“Leave me alone,” Maria eventually growled, with her eyes still closed.

“Sorry,” Rudi replied, “but that hasn’t worked.”

Rudi then picked Maria up in her arms and carried her toward the bathroom—something that caused Maria to finally wake fully.

“What are you doing?” she howled.

“It’s called an intervention,” Rudi answered.

“Let me go!”

But Rudi didn't listen. She kept carrying Maria toward the bathroom, and, when she got there, she kicked in the door and brought Maria over to the tub.

"Let me go!" Maria repeated.

"Will do," Rudi told her, before dropping her into the tub. Which was just before she turned the shower on full blast—and on full cold.

With much agony, Maria cried out—so much agony that her mind couldn't even form words. Though, after many seconds of this torture, she yelled, "What are you fucking doing?"

"What are *you* fucking doing?" Rudi yelled back.

Maria didn't reply. She instead tried to stand up. But Rudi just pushed her back into the tub.

"You have to stop this," Rudi told her.

"Stop what?" Maria screeched.

"Your fucking drinking!"

"Fuck you!"

"You're hurting everyone around you, especially Sandra. She loves you, you dumb bitch!"

"Fuck her, and fuck you, too!"

"Just tell me why?" Rudi asked, with her voice suddenly calm.

"Why what?" Maria asked back, with her voice anything but calm.

"Why are you drinking so much?"

"I can drink if I want to! I'm not a fucking addict like you!"

"That's right—you're not. So, why? Why are you doing this?"

Maria didn't reply. She just stewed there, with the water drenching her.

"Please, tell me," Rudi implored. "Sandra's not the only one who loves you. I love you, too."

Suddenly, Maria began to break down—and once the process had completed itself, she lowered her head and mumbled, “I . . . I just want to be normal.”

“Normal?” Rudi gasped. “You’re the most normal person I know!”

“I want to be like everyone else!”

“Fuck everyone else! Everyone else sucks!”

Uncontrollably, Maria started to cry, and she looked up at her friend and muttered, “I, I want to be like you.”

Rudi responded by falling to her knees, and she hugged Maria, quickly becoming as wet as her.

“I thought it would be so easy,” Maria shrieked, as she wept on Rudi’s shoulder. “I thought it would be easy once I came out and went to college. But it’s worse now. It’s so worse!”

“What do you mean?” Rudi asked.

“Everyone hates me.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is! You don’t see the dirty looks. You don’t hear the snickering and the jokes. I see and hear this fucking everywhere!”

“Is this about Vicki? I swear I’ll kill—”

“—It’s about everyone! I’m so alone here. Do you know there’s something like ten thousand undergraduates at this school, and yet—besides Sandra and me—there are only four fucking people in the Gay & Lesbian Student Alliance. *Four!*”

“I still don’t understand why you’re drinking so much.”

“When I drink, I don’t hear anything. I don’t see anything. I’m no longer alone. I’m just like everyone else.”

Slowly, Rudi removed her arms from around her friend, so that she could look into Maria’s eyes—and she firmly told her: “You’re better than those assholes.”

"No," Maria insisted, with a shake of her head. "I'm not. I'm not better than anything. I'm a freak."

"You're not. And not everyone hates you. Those Sigma Nu guys like you."

"They, they're just hoping to see Sandra and me kiss."

"They're worried about you, Maria. I saw it in their eyes yesterday. You were right about them. I was wrong."

Again, Maria shook her head. She shook it over and over and over.

"You know," Rudi went on, "there's this Sex Pistols album called *Never Mind the Bollocks*. The title basically means 'ignore the bullshit.'"

"So?" Maria uttered.

"So, whenever some asshole bothers you or makes you feel worthless or mad, just tell yourself this again and again: never mind the bollocks!"

Rudi subsequently grabbed Maria's face with both hands and she screamed, "Say it with me!"

But Maria wouldn't do it.

"Say it!" Rudi demanded. "Fucking say it!"

"Never mind the bollocks!" Maria yelled.

Afterward, the two of them repeated this over and over before clutching each other in an embrace so warm that neither cared about the freezing water falling upon them.

WITH THE PHONE ringing, Rudi exited the bathroom, and, while drying her hair with a towel, she rushed toward the device, thinking Sandra was calling. Then, once she picked up the receiver, she uttered into it: "Hello?"

"Hi, is, is this Rudi?" replied a familiar male voice.

"Yeah."

"It's me—Dennis."

"Oh, hi."

"I just wanted you to know that a couple of brothers saw Maria last night at Odds."

"It's all right—she's fine. She's gonna be just fine."

"That's great. Tell her, tell her we care."

"She knows."

"Well, I, I'll let you go."

"Dennis?"

"What?"

"Thanks."

"I didn't do anything really."

"I think I owe you a dinner."

"Nah."

"You mentioned something about a pizza place in Georgetown."

"You remembered," he uttered—and she could almost see his smile.

"I remembered," she uttered back with her very own smile.

Chapter Eighteen

AFTER RUDI LEFT her Linear Algebra class, she approached the Marvin Center on her way to work and saw lots of people in front of the building. She also saw two big limousines parked nearby.

Soon, the back door of one of the vehicles opened and a smiling Walter Mondale stepped out and waved to the mostly supportive crowd. Though not far away a small group of protesters representing the Young Americans for Freedom started waving signs and chanting, “Mondale, go home!”

Rudi wanted to ignore this, as she needed to get to work and didn’t like Mondale any more than she liked Reagan. But it seemed to her that there was something wrong about attacking a guy down 20 points in the polls with less than two weeks before the election. So, while Mondale slowly made his way through his fans, Rudi strode up to a handful of people who were heckling the hecklers. And she saw that one of the protesters was Vicki.

This infuriated Rudi for a number of reasons—the least of which being that Vicki’s lifestyle was far from conservative. What really infuriated Rudi was that she truly believed Vicki had been Maria’s prime tormentor, and she couldn’t stop the venom from pouring out of her mouth.

“Hey, Vicki!” she called out. “Aren’t you afraid Reagan will ban abortion?”

Vicki didn’t respond. She just kept shouting at Mondale.

“Man,” Rudi went on, “you’d have more kids than that old woman in the shoe!”

“You only wish you’d need an abortion!” Vicki yelled, after finally turning to Rudi. “A guy would have to be deaf, dumb, and blind!”

“Funny, Dennis isn’t any of those things! Maybe that’s why he’s going out with me this weekend and not you!”

These words caused Vicki to furiously spin away from Rudi, and she returned to her anti-Mondale chants.

“People like you,” Rudi continued, “you’re always trying to hurt others. It’s because you’re such filth—you lash out at anything that’s good. Well, why don’t you do the whole world a favor—and drop fucking dead!”

Suddenly, Vicki shrieked—and with a face full of rage, she spun toward Rudi and tried to slam her sign on top of Rudi’s head. And she was only stopped when some of her friends grabbed her at the last second and dragged her away while trying to calm her down.

Watching this, Rudi was perplexed. She really didn’t think she had said anything to garner such a violent response, and she wondered whether she had crossed some line she couldn’t even see. Then, as she started walking to work—no matter how many times she told herself that Vicki deserved every word spoken to her that day—she couldn’t help feel guilt. Which only got stronger and stronger.

AT THE MISSION that night Rudi brought her tray of food over to where Thelma was once again eating by herself.

“Is this seat free?” Rudi asked.

Thelma sighed deeply.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Rudi added, before sitting

across from the woman.

"Why won't you leave me alone?" Thelma demanded.

"I'm stubborn," Rudi replied, with a little grin.

"*Oy vey*," the woman muttered.

"What did you just say?" Rudi muttered back, unable to hide her surprise.

"It's a Yiddish expression," Thelma explained, with lots of exasperation.

"I know," Rudi told her, prior to showing the woman her Chai pendant.

"So you're one of them. Figures."

"And you?"

"I ain't nothing."

"You just roll off Yiddish expressions."

"I picked it up somewhere."

"Yeah, me, too. I wonder where?"

Right then, Rudi really did wonder. She wondered hard. She wondered if the two of them weren't just random strangers.

Thelma, though, didn't do any wondering. She just turned her head slightly away and barked, "Pass the salt."

"Pass the salt what?" Rudi barked back, after picking up the small white canister.

After another deep sigh, Thelma glared at Rudi—and she growled, "Pass the salt, *Gertrude*."

Rudi smiled at this, and, try as she may, Thelma couldn't help smile back just a little.

RUDI WAS STILL smiling later on when she backed into the kitchen with a stack of trays—prior to calling out, "Hey!"

With a bit of surprise, the middle-aged man doing the dishes turned to Rudi—something that caused her lots of surprise.

“Where, where’s Jared?” she mumbled.

“He had a problem with his roommate,” the man replied.

“What kind of problem?”

“I don’t know.”

WHEN RUDI RETURNED to her dorm she strode up to Jared’s room, from which she could hear the sounds of the Grateful Dead.

For a few moments she thought about knocking on his door, but didn’t for a number of reasons. First, she wasn’t certain if he were busy or even awake. But, just as importantly, she had never been inside Jared’s room before, or had even stood in his doorway. He never offered and she never said anything about it, thinking that it might be something his religion didn’t allow.

So, while telling herself she could ask Jared about his roommate the following day, she went inside her own room, where she heard the soft sounds of her roommates making love behind the curtained alcove. Rudi smiled at this, happy her two friends had made up and seemed more in love than ever. She then took off Tommy’s jacket and sat on her bed, while trying to mask her feelings of envy, and her desire to be making love as well—to someone in particular.

With this in mind, she took out her Walkman and listened to “Moonlight Serenade” while feeling all kinds of happiness wash over her. Though these feelings didn’t last long, as they were interrupted by sounds coming from Vicki’s room—sounds that weren’t soft at all. If anything they were harsher and louder than normal, as there were two guys with Vicki that night. Even worse, Rudi could tell exactly who the two were: Brad and Pete.

This disgusted her, especially as she couldn’t imagine

anything more heinous than those three together. It disgusted her so much that she jacked the volume of her Walkman all the way up. But this did nothing, or very little, to mask the noise from next door. Nor did putting a pillow over her head. Or even putting two.

Eventually, it got so bad that she jumped out of bed and rushed out into the hallway, where she could now hear "In the Court of the Crimson King" coming from Jared's room. She could also now conclude that he was likely awake, as someone must've changed the record. And, forgetting everything else that could stop her from approaching him, she closed her own door and gently knocked on his.

There was no answer, even after she knocked again—this time a little louder. So, with a bit of a sigh, she turned around and headed back to the torture awaiting her in her room. Though, just as she got to her door, Jared's opened—and she spun toward it, seeing not only Jared standing there in gray sweats but also seeing odd red light coming from inside his room.

"Hi," he whispered to her with a little smile.

"Hi, yourself," she whispered back, with her own little smile—while realizing just how much he meant to her—how he made all her problems magically vanish.

"You all right?" he went on.

"I was gonna ask you that."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone at the mission said you had a problem with your roommate."

"Come in," he told her, as he waved her into his room.

"You sure?" she told him back.

His reply was another of his smiles—one that drove her past his door, where she immediately noticed the

source of the red light—a lava lamp on the bureau. She also noticed Jared's roommate lying face-first on his bed.

"What's wrong with him?" she murmured, while pointing at the boy.

Jared responded by quietly closing the door behind himself and saying, "He drank a fifth of vodka."

"A fifth? You sure he's still alive?"

"He's fine. I've been keeping an eye on him."

"Even though he doesn't like you?"

"What does that have to do with it?"

With lots of warmth, Rudi looked into Jared's eyes, recognizing how the platitudes of his faith weren't just platitudes to him. He not only believed them but lived them.

"You want me to turn the music off?" Jared went on.

"Why?" she asked.

"I'm guessing this isn't your thing."

"I like it, actually. My stepdad has this record."

"Reverend Samson let me borrow it. He owns like every record from the sixties."

"He's pretty cool."

"You wanna sit down?"

"Where?" Rudi inquired, after seeing that the two chairs in the room were covered in clothes and just about everything else.

Without hesitation, Jared pointed to his bed.

"You don't mind?" she uttered, unable to hide her surprise.

"Why would I mind?" he uttered back.

She smiled at this and sat on his bed, and he joined her. Then, not knowing what else to do, she glanced around the room, and saw hanging on the wall a small handmade crucifix made from tree branches—something that was held together with a piece of old rope. And

she pointed to it while saying, "So that's it."

"What?" he asked.

"The cross," she replied, right before he reached up and took it down, which was right before he started staring at it with a numb expression.

"From the way everyone was describing it," Rudi continued, "I thought it was the one from Golgotha."

Jared chuckled at this, and added, "Not quite."

"Something tells me there's a story behind it."

"A long one."

"I have all night."

"You, you wouldn't be interested."

"Like you weren't interested in my story?"

"My story involves faith."

"I don't mind."

"As you may have noticed, I don't preach—not to anyone—not even you. I don't like it. I didn't like it when it was done to me, and I don't like doing it to others. It's very personal to me—my relationship with God."

"I would still like to hear the story. Please."

"All right. But I warned you."

"Go on—tell me."

"I, I can still remember the night," Jared began—"I can even see the rain in my mind's eye." He then pointed at his roommate and added, "I was even worse than him. Much worse. I ODeD, I think. I'm not really sure. All I know is that I was laid out on some road somewhere, and that I could barely move. And the rain—it just kept coming down, harder and harder. I thought it was gonna drown me, and I really hoped it would. I hoped and hoped and hoped."

Suddenly, Jared fell apart a little, and Rudi responded by caressing his thigh, which calmed him some. And, after wiping his eyes, he continued: "The next thing I knew

I was in this mission not far from the bus station where me and my friends used to hang out. And the people there—they were tending me. Which I couldn't believe. I couldn't because I just hated these people. Man, did I hate them. We all hated them—my friends and I. We used to mock and curse them all the time. We even stole from them and vandalized their place. And the strangest part of it was that they always knew it was us but never did anything about it. And now, now they were actually helping me—or at least trying to help me.”

Jared paused just then, prior to putting the cross down on the bed—after which he looked up at Rudi and said to her: “I say ‘try,’ because I wanted nothing to do with them. Like I told you, I hated being preached. All the endless patter about damnation and hellfire—I’ve heard it ever since I was a kid. And even then I knew it was bullshit. But the thing is—the thing is the people in this mission—they didn’t preach one word to me. Not one. Perhaps they knew it wouldn’t work. Instead, they just healed me. They healed me even when I was spitting obscenities at them. And then, then they waited. They waited for faith to come to me. Which is really the only way it can come.”

“Did it?” Rudi asked, even though she knew the answer.

“Well,” he replied, “there wasn’t any ‘on the road to Damascus’ moment—or anything like that. Even today I struggle. I struggle all the time. There hasn’t been one day that I haven’t wanted to go back to that bus station. I want the junk so badly, Rudi—I want it right now. It owns me, and I like it—I fucking like it!”

Rudi, understanding exactly what Jared was saying and feeling, took his arm and gripped it as tightly as she could. Then, with his free hand, he picked up the cross

again and explained: "I made this when I was strung out at the mission. Which wasn't so easy with my hands shaking so much. But I did it. I say only with the grace of God—and I don't care what anyone else thinks, not even you. And whenever the badness comes—like it's coming right now—I clutch this."

Feeling all his pain, Rudi clutched Jared, and he clutched her back—and for a long time they just cradled each other. Afterward, when he finally calmed, she told him: "I use a pillow. That's what I clutch."

"See," he told her back, "we're not that different."

"We're not different at all. I've never met anyone less different."

Slowly, the two leaned back and looked into each other's eyes, and, just like in the hallway after their first evening in the mission, they started awkwardly moving toward one another. And, just like then, when their lips were only a fraction apart, they closed their eyes in anticipation of what was to come. Only this time they actually kissed.

Unfortunately, the kiss was limp and weak, and without any emotional power, for either of them—and, after only a few seconds of it, they broke apart, with both of them looking embarrassed.

"Sorry," Rudi whispered.

"I guess," he whispered back, while trying to hide his disappointment, "I guess we'll just have to remain friends. That's not such a bad thing."

"I'm so sorry," Rudi uttered, before turning from him slightly and lowering her head.

He responded by gently putting his fingers under her chin, prior to lifting her head up and pointing it toward him—and he told her: "Don't ever be sorry for how you feel."

“You want me to go?” she mumbled.

“Why would I want you to go?”

“Do you?”

“Do you want to go?”

“No,” she answered, while shaking her head in a near incessant manner. Which caused him to smile—which, in turn, caused her to ask, “Can I stay tonight?”

“You can stay for as long as you want,” he said, with his smile still on his face.

She forced a smile in reply, before slowly falling back onto his bed. Which was just before she turned on her side away from him, with sad and hopeless eyes.

Seeing this, he laid his frame next to hers—and wrapped his strong arm around her body. In turn, she wrapped her hands around this arm while telling him: “I want you to know something.”

“What?” he asked.

“I want you to know that if I could love anyone else, it would be you.”

He gave her a kiss right then—a soft one on the cheek—one that sent her drifting off to a wonderfully peaceful sleep. A sleep he soon shared.

THEIR SLEEP WAS broken by the same thing—loud screaming—a woman’s screaming.

Thinking it was Maria, Rudi pushed Jared’s arm away and jumped to her feet—and she quickly rushed out into the hallway, where she just as quickly discovered that the screaming wasn’t coming from her room but from the one next door. Vicki’s.

Apprehensively, Rudi headed toward her neighbor’s room, with the screaming only getting louder and more frantic. At the same time, she noticed a bunch of doors around her fly open, followed by the peeking of heads,

including two belonging to her roommates.

Soon, Rudi reached Vicki's room, and she hesitantly reached for the doorknob, which she even more hesitantly turned and found unlocked. Then, she cautiously opened the door, exposing a horror that shocked even her, as standing a short distance away in front of the closet mirror was a hysterical and naked Vicki, who had the word "SLUT" painted all over her back with red nail polish. It was so shocking to Rudi that she couldn't move. She just stood there with her mouth agape. She stood there until she heard Jared gasp, "Oh, my God," from right beside her.

At once, Rudi turned to him, and, after slamming the door shut behind them, she ran up to Vicki—and, forgetting how much she hated the girl, she grabbed her, and dragged her over to her bed, where she immediately covered her with a blanket before trying to calm her. However, Vicki—who was a combination of drunk and drugged—wouldn't stop shrieking and flailing her arms and legs, and Rudi could barely control her.

"Nail polish remover!" Rudi yelled at Jared, who was still standing by the door in shock, still unable to process what his eyes had just seen.

"Jared!" Rudi hollered.

"What?" he mumbled.

"Nail polish remover!" she repeated. "There must be some in the bathroom!"

Jared nodded his head, but he didn't budge.

"Now!" Rudi screeched.

Finally, Jared came out of his shock, and he rushed into the bathroom, where he started fumbling around the sink. But he couldn't find what he was looking for, so he looked in the medicine cabinet. There he found no nail

polish remover, but he did see a large array of prescription pill bottles—an array way too large for such a young person. It was so large that, with rising curiosity, he picked up the closest bottle—one labeled “Ondansetron”—something he stared at with a puzzled expression, as it sounded vaguely familiar.

“What are you fucking doing?” Rudi screamed, over Vicki’s continuing cries.

“I’m looking!” he screamed back, prior to putting back the pill bottle. He then looked in the cabinet under the sink and found a large circular box—and he opened it and saw something even more peculiar than the drugs: the head of a mannequin.

“Come on, Jared!” Rudi begged.

Jared responded by putting back the box, and he continued to look in the cabinet—and after shuffling through a number of bottles, he finally found what he was seeking, and he called out, “I’ve got it!”

“And bring a washcloth,” Rudi called back—“a wet one!”

Instantly, Jared grabbed a small towel from the sink, and, after soaking it in water, he took it and the bottle of nail polish remover and ran into the main room, where Rudi was still struggling with Vicki.

“Leave me alone!” Vicki hollered, while shaking all over, with tears pouring down her heavily made-up face.

“I’m trying to fucking help you!” Rudi hollered back, just as Jared came up to her with the items.

“No!” Vicki shrieked. “I don’t want it!”

Ignoring this, Rudi pushed the girl onto the bed face-first and straddled her waist, prior to taking the things from Jared. Though, at the same time, Vicki bucked—almost knocking Rudi onto the floor.

“Hold her arms down!” Rudi ordered Jared—and he

fell to his knees and grabbed Vicki's wrists—and he had to hold them with all his strength. While he did, Rudi removed the blanket from Vicki, and, after pouring lots of nail polish remover onto her back, she started scrubbing the vileness off her.

Unfortunately, this did nothing to calm Vicki, who, if anything, was even more hysterical than before, especially as she could now comprehend who was helping her—the two people she wanted help from the least.

"Stop!" she screamed. "Get out of here! Both of you!"

"You stupid idiot!" Rudi screamed back, as she continued scrubbing. "I'm getting it off you!"

"Just leave me alone. I . . . I deserve it. I fucking deserve it."

"No," Jared quietly howled, with his face just inches from Vicki's. "You didn't deserve this. Nobody deserves this. *Nobody*."

Suddenly, Vicki calmed a little, and she looked at Jared, and, once she was finally able to focus her eyes on him, she slurred, "Aren't you gonna say it?"

"Say what?" he inquired.

"You know."

"I don't."

"Repent! Repent! Isn't that what you people always say?"

Jared smiled a bit at this, recognizing something in her. He recognized himself. And he afterward murmured, "I think you've seen *Elmer Gantry* once too often."

Bewilderedly, Vicki turned her head and looked up at Rudi, and she asked, "Who's Elmer Gantry?"

The question made Rudi grin, and she also grinned at Jared, prior to saying, "Not him. That's for sure."

However, Rudi's grin didn't last long, as she soon

heard through the walls the sound of Brad and Pete cackling in the next room. Knowing why they were cackling caused a violent rage to rise inside her—something that overwhelmed her. It overwhelmed her so much that she stopped scrubbing and jumped off the bed, before marching toward the door.

“What’s wrong?” Jared asked, clearly frightened by her anger.

“I’ll be right back,” Rudi replied, as she thrust open the door.

“Where you going?”

“Just stay with her!”

“*Rudi.*”

But Rudi didn’t listen. She stormed out into the hallway, slamming the door behind herself—watched by all the peeking heads, including those of her roommates. And, not paying attention to any of them, she rushed toward the room on the other side of Vicki’s, where the two boys were still cackling. Then, as soon as she got to their door, she began banging her mighty fists onto it while howling, “Open up! Open the fuck up!”

At once, the cackling inside the room came to a halt—and the door opened just a bit. After which Brad—with his breath reeking of alcohol—uttered, “What do you want?”

Rudi answered by smashing her hands into the door, not only knocking Brad backward off his feet but also causing the door to swing open—and she afterward burst into the room, right before slamming the door closed.

Soon, Brad regained his footing, and, while trying to hide his obvious fear, he repeated, “What do you want?”

“I know what you did to her,” Rudi softly replied, as she pointed toward Vicki’s room.

"Yeah?" Brad replied back, not so softly.

"Why don't you try that with me?" she cooed, prior to motioning him toward her with her finger.

Brad smirked at this, and, after smirking at his roommate, who was as drunk as him, he stumbled toward Rudi while quipping, "I think we'll paint 'freak'!"

It wasn't long before he was in range, and she slammed the heel of her palm into his nose—sending him flying backward onto the floor screaming in pain, where he held his bleeding face while howling, "You broke my fucking nose!"

"You psycho!" Pete screamed, while rushing at Rudi. He further threw a feeble roundhouse punch, which she easily blocked, and, in the same motion, she grabbed his arm and snapped it behind his back—making a loud cracking sound, which was followed by an even louder cry. Which was just before she flung the boy into the corner of a desk, causing him even further hurt as he collapsed onto the floor.

"You broke my fucking nose!" Brad repeated, as he squirmed on the floor.

Still fuming, Rudi stepped toward the boy, before stopping just in front of him—and she whispered, "Listen, you two, and listen carefully: if I hear one word of what you did to that girl tonight, I'm gonna break all your fucking teeth. Both of you! Do you understand me?"

Neither of them replied, so Rudi leaned down toward Brad's face and howled, "Do you understand?"

"Fuck you!" Brad howled back.

Rudi responded by kicking him as hard as she could in the gut, causing him to gasp both in pain and shortage of air.

"Do you fucking understand?" she screamed, while shaking all over.

"All right," Brad whimpered, as soon as he could speak again. "All right. Just leave me alone. Please."

Rudi complied, and, after taking one last look at Pete, who was softly crying by the desk while holding his broken arm, she stormed out of the room—doing so even more violently than she had stormed into it. She also slammed the door more violently—after which she saw all the peeking heads.

"Go back to your rooms!" she commanded—an order that was followed instantaneously. At least by everyone apart from her roommates. "You, too!" Rudi screamed at them, while threateningly pointing her finger.

Quickly, they obeyed, and Rudi reentered Vicki's room—and ignoring the shocked expression of Jared—she returned to Vicki's back and continued her scrubbing—though this time much harder than before.

"What did you do to them, Rudi?" Jared murmured.

Rudi didn't reply. She just kept scrubbing.

"*Rudi*," he pleaded.

"We just had a nice little chat," Rudi insisted, through her clenched jaws.

"You should've just—"

"—Don't tell me what to do!" Rudi hollered, looking as if she were about to literally explode. "I'm sick of everything! I see such terrible things every day! *Every fucking day!* People are such shit! All of them!"

"No," he told her, before gently taking her hand. "Not all of them."

Before this moment, Rudi didn't think anything would ever calm her again. But, just as Jared's words were able to calm Vicki, they calmed her as well.

AS SOON AS Rudi finished removing the nail polish—

without saying anything to Jared—she got off the bed and returned to her room.

Right then, Jared wasn't sure what to do, and so he mumbled to Vicki: "Are you gonna be okay?"

She nodded her head. She nodded her head on the bed without looking at him, and he reluctantly released her wrists and stood up—and afterward he headed out. Though, when he got to the door, he turned back to Vicki and saw her silently crying—something that reminded him of his own despair. And it took all his strength to walk out the door.

Chapter Nineteen

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, as Jared was eating breakfast by himself downstairs in the cafeteria, a young woman walked up to him carrying a tray of food—a woman he at first didn't recognize.

That's because it was the first time he had seen Vicki without makeup or flashy clothes. Or with her hair tied back.

"Oh, hi," he muttered once he finally realized who she was.

"Hi," she muttered back, with a strange melancholy expression—one that seemed so out-of-character.

Suddenly, there was a brief pause—after which Vicki added, "Where's Rudi? I, I usually see you guys eating together."

"She has an early class today."

"Oh."

Once again there was a pause, which was broken when he asked, "You wanna join me?"

Vicki didn't respond in words. She just sat down across from him, and then, with both of them looking uneasily at each other, she uttered, "I'm not, I'm not as bad as you think."

"I'm not as good as you think," he uttered back.

She nodded, rather unconvincingly, and the two started nibbling their food while continuing their uneasy staring.

"So . . ." she eventually said, after putting down her knife and fork.

"So?" he said back, before putting down his utensils

as well.

"So, aren't you gonna tell me how I can save myself?"

"No one can tell you that. And anyone who professes they can is a liar."

"You mean, you don't have any pamphlets?"

"Pamphlets?"

"Or Bible passages?" she added, while pointing to the dog-eared book next to his tray.

"I wish there was some magic I could give you," he answered. "I really do. I'd take it myself. But there just isn't."

"Then how, how do I save myself?"

"With me, the first step was accepting who I am."

"What if I don't like who I am?"

"That's the second step."

AS JARED AND Vicki were heading in the same direction after breakfast, they walked together. They walked slowly and unsurely and silently, looking straight ahead with the same uneasy expressions they had in the cafeteria.

Jared could now sense that there really had been something underneath Vicki's veneer. There was something decent and vulnerable and kind. Also, much like the night before, he saw a lot of himself in her—and he strangely found her attractive, even if he tried to convince himself that this wasn't at all what he was thinking.

As for Vicki, she wasn't sure what to think about Jared—and this scared her a little, because men were always something she was certain of. From the moment she hit puberty, she knew what they were about and what they wanted—and she used this for her own benefit. But Jared didn't eye her like others did, and even though she purposely made herself as unattractive as possible that

morning he didn't shy away from her, either. He even seemed interested in her, just as he seemed the night before when she saw his warm protective eyes and heard his sweet calming voice. The oddest part of all was that there seemed to be no stratagem behind this interest, just as there seemed to be no stratagem behind his help the previous night. He clearly wasn't trying to bed her, and just as clearly he wasn't after her soul.

So, what was his interest? she kept asking herself. She had no answer, and, after a while she just gave up and said, "So, what's your major?"

"I'm pre-med," he told her.

"You know, I've never actually met anyone here who was pre-med. Though I do know some people who are pre-wed."

Jared chuckled a bit at this before saying, "And you?"

"Definitely not me," she replied, with an emphatic shake of her head. "That's the very last thing I'll ever be."

"I mean, what's your major?"

"I don't have one. There's not much point."

"Why?"

"It's not important."

Ondansetron.

At once, the image of the pill bottle in Vicki's medicine cabinet popped into Jared's head, and it wouldn't leave. And he tried to remember where he heard about this drug and what its purpose was. But nothing came to him, and eventually he told himself that it probably wasn't anything special. He told himself that people take all sorts of drugs for the simplest of conditions.

"Can I ask you something?" Vicki inquired.

"Sure," Jared answered, with the image of the pill bottle finally leaving his head.

"I can't understand why Rudi did what she did last

night.”

“If you understood Rudi, you’d understand why. You’d understand she couldn’t’ve done anything else.”

“So, so you guys are . . .”

“We’re friends. Good friends.”

“Are you even allowed to have girlfriends?”

“Oh, yes,” he said with a gentle smile. “It’s encouraged, in fact.”

“It is?” Vicki uttered, with some surprise.

“Without love the world can’t continue.”

Just then, Vicki came to a stop in front of a building, and Jared stopped with her—and, while pointing toward the entrance, she told him: “Well, this is me.”

“Oh,” Jared told her back, with a nod and an expression indicating that he was a bit disappointed that their time together was at an end.

“So, maybe I’ll see you later,” she uttered.

“Like at breakfast,” he uttered back.

“Sure.”

She then hesitated for a few moments, before heading off.

“Hey,” he suddenly called out—and, just as suddenly, she came to a quick stop and spun toward him, unable to hide the hope on her face.

“If you’re not busy tonight,” he went on, “Rudi and I will be studying at the library.”

“Where?” she asked.

“In the third-floor lounge. At about eight.”

“Oh. You know, I really don’t know.”

“Yeah, I forgot—it’s Friday. You must . . .”

“Actually, I was gonna take it easy tonight.”

“I totally understand. Perhaps some other time.”

“Maybe I’ll be there.”

“All right.”

“All right.”

Quickly, Vicki turned around and skipped to the door, with just a hint of a smile on her face. A smile Jared shared.

WHEN VICKI ENTERED her Art History class that afternoon she saw Rudi sitting in her usual spot in the back—and, after taking a deep breath, she strode up to her and uttered, “Hi.”

Rudi responded by spinning her head and looking up at Vicki—and, much like Jared, she couldn’t quite recognize her. So, she just stared blankly for a few seconds.

“Can I sit down?” Vicki added—and Rudi finally realized who she was, and she shrugged unemotionally and returned her eyes up front.

Vicki then sat next to her, and, after not saying anything for a brief period, she said, “I saw Brad and Pete earlier in the hallway.”

“Yeah?” Rudi replied, with lots of disinterest.

“They looked pretty messed up.”

“Accidents happen, especially when you’re careless.”

“They were so frightened that they wouldn’t even look me in the eye.”

“They’re not the most courageous of men even under the best of circumstances.”

“The terrible thing is, the terrible thing is that I barely remember hooking up with them. I was pretty messed up, too, I guess.”

“I’ve done terrible things myself when I was messed up. You just have to move on. There’s nothing else you can do.”

“I don’t know what to say to you, Rudi.”

“Don’t say anything.”

Vicki didn’t obey. With her voice breaking, she said,

"After the way I treated you . . ."

"What does that have to do with it?" Rudi said back, while trying hard not to show any emotion.

"No one's ever done anything for me. At least not without some motive. And you had no motive at all. You should've been laughing at me."

"Forget about it."

"I won't."

Just then, Vicki gently put her hand on top of Rudi's. Which disconcerted Rudi, as—despite what had happened the night before—she firmly believed she still hated Vicki. But, in spite of this, she made no attempt to remove her hand. What's more, she soon gave up trying to hide her emotions.

"I saw Jared earlier, too," Vicki went on.

"Yeah?" Rudi replied, as stoically as she could.

"He mentioned that you guys were studying later, and he, he kinda invited me."

"Yeah?"

"I'm not sure about it though."

"Yeah, you must have much better things to do on a Friday night. I'm always kind of embarrassed about it, to be honest. We're usually pretty much the only people there."

"It's not that. I, I wouldn't want to intrude on you."

"You wouldn't. Jared and I are just friends."

"You know, I always thought he was so weird," Vicki murmured.

"Me, too," Rudi murmured back, with a little smile. "But if you want my opinion, he's the best guy in this whole school. And it's not even close."

RUDI ENTERED THE Gelman Library and proceeded to the nearly empty glass-enclosed lounge on the third

floor, where she saw Vicki and Jared sitting not far away—with both of them pretending to be reading when they were clearly far more interested in each other than the textbooks in front of them.

Rudi smiled at this, thinking the two were an even more ridiculous pair than she and Jared had been. But she also saw how natural they looked with one another. They looked as if they not only belonged together but that they had always belonged together. So, she started backing out of the room, realizing that she was the one intruding.

“Rudi!” Vicki quietly called out, causing Rudi to come to a quick stop.

Vicki afterward waved Rudi toward them, and reluctantly Rudi complied—and the three silently began studying together. Though Rudi all-too-well noticed the furtive glances the two would give each other when they thought the other wasn’t looking—and she finally whispered, “You know, I really need to do some research for this paper I’m working on.”

Rudi then stood up and quickly packed her things, and, while looking at the uneasy glances of the two, she added, “But don’t let me interrupt you guys.”

“Well,” Vicki softly spoke, “I probably should . . .”

“Stay,” Rudi insisted. “I’ll see you two tomorrow.”

“Sure thing,” Jared replied, with a knowing smile—something Rudi returned, right before she rushed to the door. However, just after she left she couldn’t help notice the two through the glass as she walked by. She also couldn’t help feel pangs of envy.

VICKI AND JARED stayed late at the library—so late that Vicki managed to do more studying in one evening than she had done in her entire college career.

Not that she minded. She especially didn't mind sitting next to Jared all night—someone who made her feel so comfortable about herself. She didn't have to be witty or sexy or provocative. She could just be Vicki. And it was this Vicki Jared liked. He liked the colorful butterfly she had morphed into. He also liked the fact that she liked him—and liked being around him.

JARED AND VICKI were still feeling high when they got to their doors. After which they came to a reluctant stop.

"Tonight was kinda fun," she told him with a smile.

"Yeah," he told her back, with his own smile.

"I never thought of studying as fun before."

"It's kinda rare, I think."

"Well," she muttered as she reached for her door-knob, "I should . . ."

Just then, Jared offered her his hand—something that surprised her a bit, as she almost never shook anyone's hand—let alone a guy's. But she hesitantly shook it, and he said, "Breakfast tomorrow?"

"On Saturday?" she replied, with even more surprise than before.

"You don't eat on Saturdays?"

"Usually I'm nursing a hangover. A bad one."

"You think you're gonna have one tomorrow?"

"Probably not," she replied with a chuckle. "Though I guess there's always a possibility of a flashback."

He returned her chuckle with one of his own, and continued: "So, we're on? About eight or so?"

"All right. Hey, maybe, maybe we could do something afterward."

"Actually, I gotta work."

"Oh. Where do you work?"

“At this homeless mission by Union Station.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it’s not exactly glamorous.”

“You’re such a better person than me,” she told him, with a shake of her head.

“It’s not true,” he insisted.

“It is.”

“I can prove you’re wrong.”

“How?” she asked.

“Come with me tomorrow,” he answered.

“You gotta be kidding—me at some homeless mission?”

“It’ll be fun. Even funner than the library.”

“I don’t know, Jared.”

“Please.”

“I’ll think about it.”

He grinned at this, and at her, and he also started backing up toward his door—and was so lost in thought that he walked right into it. Which made Vicki grin, too.

Chapter Twenty

JARED ENTERED THE mission the following morning, practically dragging Vicki inside by the hand—a Vicki who looked well beyond frightened.

“Come on,” he pleaded. “Nothing is gonna happen to you. I promise.”

“This is not a good idea,” she pleaded back, while shaking not only her head but just about everything else as well. Then, when she saw all the homeless people nearby, she came to an abrupt halt and told him: “I’m going back to GW. Right now.”

“All right,” he said with a sigh—and, after a brief moment of hesitation, she spun around and headed out. But she quickly stopped when she noticed Jared wasn’t coming with her, and she turned to him and howled, “Aren’t you gonna walk me to the train?”

“I have to work,” he replied, with a small smile.

“This is not funny!”

“It’s not?”

“You don’t expect me to walk through this neighborhood by myself, do you?”

“I’ll walk with you, right after work.”

He then smiled again—with his smile not so small—and he headed toward the kitchen.

“Jared!” she screamed.

But he just waved to her and continued on, and right then she noticed a whole bunch of people staring at her, which made her only more frightened—and in this state she started backing up. Though she didn’t back up far. That’s because someone grabbed her hand, causing her

to both cry out and almost shoot through the ceiling.

“Sorry about that,” Rudi said with a bit of a smirk, as soon as Vicki returned to earth.

A minute earlier, when she saw Vicki enter the mission, Rudi couldn’t believe her eyes. She literally did a double-take, as Vicki was the last person she ever expected to see there. However, once she got over her shock, she rushed over to the girl.

“You work here, too?” Vicki uttered, with lots of relief, knowing that she was at least safe.

“I volunteer here,” Rudi answered.

“But you’re Jewish.”

“So?”

“But, but I thought punk rockers hated religion.”

“We only hate the bad kind.”

“I’ll be honest with you,” Vicki murmured, as she nervously scanned the room, “I’m scared out of my mind.”

“You could’ve fooled me,” Rudi replied, while trying to suppress a smile—one that was soon replicated on Vicki’s face.

“Maybe you could walk me to the Metro.”

“I’ll tell you what—all three of us will walk there together later. Right now, I’m gonna introduce you to Reverend Samson.”

Rudi afterward started leading Vicki off—or, more exactly, started dragging her off.

“I, I’m not real religious,” Vicki pleaded.

“Neither am I, really,” Rudi told her. “Come on.”

“You think Jared would mind?”

“Mind what?”

“That I’m not real religious.”

Rudi smiled at this, and kept dragging Vicki, while saying to her: “What you have to understand about Jared

is that every preconception you have of him is likely wrong.”

VICKI, WHO WAS leaning heavily against Rudi, served peas to the endless multitude passing in front of her—careful to avoid looking into the eyes of those she served.

Suddenly, a little old man with a scruffy face came up to her, and, after she gave him some food, with a gravel voice he said to her: “Thank you.”

It was the first time one of the people there had spoken to her, and she couldn’t help look at him, and, when she saw his warm expression, hers became warm as well—and she told him with great sincerity: “You’re welcome.”

He nodded his head at this and continued on, and Vicki couldn’t believe how good she felt—and she turned to the next person in line, and, while looking the woman straight in the eyes, she put a heaping spoon of peas on her plate and smilingly told her: “Here you go, ma’am.”

Watching this, Rudi smiled, too. She also playfully nudged Vicki’s arm—and Vicki quickly reciprocated.

LATER THAT SAME day Jared cautiously rose his head above the kitchen sink, just before Vicki squirted water at him from the sink’s hose.

“Gotcha!” she hollered.

“I got both of you!” suddenly came Rudi’s voice, as she poured a big bucket of water on top of both their heads.

This caused the two of them to scream—and Rudi screamed as well when Jared grabbed her—sending her flying on top of him and Vicki. Which was just before the three started wrestling on the drenched floor—with

their laughter drowning out the sounds of everything else. So, they didn't even notice when Reverend Samson entered the kitchen wearing an old Ten Years After T-shirt. Nor did they notice the great joy the man found in watching them play. Though they did notice him say, "This reminds me of a movie"—and they instantly jumped to their feet, with their heads hung low. After which Jared murmured, "Sorry about all this, Reverend."

"Sorry about what?" the minister replied. "This reminds me of *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*. Have any of you seen it?"

Slowly, the three rose their heads, and they glanced at each other prior to looking at the minister with lots of confusion.

"It's one of those old hippie movies," Samson went on. "Donovan even did the score. Anyway, it's all about Saint Francis. He was a spoiled brat until he found his way. Then, he started rebuilding this old broken down church for the poor—and, before he knew it, all his former spoiled brat friends started helping him. And, before I know it, all of GW will be helping out in my mission."

"I wouldn't count on it," Rudi retorted, with a shake of her head.

"Ah, Rudi," the man retorted back—"I'm gonna depend on it!"

RUDI, JARED, AND Vicki were still laughing and horsing around when they returned to their dorm rooms early that evening—and they were still wet.

"So, what do you guys want to do now?" Vicki asked, feeling happier than she could ever recall, especially without having to drink, swallow, or inhale something beforehand.

"Well," Rudi replied, "I have sort of a date."

"Really?" Jared replied back, with some surprise.

"I think I know who it is," Vicki interjected, with a bit of a grin.

"He's just a friend," Rudi insisted.

"Uh-huh," Jared uttered.

"So, I need to get out of these clothes."

"Have fun," Vicki told her.

"You, too," Rudi told her back, before giving her a little hug—as well as a kiss on the cheek.

"What was that for?" a surprised Vicki asked afterward.

"I don't need a reason."

Rudi then entered her room, and Vicki turned to Jared and said, "She's really nice. So unlike what I thought."

"So are you," Jared uttered.

"Well," Vicki uttered back, prior to pointing her thumb at her door and adding, "I'd better get out of these clothes, too."

"And then?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said you wanted to do something."

"Oh, I don't know."

"Maybe we could get a pizza and listen to some records," he said hopefully.

"I don't know," she said back skeptically. "To be honest, I really don't like gospel music."

"Me, neither. What about the Stones?"

"As in the 'Rolling Stones'?" she mumbled, with great shock.

"I have a whole bunch of their albums," he replied. "Including this great live one."

"I was actually backstage with them once."

"Are you serious?"

"It was so wild!"

"You can tell me about it over dinner."

She shook her head, and said, "You wouldn't want to hear about it. Trust me."

"You think it would horrify me?"

"Yup."

"You have a lot to learn about me. So, shall we say my room in a half-hour? I'll order a pie. You like pepperoni?"

"Sure. But . . ."

"I'll see you then," he told her before rushing into his room so she couldn't change her mind.

DENNIS WHISTLED "LUCK Be a Lady" as he skipped down the house stairs wearing a tight black turtle-neck sweater—one that barely concealed his ample curves. Then, he sauntered into the main room, where many of his brothers were watching a pornographic video on the TV. Which he looked at with a tilted head.

"I didn't even think that was possible," he quipped, right before adding, "I'll have to try it."

"Big date tonight?" Johnny asked.

"One can hope," Dennis replied.

"With who?"

"*Whom*," Rich interjected.

"Excuse me, Emily Dickinson," Johnny growled. "With *whom*?"

"With a certain punk chick," Dennis answered.

"Are we gonna lose our bet tonight?"

"One can hope."

"I still don't believe it," Chuck stated.

"You wanna double the bet?" Dennis inquired.

"You're on."

Dennis replied by shaking his fist, and he hurried down the corridor toward the back room. Then, once

there, he opened the door leading to the driveway, where staring at him was a large white Eldorado convertible. One he couldn't help smile at.

"You're almost as pretty as Rudi!" he cried out.

THE ELDORADO RUMBLED up Pennsylvania Avenue in the direction of Georgetown, with its top down in spite of the chilly weather.

Rudi, who was sitting in the front passenger seat, suddenly turned to Dennis and said, "You know what they say about guys with big huge cars?"

"What's that?" he replied with a knowing grin.

"That they are overcompensating for a certain deficiency."

"Well," he uttered, before turning to her with an even bigger grin and saying, "that's certainly true in my case."

Like usual, Rudi found Dennis's grin intoxicating, and she just had to grin back.

WHILE RUDI AND Dennis waited in the Zebra Room for their meal a waiter walked by with a pizza so large that it looked like it could feed an army.

"That's not what we ordered, is it?" Rudi asked, with lots of shock.

"Nah," he replied, with a dismissive wave.

"That's insane."

"Supposedly, if four or fewer people can eat the whole thing, it's free. Though I've never heard of anyone actually doing it."

"How disgusting," Rudi growled, with a bit of a sneer.

"You haven't even tried it yet!" Dennis jokingly retorted.

"There are people on the streets starving just a short distance from here. They're starving right now!"

"You can't save the world, Rudi."

"Says who?" she barked.

Dennis smiled at this. He smiled because—while he had heard people express similar sentiments before—he had never heard someone actually mean it. Though, misreading his smile—with a bit of aggravation—she said, "What's so amusing?"

"You're the most amazing chh . . . you're the most amazing woman I've ever met. And I haven't even seen you without your clothes!"

"And you never will."

Dennis responded with another of his knowing grins—and Rudi again couldn't help grin back. A grin that remained on her face when a waitress brought them over a pie—one loaded with every vegetable topping the restaurant offered but still far smaller than the monstrosity that had just passed them. Rudi then took a slice and blew on it a bit before bringing it to her mouth, while noticing Dennis wasn't looking at her. He was looking at his own slice.

As she took a small bite, she tried to tell herself this was exactly what she had expected, but she couldn't hide her disappointment.

"Well?" Dennis asked, right after she swallowed.

"Better than the Rathskeller," she answered—"that's for sure."

"Can you taste the love?"

"It's not exactly love. But it's closer."

Warmly, Dennis took her hand.

"I don't want to give you the wrong impression," she told him.

"What impression is that?" he inquired.

"That anything is going to happen between us."

"One can hope."

VICKI THOUGHT SHE had a good time earlier that day, but it was nothing compared to the evening spent on Jared's floor.

There they stayed for hours, eating and listening to music, while getting higher and higher off each other. They also continued the horsing around they'd been engaged in most of the day—something that peaked when the two tickled each other to the point where they could barely breathe through their laughter.

Suddenly, though, they stopped. They stopped just as Joe Cocker's "You Are So Beautiful" began playing on Jared's stereo—and they leaned up against his bed and looked into each other's eyes. Which caused Vicki to become a little weak, as she had never seen anyone look so deep into her before.

"Can I ask you something?" she murmured.

"What?" he murmured back.

"Is it, is it against the rules for you to kiss?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"On whether the kiss means something."

Unhesitatingly, she kissed him. It was an innocent kiss—the most innocent she had ever experienced, even in childhood. Not only were their eyes closed but so were their lips, and their bodies were a good distance apart. What's more, their hands were doing nothing more than caressing each other's back. Still, it was the most powerful kiss she ever knew—one that made her swoon—something she thought only happened to people in stories.

As for Jared, he quickly became lost in her kiss—a kiss that seemed to breathe life into him—a kiss that somehow erased all the horrors of his life and made him feel that everything would be all right just as long as the

kiss never ended.

Neither one actually wanted the kissed to end, and their lips remained locked for what seemed like hours—during which time the magic spell cast upon them only got stronger. However, Vicki eventually felt a near overwhelming urge—an urge for something far stronger than a kiss—an urge she knew Jared couldn't fulfill. So, she broke their embrace and told him: "I, I think I should be going."

"All right," he softly told her back, understanding exactly why she needed to leave. He then stood up and lifted her to her feet, and the two reluctantly left his room, with Vicki looking well beyond sad.

"What's wrong?" he asked, as they stopped at her door.

"I was just fooling myself," she answered. "But now . . ."

"Fooling yourself about what?"

"I was just thinking—I don't know—I was thinking I could be something—something I'm not."

"You can be anything you want."

"I wish that were true."

"It is. I believe in you, Vicki. All you have to do is believe in yourself, too."

Suddenly, he kissed her—a kiss that wasn't nearly as innocent as before, and one that made her swoon even more. Which frightened her some, knowing that she couldn't control this, and that she couldn't control him—at least not in the way she controlled other boys. So, she pushed him away while saying, "We better stop."

"Breakfast Monday?" he then inquired.

"I guess you, you'll be in church tomorrow."

"Yeah," he told her.

"I have to be honest with you about something. I'm

not—”

“—Not religious?” he interrupted.

“Yeah.”

“I know. But you’ve got something way better than religion.”

“What’s that?”

“You have a good heart.”

“I don’t. Not really.”

“You do. And that trumps everything.”

The two right then became silent and just stared at each other for a few seconds, and afterward he turned around and headed back to his room.

“Jared,” she softly called out.

This caused him to stop and spin back to her—and she murmured, “Would you like some company tomorrow—at church?”

“Only if that’s what you really want,” he murmured back. “Don’t do it for me.”

“I want to.”

“I get up pretty early.”

“When?”

“I usually head down to breakfast at around 6:30.”

“All right.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Just knock on my door.”

THE ELDORADO PARKED in front of Thurston Hall and Dennis led Rudi to the front door of the building.

“I guess a nightcap is out of the question,” he said.

“You guess right,” she replied.

Still, he leaned toward her, only to be stopped by her palms.

“It was a nice evening,” she told him. “Don’t ruin it.”

"All right," he told her back. "I won't push it. So, do you have any plans for Thanksgiving?"

"I'm going home. I can't wait to see everyone, especially my mother-in-law. I miss her a lot."

"Most people don't even like their mother-in-laws."

"We used to hate each other big time. But she's really the only reason I'm alive."

"I owe her a debt then."

"I'll be sure and tell her that. What about you? What are you doing for Thanksgiving?"

"I'm not doing anything."

"Why not?"

"Well, my mom's gotta work, and, to be honest, she's never quite understood the holiday in the first place."

"How long has she lived here?"

"Since '68, when the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia."

"So, you were born over there?"

"Yeah. I can even vaguely remember the tanks in the streets."

"How'd your parents meet?"

"My dad was an international lawyer before he got into politics."

"And what about him? Aren't you gonna do something with him on Thanksgiving?"

"Nah. He's always in campaign mode. He'll likely be trying to get some money from someone somewhere. Besides, we're not very close."

"I'm sorry."

"Me, too."

"You know, you always seem like the very last guy in the world who'd ever be lonely."

"It's not true."

Dennis then again leaned toward Rudi, who again

stopped him with her palms—and who again said, “Don’t ruin it.”

“All right, all right. I can be patient.”

“Can you?”

“I didn’t say I was good at it.”

Rudi chuckled at this, and he chuckled back, before telling her: “You know, we’re gonna have our annual Christmas/Chanukah party right after the break.”

“Yeah?” Rudi uttered.

“You think you could stop by? I’m sure Maria and Sandra will be there.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes.’”

VICKI ENTERED HER room feeling a giddiness she didn’t want to end. Though this quickly dissipated when she went into her bathroom and saw all the pill bottles in the medicine cabinet. And it disappeared completely when she took off her wig.

Which she threw onto the floor in a mad fury, right before falling to her knees and crying.

Chapter Twenty-One

EARLY THE FOLLOWING morning Jared gently knocked on Vicki's door.

But there was no reply, so he knocked again—this time a little harder.

“Yeah?” she uttered.

“It’s me—Jared,” he uttered back. “You still want to come with me?”

“Actually, actually I’m not feeling too well.”

“Is there something I can do?” he asked, suddenly recalling all the medicine in her bathroom, even if he really didn’t want to recall it.

“No,” she told him.

“I could take you to the clinic,” he went on—“or even to the hospital.”

“That’s all right. I’ll be fine.”

“You sure?”

“You better get going. You’ll be late.”

“All right. Will I see you later?”

“Maybe.”

“And breakfast tomorrow?”

“Maybe.”

JARED DIDN’T SEE Vicki either later that day or at breakfast on Monday, and she avoided him everywhere else as well, and continued doing so during the days that followed.

The message she was conveying by this was clear to him and he tried to accept it and move on. But he just couldn’t get her out of his head—nor could he get out

the kiss they shared. What's more, he couldn't sleep or eat or study—or be functional in any way. So, one morning he got up early and waited for her outside the dorm on a bench. He waited for more than two hours.

Finally, she came out and saw him, and quickly rushed off.

"What's wrong?" he called out after jumping to his feet and following her.

"I'm in a hurry," she called back.

"Can we have lunch or something?"

"I'm pretty busy."

"Dinner?"

"I can't talk right now."

Vicki then ran off, with him staring at her hopelessly.

Ondansetron.

Once again, the name of the drug she was taking popped into his head, and he wondered if it were the cause of her strangely altered disposition toward him. At first, he wondered if it were a side-effect of the medication, and then he wondered something else. He wondered something far worse.

AS RUDI AND Jared walked up the steps of the Foggy Bottom Metro station she could tell he was upset, and so she asked him what was wrong.

"Nothing," he replied.

"Jared."

"I told you—nothing."

"It's Vicki, isn't it?"

Suddenly, Jared stopped—and so did Rudi, and he told her: "She shutting me out for some reason."

"Did you say something to her?"

"I . . . I don't think so."

"You want me to talk to her?"

"I don't want to get you involved."

"I'm already involved. You're my friends."

"She's probably just not interested in me."

"She's interested, believe me. I'll talk to her tomorrow right after class."

WHEN RUDI ENTERED her dorm room that night she found her roommates watching TV with the glum-mest faces imaginable.

"Who died?" she asked.

"Reagan won," Maria answered.

"49 states," added Sandra.

"Oh, well," said Rudi, "at least Tommy's happy."

"I can't understand how he could've been a Republican," Sandra muttered while shaking her head.

"If there's anything I've learned," Rudi replied, "it's that labels don't mean a thing. You have to peel them off if you want to discover the truth. Just like you two don't fit the crude stereotype of gay women, Tommy didn't fit the stereotype of a Republican. Probably no one fits any stereotype—it's just easier to believe they do."

THE NEXT DAY after Art History class Rudi followed an emotionless Vicki out the door, and she said to her: "So, you must be excited."

"About what?" Vicki uttered, without looking at Rudi.

"Reagan."

"Actually, I'm not really into politics. There was just some guy in the YAF I liked."

"What about Jared? Don't you like him?"

Vicki sighed at this, before coming to a stop. Then, she turned to Rudi and said, "I'm not right for him."

"Don't you think he should decide that?"

"I'm not good enough."

"That's what I used to think about myself. And, because of it, I almost lost out on someone—someone incredible."

"Tommy?" Vicki mumbled, while pointing at the name on Rudi's jacket.

Rudi nodded.

"Jared mentioned something about it," Vicki went on. "I'm sorry. It must be terrible being without him."

"It would've been much worse if I never got to love him," Rudi told her.

"You sure?"

"As sure as I am of the sun rising tomorrow."

All of a sudden, Vicki started off again—and she uttered, "Jared needs to find himself a nice virginal church girl. Someone he could live happily ever after with in some little white house with a picket fence."

"And what if he doesn't want any of that?" Rudi called out. "What if he wants you?"

"He doesn't have that option!"

THAT NIGHT, WHEN Rudi walked inside the kitchen of the mission, Jared turned to her hopefully.

"Sorry," she told him.

"It's all right," he told her back.

"I don't know what her problem is. But I know it's not that she doesn't care about you, or that she doesn't want you."

"I think, I think I know what the problem is."

"Yeah?"

"I've only been pretending I didn't."

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you when I'm sure."

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON in between classes Jared entered the Himmelfarb Health Sciences Library and walked up to a librarian and said, "Excuse me, I'm looking for some information about a drug called Ondansetron."

"What kind of drug is it?" she replied.

"That's just it—I don't know. I think, I think I read about it in a medical journal in the past year."

"You don't know which journal?"

"I read a lot of them."

"Let me see what I can do."

THAT EVENING, AS Rudi and Jared walked up the Metro stairs together, she saw that he was even more upset than before. So, she came to a quick stop and murmured, "All right—what is it?"

He responded by stopping next to her—and he lowered his head. But he didn't say a thing.

"Tell me," Rudi insisted.

Slowly, he raised his head and murmured, "Can I ask you something instead?"

"What?"

"It's very personal."

"What?"

"If it's too personal . . ."

"Jared."

"If you could go back in time—knowing all you've suffered because of Tommy's death—would you do it again? Would you still love him?"

"I don't see how I would have a choice. I didn't the first time. But why are you asking me this?"

Again, he lowered his head, and—mimicking what he had done to her that night in his room—she gently put her fingers underneath his chin and raised it.

"Tell me," she whispered.

"Vicki's sick," he answered. "Very sick."

"What?"

"She doesn't even know I know."

"Oh, my God," Rudi uttered, before turning away from Jared in horror as she thought back to something.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Back, back when I didn't like Vicki I told her to 'drop dead.' She got so upset—I couldn't understand why. But now I do."

"You didn't know."

"I know now. And I feel terrible."

Slowly, Rudi turned to Jared, and, after taking his hand, she said, "I know exactly what you're going through, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone."

"What should I do?"

"You don't need me to tell you that."

JARED THOUGHT ALL night long about what he was going to say to Vicki the next day. Even more importantly, he thought about the consequences of this—for both of them. He even tried to come up with options, even though he knew there were none.

Then, as soon as the sun rose, he mechanically got off his bed, and, after putting on one of his plaid shirts and a pair of jeans, he went outside—and he sat on the bench and waited for Vicki to come out. He waited almost until noon, and the instant she left the dorm she saw the sad expression on his face, and, almost as instantly, she

turned from it and headed off.

"We need to talk," he called out, as he stood up and started following her.

"Not now," she called back.

"You can't keep avoiding me."

"The truth is, Jared—the truth is you're just way too slow for me. I'm sorry, but it's the truth."

"I really wish that was the truth. It would be a lot easier to accept than cancer."

Suddenly, Vicki came to a stop, but she didn't turn around. She just mumbled, "How . . . how did you know?"

"Does it matter?" Jared asked, as he stopped a few steps from her.

"It matters!"

"When I was in your bathroom that night I saw . . ."

Before he could even finish his sentence, she angrily spun toward him—and howled, "So, that's what this has all been about!"

"What are you talking about?"

"You were just pretending to like me. You felt sorry for me."

Looking as if she were about to cry, Vicki again took off. But he went after her and soon caught up with her—and he grabbed her shoulder and forced her to face him while telling her: "That's not true! The only pretending I did was pretending I didn't see anything! I pretended because I desperately wanted to pretend!"

"Do you know what type of cancer I have?" she whispered. "Do you?"

"It doesn't matter," he replied.

"It matters! I have cervical cancer. Do you know anything about it?"

"I know about it."

"Then, now you know. Now you know why I've been trying to cram a lifetime into a few years. Because the odds are I won't see twenty-five."

"Odds can be beaten. I did it."

"You know nothing about anything, Jared. You live in some Christian fantasy world, where the very worst thing is being late for church."

"You're wrong!"

"I don't want your pity!"

"What about my love?"

"Love?" she incredulously gasped.

"I know it's crazy. I barely know you. I guess, I guess I'm just the type of person who either loves fast or not at all."

"Do you have any idea how I contracted this disease?"

"I know. I know exactly."

"Then how could you love me? I'm a fucking whore!"

"No," he told her, while shaking his head. "You're not."

"Go home," she stated with rising emotion as she hesitantly stepped backward. "Go home and find someone who's as good as you. It's not me."

"I'm not good!" he cried out.

"You are!"

"I'm a junkie, Vicki! A worthless fucking junkie!"

"No," she muttered, before coming to a stop and emphatically shaking her head. After which she added, "You're just making that up."

"I am," he replied, as he started unbuttoning the cuffs of his shirt—which was just before he asked, "Did you ever wonder why I wear long shirts and pants even when it's scorching hot out?"

He then rolled up his sleeves and she saw the track

marks—and she couldn't help gasping once again. Though she also continued shaking her head, while trying to convince herself the marks weren't real. And to further convince herself of this she uttered, "I don't believe it."

"Do you believe this?" he uttered back, prior to ripping his shirt off, sending buttons flying everywhere and exposing marks all over his torso. He afterward told her: "I've been ashamed—ashamed of my own body! But I don't care anymore! It's you I care about!"

"No," she once again muttered.

He responded by unbuckling his belt, and, as he began removing his jeans, he said, "It's all over my legs, too. I'll show you!"

"Jared—people are watching!" she screamed, after noticing the stares of a handful of students not far away.

"I don't care!" he screamed back—and he continued with his jeans, only to be stopped when she rushed up to him and grabbed his wrists.

"You think you're bad," he softly went on. "You think you're bad because you've fucked around some. But you wanna hear a story about real bad?"

She didn't reply. She just started crying.

"I had my first taste of smack when I was fourteen. At sixteen my mom threw me out. And I don't blame her—all I did was lie and steal. I even hit her—my own mother! I can't live long enough to make up for that! I can't do enough good deeds! Nothing will ever make up for it! Nothing!"

Jared then paused to wipe his teary eyes, and he said to Vicki: "You called yourself a whore just now. But you don't even know the meaning of the word! After I got thrown out, how, how do you think I survived? I, I had

to hustle.” Suddenly, Jared again paused. But just as suddenly he grabbed Vicki’s arms and shook her—and he howled, “Do you know what that fucking means? Do you?”

Vicki shook her head, with tears pouring out of her.

“Me and the other pretty boys in town,” Jared explained with a sneer—“we would hang out at the bus station waiting for the dirty old men to drive by—so we could, so we could . . .”

Vicki wouldn’t let Jared finish. She took him into her arms and continued her crying on his shoulder—and she mumbled to him: “It’s okay, Jared. You don’t have to tell me any more. You don’t have to tell me anything ever again. I believe you—and I love you, too. I love you so much. And I don’t care what you’ve done—you’re good. You’re so good.”

“So are you,” he replied, prior to caressing her cheek with his shaking hand. “So are you.”

“But I’m gonna tell you right now—I’m gonna be a lousy girlfriend.”

“Probably,” he replied.

“What?” she replied back in surprise, before breaking their embrace and looking him in the eyes. At which time he grinned and said, “But you’d make one hell of a wife.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

MRS. GOODWIN COULDN'T stop smiling at Rudi as the two of them waited at Reservoir for their pizza, and Rudi had the very same problem.

An hour earlier, Rudi arrived at Newark Airport and the first thing she wanted to do—before even dropping her things off at home—was to visit her favorite restaurant. Though her mother-in-law wasn't so enthused about it.

"You know," she said, "I would've taken you anywhere tonight."

"And you have," Rudi said back.

"I would've even taken you to the best restaurant in New York."

"Instead you've taken me to the best restaurant in the world."

"Aaggghh. You're just like Tommy."

"I take that as a great compliment. The ultimate one."

Just then, Mr. Agnellino came over with a pie and put it down on the table, and when he saw Rudi's smiling face, he told her: "It's so wonderful to have you with us again."

"You have no idea how wonderful," she told him back, as she took hold of his hand. "I've missed you—and your pizza. You don't know how much."

He thanked her in reply and took his leave, and Rudi quickly pulled out a slice. Then, after barely blowing on it, she took a huge bite, with bliss covering her face.

"Let me tell you," she subsequently said to her mother-in-law, "the pizza in DC just sucks. And you

can't even get a bagel down there. At least not a real one."

"Friday I'll have Elizabeth pick up a big bag from the place up the street," Mrs. Goodwin stated.

"How is Elizabeth?"

"Just fine. She's very excited to see you."

"I can't wait to see her, too."

"And she's not the only one excited. The rabbi was asking me if you'd be coming to service on Saturday."

"I've never been to service. What's it like?"

"To be honest, it's not particularly thrilling. But we can stop by near the end of it."

"All right."

"What other plans do you have for the weekend?"

"We're still going to the Crosses for Thanksgiving, right?"

"Of course."

"Well, Friday I'm gonna visit some friends and then have dinner with my dad, along with some mystery woman."

"Really?"

"And then on Saturday, believe it or not, I'm having tea with royalty."

"Are you serious?" Mrs. Goodwin gasped, unable to hide her shock.

"I'm serious," Rudi insisted.

"How did you manage that?"

"I don't know. This guy I met in the hospital—he's supposedly some kind of prince."

"A real prince?"

"I guess so."

"What's his name?"

"Prince Vilem of . . . of somewhere."

"Vilem? Strange, I've actually heard of someone with

that name before. But I can't think of where I heard it."

"Well, anyway, his mother hired a private investigator to track me down. She even came to my dorm."

"Why would she do that?"

"I don't know. She seems to think I helped her son somehow."

"Did you?"

"It was nothing."

"I've heard this refrain before."

"Mom, everyone makes a big deal out of the things I do when they're nothing."

"Maybe you make too small of a deal out of them."

Rudi shrugged, before adding, "Hey, you know, this tea thing is going to be in Manhattan. So, maybe afterward we could have that dinner in New York."

"What a great idea," the woman exclaimed, while rubbing her palms together in excitement.

"You can even pick out the place."

"I can't wait!"

"But I'm not wearing a dress."

"That won't be a problem. I know some great places in Little Italy. Who knows, maybe we can even wean you of this dump."

"Not likely."

"But, Rudi, you have to wear something nicer than a T-shirt and jeans."

"*Mom.*"

"The same thing applies for temple—and it especially applies for meeting royalty."

"I don't have anything better."

"Then, let me buy you something."

"No."

"Please. Make an old woman happy."

"Don't call yourself that—you're not old."

"I won't if you let me buy you something."

"All right," Rudi relented. "But this is gonna be your Chanukah gift to me. Under no circumstances are you to buy me anything else."

"Deal!" Mrs. Goodwin uttered with a grin, even though she had not the slightest intention of holding up her end of the bargain.

Rudi then continued eating—and her mother-in-law took a small bite of pizza herself prior to saying, "I'm so happy you're home."

"Me, too," Rudi replied in between bites. After which she took the woman's hand and added, "I'm so happy I have a home."

"You don't know how many times I almost jumped on that shuttle."

"What stopped you?"

"I don't know. I wanted to give you some space."

"I don't need any space from you. Not ever."

"So, tell me all about school."

"I tell you about school all the time over the phone."

"But not the things I want to know about."

"What do you want to know about?"

"Something interesting."

"Like what?"

"Come on—something interesting must've happened in two and a half months."

"Well, let's see—a couple of friends of mine are getting married. The wedding's gonna be on Christmas Eve, in fact."

"How romantic."

Rudi shrugged, leaving out the part where the wedding was taking place, knowing her mother-in-law wouldn't have found it quite so romantic. Then, she told her: "Right afterward I'll take a train home."

“Why a train?”

“I’m sure all the flights on Christmas Eve are already booked.”

“Not on first class.”

“Not a chance.”

“All right. Just let me know when the train’s coming in and I’ll pick you up at the station.”

“Ma, it’ll be in the middle of the night.”

“Just let me know the time.”

“All right.”

The two then again started eating. Though soon a devious little grin formed on Mrs. Goodwin’s face and she said, “Well, you’ve told me about your friends, but what about you?”

“What about me?” Rudi inquired.

“There must be some interesting boys at school.”

“*Mom.*”

“What?”

“No one will ever replace Tommy.”

“Who’s talking about replacing?” the woman murmured, before reaching her finger underneath Rudi’s Chai pendant and saying, “I’m talking about living.”

“I don’t see you dating up a storm,” Rudi replied.

“That’s different. I’m an old woman.”

“Again with the ‘old woman.’ You’re not old. You’re beautiful—and I’m sure lots of guys are interested in you.”

“I’m sure lots of them are interested in my money. But they’re not the men I want to talk about. So?”

“So?”

“Are there any interesting boys at school?”

“No one special.”

“Well, that’s not a no.”

“It’s not a yes, either.”

RUDI AND HER mother-in-law stood in front of a large brick manor, and Rudi couldn't help think back to when she first stood in front of the place—at the beginning of a journey that would change her life, along with many others.

Suddenly, the door swung open, exposing Pam, who immediately wished the two a Happy Thanksgiving prior to giving Rudi a big warm hug. Which was something Rudi gladly returned before also hugging her former foster father, who started talking with Mrs. Goodwin as Pam led Rudi through the packed and noisy house.

"I made lots of yams for you," Pam told her.

"Terrific," Rudi said, with a little smile.

"Oh, and your stepdad is here. He even brought someone."

"Where is he?"

"I'm taking you there right now."

It was then that Rudi noticed all the families, with lots of little children—and that recurring pang of envy hit her once again.

"So," Rudi said, while trying to keep this feeling under control, "how many kids have you got staying with you now?"

"Two," Pam answered. "Including a girl. I'd actually like you to meet her. I was thinking maybe, maybe you could talk to her a little. She's . . . well, you know, she's not exactly overjoyed about staying here."

"I think I've heard this story before."

"Will you talk to her?"

"Of course."

The two women soon entered the kitchen, where a short distance away stood Mr. Reese, who was eating an appetizer next to an attractive middle-aged woman.

At once, the man saw Rudi and called out her name,

before gobbling down the rest of the food in his hand. After which he rushed over to her and gave her one of his bear-like hugs.

“I’ve missed you a lot,” he whispered.

“I’ve missed you, too,” she whispered back.

They afterward broke their embrace, and he turned around and pointed at the woman he was with, who was standing right behind them and looking well beyond nervous. More than once, she had been warned about Rudi’s wild appearance, but she still couldn’t hold back her surprise, and fear.

“This is Nancy,” Mr. Reese uttered.

“Nice to meet you,” Rudi said with a smile as she offered the woman her hand, and, as the woman shook it, her nervousness and fear magically disappeared.

“Can I borrow your daughter for just a little while,” Pam suddenly interjected, after taking Rudi’s arm.

“Sure,” Mr. Reese said. “We’ll talk later, kid.”

“You got it,” Rudi said back, as Pam dragged her into the den, where a sullen girl of fourteen was sitting by herself on an easy chair, with her arms crossed and her head down—reminding Rudi of Stacey, and the events by the train station.

“This,” Pam cooed, once she and Rudi were right beside the girl, “this is Ellen.”

“Hi, Ellen,” Rudi murmured. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

The girl just shrugged—a shrug Rudi was quite familiar with.

“You go to Columbia?” Rudi then asked.

“She’s a freshman there,” Pam answered, once it became obvious Ellen wasn’t going to reply herself. “Stephen’s her guidance counselor.”

“What a surprise.”

“Well,” Pam stated, “I really should be checking on

the turkeys.” She afterward started to walk out, but not before mouthing her thanks to Rudi.

“So,” Rudi said to Ellen as she turned back to her, “you like Columbia?”

Not surprisingly, Ellen didn’t answer—and Rudi told her: “Yeah, I didn’t like it much, either. Actually, I thought it sucked.”

Ellen tried hard not to respond to this. But she couldn’t help smile just a bit.

“But hang in there,” Rudi continued. “You couldn’t ask for better foster parents. They really care.”

“They’re getting paid to,” Ellen mumbled.

“Hey, take a look at this place. You really think they need a couple of bucks from the government? They do this because they care. I’m telling you from experience. They haven’t received money for me in nearly two years, and yet they invited me into their home on Thanksgiving. Think about that.”

Once again, Ellen shrugged. At the same time, Rudi reached into her sea bag for a scrap of paper and a pen, and while writing she told the girl: “If you ever want to talk, here are my numbers—both at home and at school. Call me anytime.”

Rudi subsequently offered the paper to Ellen, who just ignored it. So, Rudi put it on the end table nearby and said, “I mean it—call me.” She then started out—and Ellen muttered, “Is it true you used to beat up boys?”

With some surprise, Rudi stopped and spun toward the girl—and replied, “Where did you hear about that?”

“The kids at school still talk about it. They say you beat up the entire football team.”

“That’s a *slight* exaggeration,” Rudi retorted, with a chuckle—a chuckle Ellen reluctantly returned.

“Dinner’s ready!” Pam suddenly called out—and

Rudi offered Ellen her hand, and, when the girl made no move to take it, Rudi uttered, "Come on."

Ellen sighed, but she eventually took Rudi's hand, and, after Rudi lifted her out of the chair, the two headed into the kitchen together.

AFTER DINNER RUDI and her stepdad walked outside, arm-in-arm.

"That was some meal," he said, while rubbing his big stomach with his free hand.

"Yeah," Rudi replied.

"I haven't eaten like that since . . . well, I don't even know."

"Nancy doesn't cook?"

"We haven't gotten that far yet. We've just had a few dates."

"She's real nice."

"Believe it or not, she's the first since . . . you know."

"Mom?"

"Yeah."

"Can I ask you something, Dad?" Rudi uttered, with the image of a certain woman involuntarily entering her head.

"Sure," Mr. Reese answered.

"You really don't have any pictures of her?"

"I really don't. I'm sorry."

"You don't know where I could find one? Maybe from a friend or a relative?"

"She didn't have many of either, as far as I know. And I didn't keep in touch with them after she left. Actually, they didn't keep in touch with me. Why are you asking?"

"I don't know."

"You were never curious before."

"I am now."

"Why?"

"What was she like? I mean, what did she look like?"

"I don't know—a lot like you. She was bigger, though. I mean, heavier."

"How heavy?"

"Rudi, what's going on?"

"Nothing."

"Then, why are you asking me all these questions?"

"Do you, do you ever wonder what happened to her?"

"All the time."

Suddenly, a smiling Nancy exited the house and exclaimed, "There you are!" Which was just before she walked up to Mr. Reese and gave him a little kiss, causing Rudi to once again feel that unrelenting pang.

FRIDAY MORNING RUDI and Mrs. Goodwin went to Bloomingdales in the Short Hills Mall—in spite of the holiday mob that made parking and shopping almost impossible.

After lots of squabbling over what to buy, they came to a sort of compromise, with Rudi selecting a harlequin blouse that reminded her of something Siouxsie Sioux once wore—along with a pair of jet-black slacks and equally black boots.

"Well?" Rudi asked, after striking a pose with the outfit just outside the fitting room.

"Not terrible," spoke her mother-in-law, who was holding in her hand a black Givenchy dress—something she showed Rudi while saying, "But you'd really look stunning in this."

"Mom."

"It reminds me of the outfit Audrey Hepburn wore in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*."

“*Mom.*”

“All right, all right. Just as long as you don’t look like Mel Vicious.”

“Sid Vicious.”

“Him, too.”

A SILVER JAGUAR pulled up to an auto repair shop, which was on a small side street a few blocks from South Orange Avenue.

“How will you get home?” Mrs. Goodwin asked Rudi inside the car.

“I’ll take the bus,” Rudi replied. “Or I’ll just walk.”

“Let me give you some cab fare.”

This time Rudi didn’t even say “*Mom.*” Instead, she gave her a look that expressed it, before giving the woman a kiss and opening the car door. Then, after the two said their goodbyes, Rudi entered the shop, where she said to the clerk by the front desk: “Do you know where I could find Owen Connors?”

“He’s in the manager’s office,” the man replied, after pointing to a room a short distance away.

Rudi responded by walking up to the door of the office, and she saw Owen in a pair of blue coveralls, sitting behind a metal desk doing some paperwork. Right then, she smiled at him. She smiled without saying a word, admiring the man she so unexpectedly came to care about, and she kept smiling until he finally looked up and saw her.

“Rudi?” he gasped with great surprise—even though she had told him she’d be stopping by during the latest of their regular telephone conversations.

With an even bigger smile, Rudi spread out her arms as wide as she could, and he jumped out of his seat and rushed over to her—before not only giving her a hug but

also spinning her around the room until she was dizzy.

"Oh, my God!" he howled afterward as he put her down.

"It's so good to see you!" she howled back. "How was your Thanksgiving?"

"Fine. And yours?"

"Wonderful. Just look at you—you've made manager already."

"Assistant manager. The manager is off today."

"Still . . ."

"Hey, would you like to get some lunch?"

"I was gonna invite you."

"Let me just get my coat."

The two then exited the office and approached an old desk by the edge of the garage, and, as Owen picked up his jacket off the chair next to it, Rudi noticed a picture on the desk—a picture of a young woman.

"Who's that?" she asked with a grin.

"Nobody," he answered, right after knocking the picture over face-first.

"Nobody? You put pictures of nobodies on your desk?"

"Really, it's nothing serious."

"She looks pretty serious to me."

Suddenly, Owen lowered his eyes, and he mumbled, "She, she's not you."

This made Rudi feel unease—at her inability to return the love Owen so clearly felt for her. She, of course, did love him—just not the way he so desperately wanted. But she wondered if this love was sufficient to make her happy. Sure, it would never be like what she had with Tommy—but nothing would ever be like that anyway. At least with Owen she'd be loved—unconditionally. She knew he'd give her everything he had. He'd worship

her and support her and be true to her, in every way. What's more, she could leave that ridiculous school and move back home near the people she missed. No longer would she have to escape, nor would she again be lonely or have any pangs of envy. All she had to do was leap—leap into Owen's arms. And she almost did. She almost gave herself to him right there. However, she quickly realized that this would be the ultimate escape. Even worse, it would be a lie.

THE NEXT DAY—on an unseasonably warm morning—Rudi, wearing her new outfit, entered Congregation Beth El with her mother-in-law.

It was the first time she had ever been inside a synagogue and she was a little nervous—and she only became more nervous when they entered the prayer hall and she noticed all the stares.

Afterward, when the two women sat in the back, Rudi could hear the mutterings all around her—mutterings from people who knew all too well who her husband had been and how he had died. And she only made it through the remainder of the service because Mrs. Goodwin was clutching her hand the whole way through.

MRS. GOODWIN WAS still clutching Rudi's hand after the service, as the two stood in the adjacent banquet hall, where drinks and pastries were served.

There the stares and mutterings continued, and not a single person came up to greet either of them.

"We'll just say hello to the rabbi and leave," Mrs. Goodwin whispered to her daughter-in-law, who was clearly unnerved despite the stoic expression she feigned.

"All right," Rudi whispered back, before clutching her mother-in-law's hand even harder than before.

"I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry about."

"I'm apologizing for them. Unfortunately, people are very ignorant."

"Tell me about it."

"They'll be sorry about it one day. They'll hang their heads in shame. Not just the people in this room, but all over the world."

Soon, Rabbi Orenstein entered the banquet hall, and he immediately saw Rudi. And, just as immediately, he came up to her, and, with a big smile, he warmly hugged her—something many of the people around them noticed, and noticed with great surprise.

"It's wonderful to see you again," he said, after breaking their embrace. "How are you?"

"Much better," she replied—"thank you. Actually, I never got a chance to thank you for all you did for my husband and me. I can never thank you enough for your kindness and support."

"You're welcome. You know, you're also more than welcome to join our congregation."

"I'll think about it," she told him, even though she knew she wouldn't.

LATER THAT DAY a limousine came to Mrs. Goodwin's house, and it took Rudi and her mother-in-law into the city for Rudi's appointment with royalty.

The trip quickly reminded Rudi of a similar one—the one in which Tommy took her to see Richard Hell at CBGB for her birthday—the one in which he put aside how sick he was feeling just to make her happy. And, thinking about all this, Rudi's emotions began overwhelming her.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Goodwin asked, the moment

she noticed this.

“The memories,” Rudi replied, with a bit of a broken voice—“they’re everywhere.”

“Oh, sweetheart.”

“Could you put your arm around me, please.”

The woman complied, and she kept her arm there the entire trip.

RUDI WAS FEELING a little better by the time the limo made its way up Central Park West in Manhattan.

Then, she noticed a horse and buggy riding through the park on her right—and, thinking there was likely a couple inside it, she suddenly got a little emotional again.

Seeing this—and seeing what Rudi was looking at—Mrs. Goodwin murmured, “If you’d like, we could take a ride in one later.”

“No, thanks.”

“You sure?”

“Tell me,” Rudi said, wanting to both change the subject and retake control of her emotions, “what kind of etiquette things do I need to worry about today?”

“Etiquette things?” the woman said back.

“You know, like superfluous utensils.”

“Well, if they offer you cake or something like that, eat it daintily—and with a napkin. And make sure you cover your lap beforehand. Oh, and cross your legs when you sit down.”

“Anything else?”

“Do you know how to curtsy?”

“I’m not curtsying to anyone. Not even the Queen of England.”

“I’m sure you’ll do just fine. I have great confidence in you.”

“Yeah?”

"The way you handled yourself today at temple was nothing short of remarkable. I'm very proud of you. I certainly wouldn't've held up as well."

"I very much doubt that."

"There would've been lots of black eyes today."

THE LIMOUSINE PULLED up beside an expensive apartment building not far from the Museum of Natural History. There Mrs. Goodwin smiled at Rudi and told her: "Have a wonderful time, dear. You have the phone number of the limo?"

"I've got it," Rudi replied. "But, but what are you gonna do?"

"Don't worry about me. I know lots of people in this town."

Rudi then hugged and kissed her mother-in-law, and she whispered, "Thank you."

"For what?" Mrs. Goodwin whispered back.

"I don't need a reason."

Subsequently, Rudi left the vehicle, and, after waving toward the back tinted window, she walked up to the building—outside of which stood an immense and bloated doorman in a fancy red uniform—a man who looked as friendly as an impacted wisdom tooth and who didn't even seem to notice Rudi was there.

"Excuse me," she said to him, "I'm here to see the Lobkowiczses."

The doorman didn't react to this. He just kept staring ahead. So, Rudi repeated herself—and repeated herself again.

Still, the man wouldn't respond.

"What's your fucking problem?" she finally hollered.

This caught his attention, and he looked down at her prior to growling, "What do you want?"

"I said, I'm here to see the Lobkowiczes."

"*You* to see the Lobkowiczes?" he uttered, with unmatched condescension.

"Just call them. Please."

"Go on—get out of here! Before I kick your ass up and down the block!"

"I'd like to see you try."

The man responded by grabbing Rudi's shoulder, and she responded back by grabbing his arm and flipping him over her—smashing his back against the concrete pavement and causing him to cry out in immeasurable pain. Then, she leaned down and grasped his lapel with her left hand while cocking her mighty right fist up to his horrified face—and she barked, "Are you gonna call them—or do I have to kick your ass up and down this block?"

A DOOR BUTLER led Rudi into a luxurious penthouse apartment, and the princess warmly greeted her in the foyer, wearing the same Givenchy dress Mrs. Goodwin had wanted to buy her—and Rudi couldn't help grin at this. The princess also grinned a little. She grinned at how well Rudi was dressed, having expected the same ragamuffin she encountered in the dorm.

"Thank you so much for coming," she told Rudi.

"Thank you for inviting me," Rudi told her back.

"I do hope the doorman downstairs didn't give you any trouble. We've been trying to have that horrible man fired for years."

"Trust me—he gave me no trouble at all."

The princess smiled at this and afterward led Rudi deeper into the home while saying, "I apologize that my husband couldn't attend today. He's in Zurich on business."

"That's all right," Rudi replied, not knowing what else

to say. She actually felt intimidated by everything around her, which reminded her of her first visit to Mrs. Goodwin's house.

"Vilem's brother is also not here," the princess went on. "He's studying right now at the Sorbonne."

"You don't say?"

Just then, the two entered a large Victorian parlor, where Prince Vilem was impatiently waiting in a wheelchair wearing a gray Armani suit—and Rudi almost didn't recognize him, as he looked much healthier and happier. He also had a short well-groomed beard that gave him a regal appearance.

On seeing Rudi, his face lit up—something his mother noticed with great joy. He then rolled his chair up to her and mumbled, "Hi."

"Hi, yourself," she replied, before offering him her hand, which he took and brought up to his face much as he had done in his hospital room. After which Rudi softly said, "How are you doing?"

"Better," he told her. "And you?"

"The same."

"Well," the princess interjected, "if you let go of Rudi's hand, perhaps we can have some tea."

Vilem chuckled at this, and so did Rudi, and he reluctantly released her.

AS THE THREE chatted in the parlor over tea, the princess became more and more impressed with Rudi.

While the woman before felt gratitude toward Rudi, she also thought of her as utterly uncivilized, even after forgetting that she had been in a mental hospital with her son. Which is why she only invited the girl for tea—and she only did that for the sake of her son. Never did she give a thought to it going beyond this brief encounter.

But now, now she realized Rudi was anything but uncivilized. True, there was a roughness to many aspects of her—especially her hair and makeup. But she otherwise exuded civilized. She was smart and cultured and witty, and, more importantly, she had a strength of character and a dignity the princess had never quite experienced before—traits she knew complemented those of her son, both good and bad. So, all sorts of plans started entering her head, especially when she saw the way her son continued to look at Rudi, and the way she made him feel about himself.

“Rudi,” the woman said as they finished their tea, “am I to understand you’re related to Annette Goodwin in some manner?”

“Yes,” Rudi replied. “Kinda. I was married to her son.”

“I was sorry to hear about his death.”

“You knew him?” Rudi uttered, with lots of surprise.

“I know Mrs. Goodwin a little,” the princess answered.

“You do?”

“We met a number of years ago at a fashion show in Paris.”

“Paris?”

“What a time we had together—Karl just adored her.”

“Karl?”

“Karl Lagerfeld, of course.”

“Of course.”

“We’ve also worked on some fundraisers together. I’m sure you know about all the millions she’s raised in the fight against AIDS.”

“She has?” Rudi muttered, with even more surprise than before. She was so surprised that she almost

dropped her teacup.

"I can tell you that it was not a popular subject among us," the princess said to Rudi. "Most of us wanted to keep our heads in the proverbial sand. She had to yank them out. I'm being almost literal."

"I had no idea. Since when has she been doing all this?"

"For at least a year now. She is truly a wonderful woman."

"I couldn't agree more. You know, she's gonna pick me up later."

"She is? Why don't the four of us have dinner together? There is a suitable establishment just down the street."

AFTER RUDI CALLED the limo's car phone, the driver called Mrs. Goodwin at her friend's home, and she, in turn, called Rudi at the Lobkowiczes—and Rudi told her about the invitation.

"Why didn't you tell me it was the Lobkowiczes?" Mrs. Goodwin uttered afterward.

"I had no idea you knew her," Rudi replied.

"There are lots of things you don't know about me."

"Apparently."

THE PRINCESS, VILEM, and Rudi exited the building watched by the doorman, who held open the door with one hand while holding his aching back with his other. He also glared at Rudi, who pretended not to notice he was there.

"That is indeed strange," the princess murmured to Rudi.

"What is?" Rudi murmured back.

"The doorman had no problem with his back a few

hours ago.”

“Accidents will happen.”

THE LIMO ARRIVED—and Mrs. Goodwin burst out of it and rushed up to the princess, and the two kissed each other’s cheeks before commencing a rapid-fire conversation in French.

Rudi was lost after “*Comment allez-vous*,” and she just stood there in awe of her mother-in-law, who she now saw as something just above a goddess.

“So, did you have a good time?” the woman asked Rudi, right after finishing her talk with the princess.

“Did I,” Rudi replied. She then pointed to the princess and said, “What do you think of her dress?”

Mrs. Goodwin responded by carefully looking at the outfit, and she had to hide her smile underneath her hand.

“Do you like it?” the princess inquired, with a big grin on her face. “I thought it looked much like the one Audrey Hepburn wore.”

AS THE FOUR sat down at Les Trois Magots, Mrs. Goodwin noticed the formal table setting, and, while pointing at it, she playfully whispered to Rudi: “Where have you seen this before?”

Rudi giggled, before grabbing her mother-in-law’s hand under the table, while warmly leaning against her—something that made Mrs. Goodwin happy all over.

“So, Rudi,” the princess interjected, “tell me—have you been to Europe?”

“I’ve actually never been outside of the Northeast,” Rudi answered. “To be honest, Washington is the farthest from home I’ve ever been.”

"Then you must visit our chateau in Nice this summer."

"As in France?" Rudi mumbled in surprise.

"It's beautiful there," Vilem cooed while looking deeply into Rudi's eyes. "It's right on the Mediterranean. We even have a boat."

"Yeah?"

"And, of course, Mrs. Goodwin," the princess went on, "you're invited as well."

"I don't know," Rudi uttered, feeling uncomfortable about the whole thing. She felt so uncomfortable that she tried to come up with an excuse, but the only thing she could think of was: "I'm afraid my French isn't up to par."

"Not to worry," the princess stated—"in a month you will be speaking like Sartre. Or at least Camus."

"A month?"

"You did say you had four months off this summer," spoke Mrs. Goodwin.

"But . . ." Rudi muttered.

"And after Nice I could show you the rest of Europe—at least the free parts."

"You couldn't ask for a better travel companion than your mother-in-law," the princess told Rudi. "She knows Europe even better than me."

"You do?" Rudi gasped.

"There are lots of things you don't know about me," the woman replied.

"Apparently."

"So, it is all settled," the princess proclaimed.

Rudi was left speechless. So was Mrs. Goodwin—though for an entirely different reason. The woman was recalling at how—when she first met Rudi—she thought the girl would be a total social embarrassment. But now

seeing how well she mixed with the highest levels of society she realized not even the sky was her limit.

ON THE LIMO ride home Mrs. Goodwin was still thinking about all her daughter-in-law's possibilities.

"What a handsome couple you make," she smilingly uttered.

"What are you talking about?" Rudi uttered back, while once again noticing the carriages in the park.

"You and Vilem."

"Not gonna happen," Rudi growled, with a shake of her head.

"I'm just saying," her mother-in-law cooed, while thinking back to how Vilem couldn't keep his eyes off Rudi.

"Saying what?"

"Princess Rudi—it has a certain sound to it, don't you think?"

"A gagging sound."

After saying this, Rudi wrapped her arm around Mrs. Goodwin's, and—while feeling more than a bit light-headed—she remarked, "I wish I didn't have to go back to school tomorrow. This has been the best weekend in a long, long time."

"Christmas will be here before you know it," Mrs. Goodwin remarked back. "And then summer will be right around the corner."

"Were you serious about going to Europe?"

"I'm gonna start planning our itinerary as soon as we get home."

Rudi smiled at this, having never expected to go anywhere in life—and she soon rested her head on her mother-in-law's shoulder before saying, "Sometimes, sometimes when I'm with you I get the feeling I'm in a

fairy tale. You know, the kind with a godmother who grants every wish.”

“Funny,” Mrs. Goodwin murmured, after resting her own head on Rudi’s, “I think much the same about you.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

EARLY SUNDAY NIGHT, just as Rudi reached her dorm room with Tommy's heavy backpack across her shoulders, she heard her phone ringing. So, she quickly grabbed her keys from her pocket and even more quickly opened the door, before rushing inside to answer the device.

"Rudi, is that you?" came Jeannine's voice—one that sounded frantic.

"Yeah, it's me," Rudi replied.

"Thank God—I've been calling for an hour."

"I just got in. What's going on?"

"A huge cold front's coming in—that's what's going on. The temperature's gonna be below freezing tonight. Way below. This is one of those emergencies I mentioned once. We need to get people off the streets right now. I know you must be tired . . ."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

BY MIDNIGHT RUDI had gotten every person she knew about out of the cold, which wasn't easy with the shelters overflowing. It was so bad that Reverend Samson had to line his mission with cots created out of table linen, and even then many people could do nothing more than sprawl out on the hard benches of the chapel.

Rudi was more than exhausted, and she started for home. But she got no more than a few blocks when she saw, sitting in a small park, a comatose-looking middle-aged man in an army jacket—the same man she was once urged to avoid. And she thought about avoiding him

again. Though instead she headed toward him, knowing that if she didn't save him she wouldn't have saved anyone that night.

Soon, she was standing in front of him—and she could see him shivering in spite of himself.

"You need to get out of this weather," she stated. "There's a place about ten blocks from here. I'll walk you there."

The man didn't reply. He just kept staring out into space.

"You don't understand," she went on—"you won't live through tonight!"

Still, he didn't move, or react in any way—and Rudi tried telling herself that she couldn't do anything more for him. But she couldn't quite convince herself of this, and eventually she just plopped herself down next to him.

"Fine," she growled, "now I'm your responsibility."

RUDI SAT IN the blistering frost next to the man, with her whole body shaking with cold. Though this at least kept her from falling asleep—something that could've been fatal.

She had been there about an hour when she took out her Walkman and started listening to "Moonlight Serenade"—something that not only made her smile, but gave her both comfort and warmth. She even began humming the tune, over and over.

"Quiet!" the man suddenly barked—the first words he spoke to her.

"You'll have to go to the shelter for that," she barked back.

"I'll kill you!" he hollered as he raised his fists.

"No, you won't," Rudi told him, moments before he

brought his arms down upon her. Which she easily caught.

“Hitting me won’t solve anything,” she murmured. “It won’t make you warm or less hungry—and it won’t take away any of your pain.”

“I want death,” he uttered. “Do you understand—I want it!”

“I understand,” she uttered back. “You don’t know how many times I’ve wanted the very same thing. Recently, in fact. But somehow, somehow there was always someone to stop me. Well, tonight *I’m* that someone.”

Rudi afterward released his arms, so she could put her own arms around him—and she held on to him tightly. And, many minutes later, he did the same to her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

RUDI HESITANTLY HEADED up the front steps of the Sigma Nu house, and, even more hesitantly, entered the foyer and the main room, where the smell of eggnog was overwhelming.

There “White Christmas” was softly playing through the massive speakers, which were a short distance from a well decorated Christmas tree—which itself wasn’t far from a mantle where stood a beautiful menorah. Also in the room were lots of people, including Maria and Sandra, who were slow dancing with the biggest of smiles on their faces. This reflexively caused Rudi to smile herself, happy not only that her friend was happy, but that she was in a place where she was free to be happy.

Rudi then looked further around the crowd and spotted Vicki and Jared, who were also dancing—dancing as if they couldn’t stand without the aid of the other. Seeing this—and realizing she would never again experience what they were feeling—a wave of sadness overtook her, along with that ugly pang—and she started backing out of the room. Though she didn’t back out far, as she backed right into someone.

At once, she spun around and saw a grinning Dennis, who was wearing a striped tie and a blue blazer—and holding a piece of mistletoe over both their heads.

“Merry Christmas!” he exclaimed. “And Happy Chanukah!”

Rudi sneered a bit at this, and placed her hands firmly on her hips—and, while nodding at the mistletoe, she

growled, "How many times have you used this bit tonight?"

"You're the first," he insisted.

"I bet."

"Sigma Nu honor," he pleaded, after raising two fingers.

"Is that supposed to mean something?" she inquired.

"I keep telling you—it means everything."

He subsequently lowered the plant and said, "And not only are you the first, you're the last as well."

After saying this, he tossed the mistletoe into a nearby garbage can, and, in the same motion, he took Rudi into his arms and passionately kissed her.

It felt good to her, even though she knew the kiss meant nothing—to either of them. She was so lonely that night that she didn't care about meaning—she just wanted to be held and be anything but alone. So, she kissed him back—and she wrapped her arms around him, just as the music changed into "I'll Be Home for Christmas."

Hearing this, Dennis broke their kiss and whispered into her ear: "Let's dance."

He afterward led her into the center of the room, where the two began slowly dancing as they listened to the crooner's sweet voice:

I'll be home for Christmas.

You can count on me.

"You can count on me," Dennis murmured. "I swear you can."

She wanted to believe him. She wanted to believe him so much that she clutched his jacket as hard as she could.

Soon, the song came to an end, and Dennis said to

her: "Let's go outside—I want to show you something."

"What?" she asked.

He answered her by grabbing her hand and dragging her out onto the front stoop, where he pulled out a small gift-wrapped package from his blazer and handed it to her.

"What's this?" she skeptically inquired.

"Your Christmas gift," he replied. "Or Chanukah gift."

"I haven't gotten you anything."

"That's a good thing."

"Why's that?"

"Haven't you heard: it's better to give than to receive."

Rudi sighed.

"Go on—open it," he went on.

"All right," she said with a reluctant nod, before opening the wrapping, exposing a box, which itself contained a pair of spiked bracelets.

Seeing this, Rudi couldn't help feel a little something, as she knew he at least put some thought into the gift—something she well knew many other guys wouldn't've done.

"Put them on," he uttered.

"Later," she uttered back.

"Put them on!" he started chanting. "Put them on! Put them on!"

Uncontrollably, Rudi started chuckling, in spite of herself—and she put on the bracelets and showed them to Dennis, who clapped his hands while he hooted and hollered.

"Happy?" she demanded.

"Very," he answered. "I'm very happy." He then put his arms around her and whispered, "You want to hear

that Psychedelic Furs album again?"

"Actually, I want something else," she replied.

"What's that?"

She responded by kissing him. She kissed him even more passionately than he had kissed her.

WITH THE SOUNDS of "Heaven" bouncing off Dennis's walls, Dennis sat Rudi on his desk, with her legs wrapped around his backside and both of them not only kissing but mauling each other.

Right then, Rudi wondered if she were doing exactly what she had stopped herself from doing with Owen. Though she told herself the difference was that Dennis didn't love her, and she didn't love him. She further told herself that this was no different than taking a pill—one that would provide her a few hours of escape, during which time she would once again be loved and touched and unalone. However, when Dennis unbuttoned her jeans and reached his hands inside them, the reality of what was about to happen hit her—and frightened her, too. It frightened her so much that she grabbed his wrists and pulled them away.

"What?" he gasped, with his heart pounding so hard that it almost broke through his chest. "What's wrong?"

"This," she mumbled with downcast eyes, "I've never done this before."

"What?" he gasped again.

"I've never done this before," she repeated—this time firmer.

"But . . . but you were married."

"He was sick," she replied, after looking up into Dennis's eyes.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked, in a tone of voice that suggested he wanted to do nothing of the kind.

Carefully, she thought it over, trying to balance her fear with her irrepressible desire to be loved. She thought and thought and thought, and finally released his wrists, while telling him: "No. Don't stop."

He knew she was lying. He knew she really didn't want to go through with it. But despite this and despite his "Sigma Nu honor," he continued anyway. He continued with his kisses and his touches, and he even put his hands back inside her jeans.

There's this wonderful decency in you.

Suddenly, Rudi's words from their first date rattled inside his head—words he long had tried to pretend he had forgotten. And they kept rattling—and only rattled harder as he got more aggressive with Rudi.

There's this wonderful decency in you.

"No!" he silently screamed in response. "I'm not decent! I'm not! I don't even want to be decent! I want to fuck her! I want to fuck her right now! And I'm gonna!"

He then put his arm underneath Rudi's knees and lifted her up—and he carried her off. Though not to his bed like he intended, but to his doorway. There he dropped her to her feet and slammed open the door—with anger pouring out of him from everywhere.

Rudi, too, was angry—and embarrassed, and she mumbled, "What?"

"Your first time is not gonna be in a fraternity house," were the words he told her—words that were not his own.

"I, I can't believe this," she uttered, with her anger and embarrassment only increasing—and, once it boiled over, she spun around and stormed off.

"Rudi!" he called out.

But she didn't listen. She just ran down the hallway and then down the stairs, with her eyes beginning to tear

a bit.

“Rudi!” he repeated, as he started after her.

Rudi though just kept running—and she eventually ran past a drunken Rich in the foyer and burst out of the house. Rich subsequently turned his attention to Dennis, who was rambling down the staircase—and Rich couldn’t help grin and say, “So, do I have to pay up or what?”

“Fuck off!” Dennis howled, right before slamming Rich into the wall by the door—slamming him so hard that he almost went through it.

Afterward, Dennis ran out of the house, and he saw Rudi racing down the block—and he raced after her. However, despite having ran track in high school, no matter how hard he ran he couldn’t shorten the distance between them—and he only caught up with her when she had to fumble for her keys outside Thurston Hall.

“Rudi, please!” Dennis cried out, before stopping behind her—which was right before he doubled-over out of breath.

“What do you want?” she barked, without looking at him, with her keys now clutched in her hand.

“I’m sorry,” he softly told her. “I really am.”

“So am I.”

She then put the key in the lock.

“Wait!” he pleaded.

“What now?” she howled.

“Just tell me one thing.”

“What?”

“What’s it like?”

“What’s what like?”

“Being in love?”

“Is this another of your stupid jokes?”

“I want to know, just in case it happens to me one

day.”

“You’re bullshitting me.”

“I’m not. You were right when you said I can’t count the number of girls I’ve had. I can’t even count the number I’ve had this year. But it’s real easy to count the number of times I’ve been in love. Real easy.”

Rudi responded by grabbing the door handle.

“Please, Rudi,” he begged. “It, it can be your Christmas gift to me. I won’t get anything better.”

Rudi didn’t say anything in reply, but she didn’t move, either.

“What’s it like?” he once again asked, as softly as he could.

“It’s like,” she began after taking a deep breath, “it’s like being swept out onto a wave, from out of nowhere. At first, you’re scared. You’re scared because you have no control over what’s happening or what will happen. Then, then you realize just how beautiful it is up there—more beautiful than you could’ve ever imagined. And this wave—it just keeps rising and rising, and just when you think it can’t possibly rise any more it does just that. And you never want to get off!”

Rudi then slammed open the door of the building and rushed inside, and she didn’t even bother with the elevator. She ran up all nine flights, trying to burn the misery from her body. Though it was still there when she got to her floor. What’s more, she knew it would always be there. So, as she stumbled toward her room, all she could think about was how she could hasten its demise, and that very night.

Soon, her mind came up with limitless possibilities—and, after choosing the quickest and easiest one—she unlocked her door and thrust it open—at which time shock overwhelmed her. Because sitting on her bed was

Tommy, in his wedding tuxedo.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“WHAT?” RUDI MUTTERED, before slapping her face in a vain attempt to wake up.

“Go right ahead,” Tommy emotionlessly told her, while pointing toward the bathroom.

“Go where?” she replied, with shock still overwhelming her.

“The sleeping pills in the medicine cabinet—that’s where you were headed, weren’t you?”

“I . . . how did you know?”

Tommy raised his eyebrows at this, and then growled, “Well?”

But Rudi didn’t move, or say a word.

“If you’re gonna do it, do it!” he barked.

She still didn’t move, so he rose from her bed and angrily marched toward her. Then, once in front of her, he glared, causing her to avert her eyes and mumble, “I don’t want to die.”

“Then live,” he softly told her.

“How?”

Gently, he took her hand, and he said, “I’ll show you”—and afterward he led her out the door.

“Where we going?” she uttered, prior to noticing that she was once again in Mrs. Goodwin’s wedding gown.

“You’ll see.”

“I . . .”

“Come on—it’s waiting for us.”

“What is?”

He didn’t answer—he just led her into the corridor, which was pitch black apart from the light of hundreds

of candles.

"I guess," Rudi remarked, "I guess I'm just crazy."

"Yeah," he replied, as they continued down the hallway. "The good kind."

Tommy soon walked her into the waiting elevator, and, once they got downstairs, he dragged her outside the dorm, where stood a horse and carriage, much like those she saw in New York on Thanksgiving weekend. What's more, on top of the carriage sat an immense and bloated man in a red suit—a man who looked just like the princess' doorman.

"Well?" Tommy whispered.

"Well what?" Rudi whispered back.

"Our suite is waiting."

"Suite?"

Again, he dragged her. He dragged her right up to the carriage entrance—and the driver tipped his hat to her and reverently said, "Evening, ma'am."

"Evening," she said back, just before Tommy effortlessly lifted her up inside the conveyance. Then, he joined her, and the carriage took off—making a left turn at 19th Street—right into Central Park.

"What?" Rudi gasped, while shaking all over—not just at the incongruence of it all but also at the striking beauty of the park lit up at night.

Suddenly, Tommy took her into his arms—and he told her: "You're not to leave me for a second tonight. I want to remember it and remember it and remember it." He afterward kissed her—and she kissed him back over and over, while enjoying once more his touch and scent and breath.

"I don't even care if this is a dream," she cried out.

Quickly, his kisses were all over her—and his hands reached under her gown, setting everything on fire. And

she screamed out his name. After which the carriage came to an abrupt stop—and Rudi looked out and saw they were in front of a hotel—one that looked much like the princess' building. Only it was so tall that she couldn't see where it ended.

"What is this place?" she asked Tommy.

"Our suite is at the top," he answered. "All the way at the top."

He subsequently put his arm underneath Rudi's knees and lifted her up—and he carried her out of the carriage and into the hotel.

"You're only supposed to carry me across the threshold," she quipped.

"Our threshold is everywhere," he replied. "Every place—every second."

Eventually, they came to a glass elevator, which opened just for them—and, once they were inside, it shot up into the sky. It shot up at such a speed that Rudi could feel gravity ruthlessly pressing down upon her. But she just smiled at this. She smiled and kissed her husband, who kissed her right back, and who wouldn't stop kissing her until the elevator stopped and opened its door. Tommy then carried his blushing bride into the suite—one so large that it encompassed the entire floor—something Rudi glanced at in wonder before looking through a window and seeing they were thousands of miles above the earth.

"Is this Heaven?" she uttered.

"It's going to be," he told her before rushing toward a huge bed in the center of the room—upon which he tossed her, prior to diving on top of her. There on the mattress the two rolled over each other, giggling non-stop. Fortunately, the bed was so big that no matter how many times they revolved they never reached the end—

and never could.

Though finally they stopped, and Tommy told her: "This is our time, Rudi—and nobody else's."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He answered by tearing off her gown, and she, in turn, ripped his tuxedo into shreds, right before he picked her up—just so he could lower her upon him.

At once, she felt him press inside her—and she gasped, right before muttering, "What are you doing?"

"It's all right," he whispered. "I'm not sick anymore. I'll never be sick again."

"Tommy!" she hollered, as she inched herself downward, feeling so much pain and pleasure that her whole body began to spasm. Along with this, her fists flailed uncontrollably, beating his back again and again. However, all of a sudden, he stopped her—something that horrified her.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"I'm hurting you," he murmured. "I told you I would never hurt you."

"The only hurt I feel is when you're not around."

"Don't you understand, Rudi—I'm always around!"

"Please, don't stop me. If you love me, don't stop me."

Reluctantly, he released her, and she continued her descent into Heaven—and, once there, she cried like a rabid animal, and she wouldn't stop crying no matter how tightly he held her. Then, over and over she returned to the paradise that was him—a him that found every nook of her. She could feel him everywhere.

"I'm so fucking alive!" she yelled, while digging her nails deep into his back. "I can do fucking anything! Anything!"

"I . . ." he mumbled, as he fought for air, "I've been

telling you this for so long.”

“Together,” she commanded. “We’re gonna do it together.”

He nodded—and she started pounding herself onto him. She pounded herself so hard that the bed kept hitting the floor.

“Oh, Rudi,” he shrieked, as he began to break.

“No words!” she shrieked back. “I just wanna feel! I wanna feel!”

Which is what she did. She felt him succumb and give his entire self to her.

“Aaaahh!” she howled, before once again spasming—much harder than before. She spasmed so hard that the bed started shaking—and then the room, and finally the entire building.

Suddenly, they calmed. They calmed and held each other for what seemed like millennia. Though eventually Tommy started to rise.

“Don’t,” she begged, while holding on to him with everything she had left.

“I’m sorry,” he told her, prior to reluctantly removing her arms.

“Shit!” she cried out, as she let her head fall back onto the bed. After which she closed her eyes and uttered, “This isn’t gonna happen again, is it?”

“Not for a long time,” he uttered back.

“Damn you! You fucking bastard! Why?”

“You have no more excuses, Rudi. No more excuses not to live. And you better live. You better live big!”

Then, he was gone—and when she opened her eyes she found herself back in her bed at Thurston Hall.

“Just a dream!” she screamed, right before striking her fists against the mattress as she rose to her waist. Which is when she saw the state of her sheets.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

AFTER RUDI TOOK her last final exam there was still a week before Vicki and Jared's Christmas wedding. So, she thought about going home to see Mrs. Goodwin, or at least meeting her somewhere. However, she realized her time could be better spent, and instead worked full-time for Jeannine.

That week, the weather was cold and wet and miserable, and the people on the street were even more depressed than normal, knowing that the holiday season was going to be anything but joyful. It was in this environment that the two women worked mostly as a team, giving out small gifts of fruit and candy, and inviting everyone they encountered to one of the many Christmas dinners around town—including a very special one at the mission. Even more importantly, they tried to convince people there was a future for them—a better one. But this was a nearly impossible task, and, by the day before Christmas Eve, Jeannine was not only weather-beaten but exhausted—physically and emotionally. There were times Rudi had to almost hold her up.

"Let's just get some coffee," Jeannine told Rudi, after a particularly futile afternoon.

"Sure thing," Rudi replied, and the two entered a small decrepit diner.

"It's so hopeless," Jeannine muttered as she stopped just inside the door, looking as if she would collapse right there.

"It's not," Rudi insisted, while caressing the woman's back.

"I don't know if I can do this much longer."

"If you don't, who will?"

Deeply, Jeannine inhaled and exhaled multiple times—until she felt almost human again, and the two afterward sat down at a nearby booth. There they received a large quantity of excruciatingly hot coffee, and, once Jeannine returned close to her old self, she pondered the magic in front of her.

"You must be a robot," she eventually said, with a shake of her head.

"What do you mean?" Rudi said back.

"You never get tired or depressed."

"Not true. Not even close."

"You don't show it then."

"Maybe."

"Man, I wish I could find the asshole who put up that ad in the Marvin Center."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'd give him a big fucking kiss. Because I didn't expect to get someone a tenth as good as you."

"Does that mean I'm getting a raise?" Rudi quipped.

"Nope," Jeannine replied with a chuckle. "I can't even afford your salary now."

"If you want . . ."

"Don't even think about it. You earn that money."

"What are you doing for Christmas?" Rudi asked, hoping to change the subject to something more cheerful.

"I'm visiting my family tomorrow," Jeannine answered.

"In Newark?"

"Yup."

"You have a big family, don't you?"

"Huge. And I love them all, even when they piss me

off, which is most of the time. What about you?"

"My family is small. But I love them just as much."

"You going home tomorrow?"

"Right after the wedding."

"I'm sorry I'm gonna miss it. It sounds wild."

"Yeah."

"Before I forget, I've something to give you."

Jeannine then dug into her purse and took out a small gift-wrapped box. At the same time, Rudi pulled out her own present from her white sea bag—one that came with a smile and a "Merry Christmas!"

"You too, honey!" Jeannine cried out, before reaching over the table and giving Rudi a big warm hug.

The two subsequently exchanged gifts, and Jeannine told her: "Don't open it until Christmas morning. That's the rule in our family—no one opens gifts until Christmas morning."

"I promise," Rudi murmured, before putting Jeannine's gift in her bag.

"So, when will you be back at school?" Jeannine continued.

"Second week in January. Will you hold my job that long?"

"Hold it? I should give you mine. And maybe I will."

"Stop it," Rudi growled, looking a bit upset.

"Stop what?" Jeannine growled back.

"Giving me praise when I haven't done anything to deserve it."

"Haven't done anything? Remember Stacey—the girl you helped that first day? Well, she's now living with a family down in North Carolina, and she's not only back at school—she wants to become a nurse. And all because of you."

"It's not because of me."

"And that family you made me stay up all night helping? I heard the woman just got a good job. They even moved into their own home. All because of you."

"It wasn't because of me."

"Yeah? What about that guy you almost froze to death to save?"

"What about him?"

"It turns out he was a Medal of Honor winner in Vietnam. People have been looking for him for years—and he'd be dead if it weren't for you."

"What about Thelma?" Rudi barked.

"She's a lost cause!" Jeannine barked back.

"She's not! And there are lots of people just like her!"

"We'll save them when you get back!"

"I thought it was hopeless," Rudi uttered, with just a bit of a smile.

"You little . . ." Jeannine uttered back, with her own smile. "You've been conning me."

"I got your spirits up, didn't I?"

"Sheesh."

"You know, for all your talk of how wonderful I am, all your stories seem to gloss over your central role. It was because of *you* they all happened."

"All I can say is that I sure hope to God you don't become a mathematician. What a waste it would be."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

WITH LIGHT RAIN falling from the darkening skies, Rudi entered the mission on Christmas Eve with Tommy's backpack across her shoulders.

At once, she noticed that water was coming through the roof, and in many places—something she had noticed before during storms. Though that wasn't the only thing she noticed that afternoon. She also noticed a nervously excited Jared, who was wearing a dark blue suit as he stood by the entrance of the chapel—a chapel filled with lots of homeless people.

Rudi smiled at this, and she strode up to her friend. She further grabbed his shoulder from behind and cried out, "Hey!"

This caused him to not only shriek, but almost shoot through one of the few solid pieces of roof. Then, he turned to a giggling Rudi, who said, "Sorry about that."

He smiled at this and at her, just a little.

"So, how you doing?" she went on.

"Not good," he answered, with a shake of his head. "Not good at all."

"I remember what that was like."

"Yeah?" Jared asked.

"Where's Vicki?" Rudi asked back.

"In the rectory. She's even worse than me. In fact, she's already warned me twice that she might back out."

"You want me to talk to her?"

"I was kinda hoping."

Right then, Rudi looked around the chapel, and she queried, "Who's your best man?"

Jared replied by taking a large ring box from his jacket pocket, and he handed it to Rudi while saying, "I was kinda hoping."

"Me?" she gasped. "You want me to be your *best man*?"

"I want you to be my *best friend*."

"But . . ."

"Rudi, take a look at the guests—and this place. It's not exactly gonna be a traditional wedding."

RUDI ENTERED THE rectory's small and spartan bedroom, and she saw Vicki wearing a basic white dress. She also saw her working on her hair while nervously sitting in front of a mirror.

Rudi then placed her backpack against a nearby wall and walked up to her friend, and she lovingly put her hands on the woman's shoulders, which caused Vicki to smile—something that was quickly replicated on Rudi's face.

"Hi," Vicki murmured.

"Hi, yourself," Rudi replied. "You doing okay?"

"No."

"Well, I can tell you that you're not the only one. But you'll both be fine, trust me."

"I don't know."

"Where, where are your bridesmaids?"

"I'm looking at her," Vicki said, in a tone of voice that made it sound more like a question.

"Me?"

Vicki shrugged.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Rudi uttered. "I would've gotten a dress or something."

"I didn't want to weird you out," Vicki uttered back.

"I mean, it wasn't that long ago you hated me."

"I didn't hate you."

Vicki responded by giving Rudi an incredulous look.

"All right," Rudi said with a grin. "Maybe I hated you a little. But that was only because I didn't know the real you."

"I didn't even know her. So, will you do it?"

"The thing is I'm already the best man."

"You'll also have to give me away."

"What about your dad?"

"My parents are in Majorca, or somewhere like that. They wouldn't care anyway. I don't blame them really. I never gave them much reason to care."

"In my experience, these things usually work both ways."

"So, how do I look?" Vicki asked, wanting to change the subject.

"Breathtaking," Rudi replied.

"Some joke, eh—me in white."

"Today the slate is wiped clean."

Vicki smiled at this. She smiled all over, and she especially smiled at Rudi—the person she most wanted to share this day with. Though her smile quickly faded, replaced by her irrepressible doubts.

"What's wrong?" Rudi inquired.

"This is really crazy, isn't it?"

"Well, it's not the most normal wedding."

"I mean, getting married when I'm gonna . . ."

"We're all gonna die, Vicki."

"But we don't all know when."

"Neither do you."

"I have a good idea."

"No, you don't."

"I'm being selfish."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm gonna get all the happiness for whatever years I

have left, and then I'm gonna leave Jared with all the pain."

"My husband thought a lot like that. It almost kept us apart. But let me tell you—it was worth every ounce of pain, as horrible as it's been. I'd marry him a million times over. And Jared would do the same for you. You should see him out there. Despite his nerves, he's so happy he practically has to hold on to something just to keep from rising."

"Still . . ."

"And you're not dead yet. Until then anything can happen."

"Jared says he's gonna discover the cure."

"I have no doubt about that at all."

Suddenly, an organ started playing out in the chapel.

"I think that's our cue," Rudi stated—and Vicki slowly and unsteadily rose.

"So," Rudi murmured, while trying to ease the tension, "where are you guys going on your honeymoon?"

"My family has a house in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. Have you ever been there?"

"I've never even heard of it."

"It's just beautiful. And this time of the year we'll practically have the whole town to ourselves. And all the Nicobolis we can eat."

"A Nico-what?"

"Nicoboli. They're kinda like calzones, but you really have to try them to comprehend their true greatness. Hey, I know—why don't you come with us."

"*On your honeymoon?*"

"Sure. You could stay—"

"—*Vicki.*"

"He's gonna be bored with me in ten minutes."

"Vicki, has any guy ever been bored with you?"

Vicki chuckled at this, before saying, "But Jared isn't any guy."

"And you're not any girl. You're special. And he loves you."

"Oh," Vicki gasped as she hugged Rudi.

Just then, Reverend Samson came to the door in full uniform, and, with a big smile, he said to the women: "Is there gonna be a wedding today or did I get dressed up for nothing?"

REVEREND SAMSON POINTED down the darkened rectory hallway and he told Rudi and Vicki: "Just turn right over there and it'll take you to a door by the back of the chapel."

"Okay," Vicki muttered.

"I'll see you at the altar."

"Maybe."

The minister giggled at this, and Rudi led Vicki down the corridor, with the organ music keeping them company.

"So," Rudi said, "I guess you guys aren't gonna be staying at the Zoo after this."

"We just got a little place."

"Where?"

"Near Dupont Circle. You better come over lots."

"I will. Maybe you can even freeze one of those Nico-whatevers for me."

"You got it."

Just then, the two exited the rectory and saw that the rain was coming down hard, especially in the chapel by the minister.

"I guess this isn't exactly the wedding you dreamed about when you were younger," Rudi whispered to her friend, while gazing at both the water and the guests.

"I actually never thought I'd have a wedding," Vicki whispered back. "So, this is pretty incredible."

"You're pretty incredible," Rudi replied, prior to taking Vicki's hand and squeezing it.

"Besides," Vicki went on, "Jared really wanted something out-of-the-ordinary—something like your wedding. 'Something the angels would remember forever,' is what he said."

"I think they'll remember this," Rudi told her.

All of a sudden, the organ music stopped—and the minister turned on a nearby turntable, which started playing "You Are So Beautiful."

At once, Vicki recalled her first kiss with Jared, and she began crying without control. Which is when the minister motioned Rudi to come forward, and she led Vicki by the arm toward her future husband, who was crying as much as her. Many of the homeless people in the pews were also crying. Even Thelma had to rub her eyes a bit.

Soon, Rudi got Vicki to the altar, and, after avoiding a few big puddles and finding a place for her and Jared where no water was falling, the couple joined hands, with Rudi a step behind them. The minister then turned off the record player and smiled at the pair—and he said to both them and the congregation: "This is my favorite function as a minister—a time when I get to create a whole new soul. For out of the love these two beautiful people share a new soul will spring forth today. A soul that will live on forever."

Hearing this, it was now Rudi's turn to get emotional, as she knew the words were as true as anything that had ever been spoken.

"Jared and Vicki have decided to recite their own vows," the minister went on, just before the couple

turned to each other, with tears still in their eyes.

“It wasn’t long ago that I was the most miserable wretch there ever was,” Jared said. “I only stopped being this when I saw myself in your eyes that night—the night we found each other. You’ve given me everything, and I pray, I pray that I can give a little of it back to you. This is my promise—my holy vow: I will love you and cherish you, and will always give you hope.”

“I didn’t even know what happy was until you,” Vicki replied. “I didn’t know anything until you. Until that moment your lips touched mine. Whatever I have to give is yours, and whatever I have to take in the coming years I will gladly take as long as I can take it in your arms. I will love you and cherish you, and will give you all the hope you’ve given me.”

Now, even the minister was overwhelmed. Though he somehow said to Rudi: “Do you have the rings?”

“Yes,” Rudi answered, before taking out the ring box and opening it, exposing two simple gold bands—the first of which Jared took with his shaking hand. After which Samson told him: “Put the ring on Vicki’s finger and repeat after me: ‘With this ring I thee wed.’”

Jared followed the man’s command, and, after Vicki placed the other ring on Jared’s finger and spoke her oath, the minister concluded the ceremony: “By the power vested in me by the District of Columbia, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Less than instantly, the couple complied—and the chapel erupted in cheers, and Rudi was the loudest of them all. But this did nothing to stop that awful pang from returning. It actually hit her harder than it ever did before.

WITH ARETHA FRANKLIN'S "Respect" echoing throughout the mission, a smiling Vicki danced with three homeless men. She danced with them as if they were her best friends in the world—and she didn't even care about all the water falling upon her. She even seemed to enjoy it.

Rudi enjoyed watching her, despite her increasingly glum mood. Though when she spotted Reverend Samson nearby she pried her eyes away and walked up to the minister—and she said to him: "You really need to get that roof fixed."

"From your lips to God's ear," he replied with a chuckle.

"Is it that expensive?"

"Well, I got some local businesses to donate the materials—they're in the supply room. Now if I could just find someone to provide the labor."

"What's the likelihood of that?"

"Somehow the Lord will provide."

"It sounds like you've been talking to Jeannine."

"Actually, we talk to the very same guy."

Rudi grinned at this, and she suddenly saw Thelma heading out with her shopping cart—and she told Samson: "If you'll excuse me, there's someone I want to say hello to."

"Sure. Just don't forget to say goodbye before you leave."

"Will do. I actually need to get my backpack out of the rectory."

Rudi then rushed up to Thelma, getting to her just before she left the building—and she uttered, "Beautiful wedding, eh?"

Reluctantly, Thelma came to a halt, and she turned to Rudi and said, "If you like this sort of thing."

"I actually got you something."

"Got me something?"

Rudi replied by reaching into her inside jacket pocket and taking out a thin gift-wrapped present, which she offered to Thelma before telling her: "Merry Christmas. Or Happy Chanukah."

"I didn't get you nothing," Thelma growled, while making no effort to take the gift.

"That's a good thing," Rudi replied.

"Why?"

"Haven't you heard: it's better to give than to receive."

Thelma sighed. She sighed much the way Rudi sighed when Dennis said the same thing to her. Then, much like what Rudi had done back then, Thelma took the present and unwrapped it, revealing a paperback copy of Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*. And, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't hide her surprise.

"Someone once told me she was one of the best writers there ever was," Rudi murmured.

"Yeah?" Thelma murmured back, with her eyes still on the cover of the book.

"Yeah."

For a moment, it looked like Thelma would finally warm to Rudi—and Rudi's face expressed this hope. But Thelma soon composed herself and barked: "Don't think this means anything. Old Thelma only cares about herself. And only sometimes." The woman afterward spun around and rambled off—and Rudi's heart sank. It sank even further than it had already been.

AS THE WEDDING reception continued both Vicki and Jared could tell Rudi was not right, in spite of the big smile plastered on her face. So, they did everything they

could to cheer her up: they danced with her, they told jokes and funny stories in her presence, and they embraced her every chance they got. Still, Rudi only got worse, and, by the time she walked the two toward their car in the fizzling rain, she couldn't even fake a smile.

It wasn't long before the three reached the vehicle, and they saw that the soap written on it had almost washed off—with "Just Married" only barely readable on the front passenger door.

Right then, Rudi gave the two a small gift-wrapped box and muttered, "Congratulations, and Merry Christmas."

"We really don't need any more gifts from you," Jared muttered back.

"That's right," Vicki added. "You've been our gift."

"Thank you," Rudi said to her, without looking into her eyes—knowing that if she did she wouldn't be able to hold it together anymore.

"Have a Happy Chanukah," Jared afterward whispered, before giving Rudi a kiss on the cheek. "We'll be sending you something."

"You don't have to," Rudi told him.

"That's right. But we will anyway."

"You sure you won't come with us?" uttered Vicki, not wanting to leave her friend in such a downcast state.

"Yes, I'm sure," Rudi answered, after finally looking at Vicki. "Go on—get out of here, you two."

"Can we drive you somewhere?" Jared asked.

"Go!" Rudi hollered.

"But it's raining," Vicki pleaded.

"I'm just gonna get my backpack and go right to Union Station."

"All right," the couple said in near unison, before heading inside their car. However, Vicki had barely sat

down before she jumped out of the vehicle and hugged Rudi one more time—and she started crying as well.

“Now what?” Rudi growled.

“None of this would’ve happened without you,” Vicki mumbled.

“That’s not true.”

“It is—and you know it!”

“You’re gonna make me cry.”

“Okay—I’m going.”

Quickly, Vicki rushed back into the car, and the couple drove off, with Rudi sadly waving at them until they were no longer in sight. After which she turned around and headed back to the mission, where standing in the doorway was Reverend Samson, who was holding her backpack.

Soon, she was right in front of the man, who more than noticed her pain.

“Here you go,” he softly said as he handed her the backpack.

“Thanks,” she said back as she took it.

“I was just about to say the same thing to you. Thank you, Rudi. You’re proof God works in mysterious ways.”

“Well, I better get going. Merry Christmas.”

“Happy Holidays.”

Rudi then started slowly backing up.

“Are you okay, Rudi?” Samson asked.

“I’m fine,” she insisted.

“If you’d like to talk . . . you can even forget I’m a minister.”

“I’m fine.”

“We all hurt. It’s not a crime, and it’s nothing to be ashamed about.”

“I’ll see you in January.”

“I’m looking forward to it. We all are.”

Rudi afterward headed toward the train station. Though as she approached it she saw all the Christmas decorations everywhere, and it suddenly hit her that this was the first holiday season since Tommy's passing. This made her recall their first Christmas together in the hospital—when he gave himself to her for good—and the next one when he was slowly dying in her arms. They were both such special times for her, and now they were gone—and would never come back.

Funny, she told herself—here she had spent the entire week trying to make strangers feel better about the season when there was nothing and no one to make her feel better.

But at least she had her Walkman—and she put on her headphones and began listening to her endless “Moonlight Serenade” tape. Which she so quickly became lost in that she didn't enter Union Station. She didn't even notice it. She just kept walking and walking, with no direction. There was only the music, and all the wonderful things it invoked.

For hours, she aimlessly passed through terrible neighborhoods, only coming to a stop when she reached a condemned but obviously occupied brownstone—a building that looked vaguely familiar. But this wasn't the reason she stopped. She stopped because in front of the house a short man in his twenties—whose flashy clothes included every primary color—was selling something to a gloomy unkempt woman. And Rudi had a good idea what he was selling.

Eventually, the man completed the transaction, and he noticed both Rudi and her stare—and he smilingly sauntered up to her and cooed, “Can Dutch get you something, young lady?”

“Who's Dutch?” Rudi replied unemotionally.

"That would be me."

"Why are you called Dutch?"

"Because I'm a treat. Get it? So, what can I get you?"

"Nothing," was Rudi's answer—one that sounded anything but sure.

Dutch smiled at this knowingly, before adding, "I got the best crack in town. Even the mayor's a customer."

"Crack?" Rudi uttered, having recently heard the term on the street but not having known exactly what it was.

Dutch replied by glancing around in all directions before taking out a small plastic pouch of off-white nuggets.

"What is it?" Rudi mumbled, with her eyes locked on the bag.

"Crystallized coke," he told her. "The best high you've ever had. And that's a promise—or your money back."

"How . . ."

"You smoke it."

To elaborate, Dutch reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small plastic pipe, and, while offering both it and the crack to Rudi, he told her: "Go on, take it—it's all yours."

"How much?" Rudi replied, in a voice not her own.

"The first is always free," the man replied back, with a big toothy smile. He then pointed to the brownstone behind him and added, "You even have free use of my abode."

Rudi didn't react to this. She just stood and stared at the drug, not making a move for it—or a move to get away, even though a big part of her wanted to do just that.

"I'm telling you, baby," the man went on, "this is *fucking paradise*."

“Paradise?” Rudi muttered.

“Paradise. But don’t take my word for it—try it yourself. What have you got to lose?”

Rudi tried to come up with an answer. She tried and tried.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

MRS. GOODWIN WAS in a state of frantic.

Hours earlier, she arrived at Penn Station in Newark for Rudi's train. But Rudi wasn't on it—nor was she on the following one that came from DC, and, after the third came without her, the woman rushed home in the Jaguar and rechecked the information Rudi had given her. However, there was no discrepancy. So, she tried calling Rudi's dorm room—and when there was no answer, she called the dorm itself. But, as it was Christmas there was only a security guard there, and he couldn't tell her anything—and, when she called back the following day, still no one could help, either at the dorm or anywhere else at GW.

Next, she tried Maria.

"You don't know where Rudi is?" Mrs. Goodwin asked, with desperation soaking her voice.

"What do you mean?" Maria asked back, recognizing the woman's fear and instantly becoming worried herself.

"She wasn't on her train," the woman answered. "You don't know where she could possibly be?"

"All I know is she had a wedding to go to."

"Yes, I know about that. You don't happen to know anyone who was at the wedding?"

"Sorry. Maybe, maybe she had to work."

"Do you know the number there?"

"I don't. I don't even know the name of the place. I just know they help homeless people."

"I hope something didn't happen to her."

"Did you try the . . ."

"Try what?" Mrs. Goodwin uttered.

"The hospital," Maria uttered back. "There's a hospital at school."

"I'll check that right away—all the hospitals down there."

"What about her boyfriend?" added Maria.

"She has a boyfriend?" Mrs. Goodwin replied, with a bit of surprise.

"Well, I don't know if he's exactly her boyfriend. Rudi doesn't like to talk about things like that. But they, they looked pretty cozy at this Christmas party we were at."

"What's his name?"

"Dennis. Dennis Winston. I think he's still down in DC. His dad's a congressman."

"Robert Winston?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Thank you. You've been a great help."

"Please let me know if you find out anything. She means a lot to me."

"And you'll let me know, too."

"Of course."

THE MOMENT MRS. Goodwin hung up she called George Washington University Hospital.

But Rudi wasn't there, or any anonymous person fitting her description. Though they were able to give the woman the names and numbers of all the other hospitals in the area—and she called every one, without success. So, the following morning she got on a plane and went to Washington, where she visited not only the school but the police, who made her wait another day before filing a missing-person report. And, even then, they didn't

seem too interested, especially as they had far more important concerns, with the city being the murder capital of America. Which was a fact that led Mrs. Goodwin to check the city's morgues—a most unpleasant experience, which fortunately turned out to be fruitless.

Subsequently, she contacted Congressman Winston's office—and, after informing them who she was, she was able to speak to the man in short order—a man who promised to look into the matter personally and with all due haste.

WITH NO STONE left to unturn, a despondent Mrs. Goodwin returned to New Jersey, where she moped in her living room while waiting for the phone to ring, much as she had once done for her son.

As she thought back to this dreadful period, she felt a strange urge to look at photos of her son's wedding—something no one had done before, mostly because of the tears they would likely induce. And, as expected, the woman couldn't help cry while viewing them. But what she didn't expect was how the pictures of Rudi moved her just as much as those of her son. Which made her realize there was no difference between the two at all. At the same time, she told herself she wasn't going to wait around for another child of hers to die. She would do something—no matter what that something was.

ON A DARK gray evening Dennis hesitantly entered an apartment building at the Watergate—the infamous complex that brought down a president a dozen years earlier. Then, even more hesitantly, he entered a top-floor unit, where he had been summarily summoned by his father.

As soon as Dennis opened the front door, he saw the

man in the study fixing himself a martini. He saw a man who looked just as towering and intimidating as he did all those years earlier during their ill-fated hunting trip, even if he was now shorter than Dennis—not to mention balding and overweight. And, without emotion or reverence, Dennis said to him: “Hey.”

“Can I get you a drink?” his father said back, also without emotion or reverence.

“No, thanks,” Dennis replied before walking up to the edge of the room and stopping.

“Have a seat,” his father ordered, while pointing to a nearby chair.

“No, thanks. What’s this all about?”

“Who’s Rudi Weiss?”

The question caused Dennis’s jaw to unhinge a bit—and a touch of surprise splashed the rest of his face as well, and it took him many moments before he could mumble, “What?”

“Rudi Weiss,” the congressman repeated. “Do you know her or not?”

“Why?”

“I got a call the other day from her mother-in-law—a woman whose late husband I had some dealings with over the years. A fine ass he was, to be sure—but an important one. And she’s no less important, if not more so.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“The woman was quite distressed. It seems this Rudi is missing.”

“Missing?” Dennis gasped, with his face now covered in shock—something his father both noticed and grimaced at.

“So, you do know this girl,” his father growled.

“I know her. A little. She goes to school with me.”

“Is that it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Mrs. Goodwin insinuated that you and this girl have . . . how should I put it—a relationship?”

“We dated a few times. Nothing serious. She doesn’t even like me. Actually, she can’t stand me.”

“So, you don’t know anything about what happened to her?”

“I haven’t seen her in weeks.”

“Sigma Nu honor?”

“Sigma Nu honor.”

“Fine, I believe you.”

Dennis then started off, but the congressman called out, “I’m not finished yet.”

With some exasperation, Dennis stopped—and he turned back to his father and crossed his arms, prior to uttering, “Now what?”

“We’re not gonna have any more scandals, are we?” the man uttered back.

“No, sir.”

“If you had only kept your nose clean, you’d be going to a real school.”

“GW is a real school.”

“It’s a school for underachieving overprivileged shits like you. You should be going to Stanford, like every man in this family had done for four generations.”

“Is there anything else?”

“I had my staff check this Rudi Weiss out. That’s why I waited a few days before talking to you about her.”

“And?”

“And she’s one big scandal.”

“She’s anything but,” Dennis replied. “I only wish I had a relationship with her. I’d be lucky.”

Right then, Dennis again turned around, and again

started to leave.

"I'm not finished yet!" his father howled.

"But I am!" Dennis howled back.

"Stay away from this girl! That's an order!"

Dennis didn't reply. He just opened the front door.

"Don't forget who's paying the bills!" the man continued.

Again, Dennis didn't reply. He just walked out, before slamming the door behind himself.

AN AGING MAN in a pinstripe suit gazed at the woman sitting across from him in his office.

"My husband used the services of your firm on more than one occasion," Mrs. Goodwin stated, "and he was always pleased with the results."

The man smiled at this, and afterward remarked, "Washington is a big city, and a long way away."

"I don't care about price," the woman replied, understanding all-too-well the meaning of the man's remark.

"You mentioned she's had problems with drugs."

"I only mentioned it to better help you find her."

"What I'm trying to say is that you might not like what we find."

"As long as you find her, I will."

"She could be in trouble."

"Then you'll take care of it, won't you?"

"That's different than finding her."

"I'll pay that price, too."

Chapter Thirty

A DARK SNOW fell upon the city.

At least that's what it looked like through the dirty windows of a tiny room—a room consisting of nothing more than a stained single mattress on a rotting and exposed underfloor.

On top of this mattress lay a woman vaguely resembling Rudi—a woman who gripped a plastic pipe in her right hand and a lighter in the other, which she was using to ignite the rock in the pipe. Having barely slept or eaten in weeks, this woman was a horror—filthy and gaunt, with blackened lifeless eyes that made her look like a zombie. Her hair, too, was a mess. It was matted down with both dirt and sweat, with its natural color creeping in—making it look more like animal fur.

Just about the only thing recalling Rudi's previous state was her Walkman, which was blasting “Moonlight Serenade” into her skull, much as it had been doing ever since she arrived in this peculiar form of hell. It was actually one of only a few things she still possessed, as her backpack—which included her sea bag and most of her clothes—was long gone, as well as her jacket and sneakers.

Suddenly, Rudi took a deep hit of the crack—and while it didn't give her anywhere near the high it gave her the first time she tried it, it was more than sufficient. It was sufficient to send her back to her dream—a dream in which she was lying in a hospital bed, with Tommy by her side and a newborn baby girl in her arms.

“She's so beautiful,” Rudi cooed, while checking the

child's fingers and toes.

"She looks just like you," Tommy whispered, before kissing Rudi's neck and caressing her arms.

"You mean she looks like you."

"She looks like both of us."

"I'm so happy, Tommy. You've made me so happy."

"The three of us are gonna be happy forever."

"Tell me you're never gonna leave me again."

"Never."

"It's not real," abruptly came another voice—one that brought Rudi out of her dream. She then saw Tommy standing nearby in his tux, with tears falling down his face.

"You're the one who's not real," Rudi insisted.

"No."

"If you can't be with me, I want him."

"He doesn't exist!"

"Neither do you!"

"Rudi, please—you've got to stop this."

"Don't tell me what to do! This is all your fault!"

"What?"

"You did this to me—you!"

"*Rudi.*"

"How could you leave me so alone?" Rudi cried out, with tears now falling down her face, too. "How could you?"

"I—"

"—Shut up! I don't want to hear it! I'm going back to him."

"No!"

But Rudi didn't listen. After pushing away some half-dead batteries on the floor, she took another hit—one much bigger than before, and instantly she was back in her dream—this time watching her daughter's first steps

while sitting in Tommy's lap.

"You can do it, baby!" she called out to the girl. "Come to Mommy."

Slowly, the child inched toward her, with each step seemingly taking an infinite amount of time. Not that Rudi minded—she enjoyed every second of it. Eventually, the girl reached Rudi and hugged her, and Rudi could feel the girl's fingers desperately clutching her—making her feel joy all over. And she only felt better when the dream Tommy put his arms around her as well.

"Don't leave us again, Rudi," this particular Tommy told her.

"I'm not going anywhere," she told him back. "Not ever."

WITH DARKNESS EVERYWHERE, Rudi's door creaked open, and a tall lean man entered the room with the aid of a flashlight.

At once, he waved his free hand across his nose against the stench, before glancing around the room with the light. Then, just as instantly, he spotted Rudi passed out on the mattress—and he quietly walked over to her, and started searching for something.

Soon, he found what he was seeking, and he leaned down and began removing Rudi's wedding ring. Which caused Rudi to groggily wake, and she mumbled, "What are you doing?"

The man didn't answer—he just continued with the ring.

"What are you doing?" Rudi repeated, after finally understanding what was happening—and she grabbed the ring and pushed it down over her finger.

"You have to pay, bitch!" the man howled. "I'd take the necklace, too," he added while pointing his flashlight

at her Chai pendant—"but it ain't worth shit!"

"Fuck you!" she hollered.

He responded by yanking her ring off, while telling her: "Fucking is exactly what you're gonna do next for your rock, just like the rest of the crack whores!"

"Give me that ring back!" she screamed as she rose to her waist, with a face full of fury.

"Look," he told her, "I don't want to hurt you, but I will if I have to."

He afterward started to leave.

"Give it back!" she yelled, before jumping to her feet and rushing at the man. Which was just before she smashed her right heel into his right calf—sending him crashing to the floor screeching in pain.

"You're fucking dead!" he bellowed as he rose to his knees and turned toward her, prior to flinging his right fist at her face. Which she blocked prior to flinging her own right fist into his mouth—something that caused his head to fly backward onto the floor, along with lots of his teeth. She further started kicking the man. She kicked his head and face, and stomped his chest—releasing all her drug-infused rage, and continued kicking him long after he lost consciousness. And she only stopped when she remembered the ring. She then leaned down and ripped it from his lifeless hand and quickly returned it to her finger.

At the same time, Dutch entered the room with both a flashlight and a handgun.

"What the fuck is going on here?" he hollered in fright, before pointing his light at both Rudi and the unconscious man on the floor. After which he added, "Holy shit! Who did that?"

"Me!" Rudi barked, as she stepped toward him. "So you better leave me the fuck alone!"

“You?” he gasped, as he lifted the gun toward her. Rudi, though, grabbed his wrist and slowly turned it—and she pointed the gun at his head while beginning to press down on his trigger finger.

“Don’t kill me!” he cried out. “Please!”

“Let go of it!” she cried back.

He complied, and, once the weapon hit the floor, she picked it up and told him: “Don’t fuck with me again. Ever!”

“You owe me,” he muttered.

“I know!”

“You, you can take Tim’s job.”

“Job?”

“You know, collecting money—keeping the peace around here.”

Carefully, Rudi thought it over, as best she could.

“And,” the frightened man continued, “and in return you get all the crack you want. I’ll even get you new batteries for that fucking Walkman.”

Rudi didn’t exactly reply. She just pointed the gun at Tim’s body and said, “Get him out of my sight.”

THE WEEKS WENT by, with Rudi continuing her descent—not that she paid any attention to the calendar or the clock. There was only the drug and the music and the dream, briefly interrupted by the menial tasks she had to perform to keep them all continuing in motion.

One night, after finishing her crude work, she stepped outside to unwire a bit—and she lit a cigarette one of the inmates of the house had given her to get on her good side, having quickly learned the terrors of her bad one. And, as she watched Dutch ply his trade to two lost souls on the sidewalk, she leaned against the building and blankly gazed out at the nothingness everywhere around

her, while sucking in the stale tobacco.

“Gertrude?” all of a sudden uttered a familiar female voice from nearby. “Is that you?”

Reluctantly, Rudi turned her head, and she saw Thelma staring at her and her appearance in shock.

“What are you doing here?” Thelma growled.

“What do you care?” Rudi growled back. “You’re not my mother!”

“Move along, grandma,” Dutch said to the woman, as he strode up to her while shooing her away with his hands.

“Go fuck yourself,” she said back.

He responded to this by grabbing her, and she responded back by taking out her stick from her shopping cart, which she used to beat the man. She beat him so hard that he collapsed onto the sidewalk with his hands covering his face in desperation.

Thelma then turned to Rudi and barked, “I thought you were better than this.”

“You thought wrong!” Rudi barked back.

“Obviously!”

The woman afterward returned her stick and rambled off—and Dutch rose to his feet and cried out to Rudi: “Why didn’t you stop her?”

“My job is inside the house,” she cried back. “Not out here.”

“Then get the fuck back in there!”

Rudi didn’t exactly reply. She just flicked the remains of her cigarette at Dutch and returned to the inferno—and to her dream.

Chapter Thirty-One

HECTOR AND HIS two goons entered a nondescript building in Arlington, Virginia—a short distance from Washington, and soon the three entered an equally nondescript office, where waiting were two men with Middle-Eastern complexions.

After a bit of small-talk, one of the Middle-Eastern men said to Hector in broken English: “Who your favorite poet?”

“Rumi, of course,” Hector replied, with a knowing smile.

The man nodded at this, and a third man entered the room from an adjacent one—a man carrying a printed document, and carrying it as if it were something valuable. He carried it over to Hector, who began taking off his dark overcoat.

THE THREE MEN left the nondescript building, and the larger of the two goons said to Hector: “Does this mean no more selling?”

“How much do we have left?” Hector replied.

“Just what’s in the trunk.”

IN THE ONLY well furnished room of the brownstone Hector watched as his goons counted the large stacks of money on the floor.

At the same time, Dutch—who was sitting on a couch nearby—stuck a small knife into one of the many keys of cocaine in front of him on the coffee table—watched by a pair of well-armed associates standing behind him.

He then pulled out the knife, along with a bit of white powder, which he let settle on his tongue as if he were tasting fine wine.

“Good?” Hector asked.

Dutch replied with one of his toothy smiles and added, “Very good.”

“It’s almost criminal what you do to our coke,” Hector went on, after pointing to a big package of baking soda on the table, which stood next to many little packages of crack.

“To each his own,” Dutch replied. “To each his own.”

Hector then turned to the goons, who were now putting the stacks of money into expensive attaché cases—and the larger of the two nodded at him.

“A pleasure as always, Mr. Dutch,” Hector afterward said, as the three men started out the door.

“The pleasure is all mine, boss,” Dutch replied. “And please do give my regards to President Ortega.”

This quip caused Hector to come to a sharp stop, and he spun toward Dutch before growling, “That was not funny. A joke like that can get you killed where I’m from.”

“Sorry,” Dutch uttered, with his hands in front of his face defensively. “No offense. Hell, I even voted for Reagan.”

Hector didn’t respond to this. He just turned around and again started off. Though he once again stopped when a dazed-looking Rudi entered the room and stumbled toward Dutch.

“Do I remember you?” he whispered to her with a slightly tilted head.

Rudi, though, ignored him and continued to Dutch, and she dropped a whole bunch of crumpled cash onto

the table before saying, "Everyone's paid up."

"Fine," he said back, without looking at her.

She subsequently stuck her slightly shaking hand in his face—and, after sighing a bit, he put a package of crack onto her palm.

"More," she ordered.

He glared at her, but gave her another pouch—and she stumbled away. Though, as she passed a still smiling Hector, the man grabbed her chin, causing her to stop and turn in his general direction, with lots of exasperation. Which is when he cooed, "Yes, I remember you. You've changed some, but I remember you—and I told you I'd know you better."

She responded by slapping away his hand, and she also headed off to the stairs.

"You fucking witch!" he howled, before following her as she started up the steps.

"*Hector*," the shorter of the goons pleaded, while reaching out for him.

"I wouldn't do that, boss," Dutch hollered, just as Hector came to the foot of the steps.

"I'm gonna show that witch something!" he hollered back. "I'm gonna show her hard!"

"That 'witch' put my boy Tim in the hospital. She broke every fucking rib he's got—and his jaw, too. And the dude's got a black belt."

"Get out of here—that little thing?"

"Don't fuck with her. I'm warning you. I'm warning you not because I like you, but because I like your coke."

Hector thought it over for a few moments before waving Dutch off—and he afterward started up the stairs.

"Wait a second!" Dutch yelled as he reached into a leather bag lying next to him on the couch—and Hector

spun toward him with great aggravation. After which Dutch added, "I was going to do this myself—or, more likely, have someone else do it."

"Do what?" Hector barked.

Just then, Dutch pulled out a loaded hypodermic needle and a rubber hose from the bag, and he rose to his feet and handed them both to Hector.

"What is this?" Hector demanded, as he glanced at the items.

"The solution to both our problems," Dutch answered, with another of his smiles.

"What is this?" Hector repeated—this time while holding up the needle.

"Enough speedball to kill 10 John Belushis," explained Dutch. "You see, I need to get rid of this 'witch.' Tim's getting out of the hospital soon, and he's threatening to shoot this whole fucking place up if he has to. And that would be kinda bad for business."

"I don't need no drugs to get what I want!"

"Sure thing, boss. Just let me know where to send your body."

This remark led Hector to glance at the needle. He glanced at it carefully.

"Please, Hector," the larger goon pleaded. "Your cousin—"

"—How many times do I have to tell you this: fuck my cousin!"

Hector afterward started up the stairs.

"Just wait a little while," Dutch sweetly told the man, causing him to once again come to a stop. "Wait until she's nice and toasted like. In the meantime, drinks are on the house."

LATER THAT NIGHT Hector stopped outside Rudi's

room, followed by the two goons, who were both holding flashlights—and he told them: “Wait out here.”

“We’re not supposed to leave you,” the shorter goon insisted. “You know this!”

“Wait out here!” Hector quietly hollered, not wanting to expose himself to the men, especially as he knew there wasn’t much to expose—especially when it came to his prowess with women.

“Please, Hector,” the larger man pleaded, “let’s just go.”

“No!”

“When we get back home I will get you the finest looking girl in Miskitia. But—”

“—Wait-out-here.”

Hector subsequently grabbed one of the flashlights and entered Rudi’s room, and, after closing the door behind himself and forcing himself not to breathe in the stench, he headed toward Rudi, who was passed out on her bed not far away. Then, once beside her, he looked down at her and smiled—and whispered, “You’re not gonna hurt me, are you, little girl? No, that nasty man downstairs was only playing a joke on me.”

Hector soon sat down on the mattress, and he thought for a second about removing his overcoat—until he remembered just how valuable it was. And, only seconds after this, he reached into the pockets of the coat for the things Dutch had given him. But he stopped himself, prior to looking down at Rudi and cooing, “I’m not gonna give you nothing but me.” And he afterward put the flashlight on the bed and reached out for her. Though, just before he grasped her T-shirt, he once again stopped himself.

“Better to be safe,” he mumbled, before taking out

the rubber hose, which he tied around Rudi's arm, causing her to stir.

"Tommy?" she murmured.

"Yes, Tommy is right here," Hector murmured back.

"Tommy is going to make everything all better."

Hector then took out the hypodermic, and he slowly brought the needle to Rudi's skin.

Chapter Thirty-Two

RUDI AWOKE THE next morning before the sun fully rose, with her head and just about everything else throbbing with pain. She awoke when she heard a man's voice calling out for Hector in Spanish from just outside her room.

Groggily, she noticed she had a rubber hose tied to her arm—and that wasn't the only thing she noticed. She also noticed there was a dead man lying next to her, with his lifeless eyes gazing upward and an empty hypodermic needle stuck in his arm just below his rolled-up sleeve.

"What?" she gasped in horror, while trying to figure out what could've happened. All she knew for sure was that she didn't know the man, even if he seemed somewhat familiar. So, for many seconds her mind fruitlessly tried to make sense of everything.

Suddenly, a male voice again called out for Hector—this one different and louder, and accompanied by knock on the door.

Startled, Rudi removed the hose from her arm and searched through the dead man's pants pockets, hoping to find some kind of identification. However, though she found a wallet there were no IDs inside it—just lots of hundred-dollar bills. So, she checked the jacket pocket of his fancy suit—and there she found a diplomatic passport for a Hector Guzman, from the Republic of Miskitia.

"Miskitia?" she quietly mumbled to herself. "What the hell is Miskitia?"

The only answer was a set of loud knocks, and even

louder voices—a pair of them, and while Rudi couldn't understand what they were saying, she had a strong feeling they weren't going to wait outside for long. So, she dropped the passport onto the floor, and—knowing she'd likely have to escape both the house and the neighborhood—she took off Hector's overcoat and put it on herself, before stuffing her Walkman into one of the pockets and grabbing Dutch's gun from the side of the mattress. Then, she silently scooted over to the side of the door, where she waited. She waited with such fright that she didn't even dare to breathe.

Fortunately, she didn't have to wait long, as the door soon creaked open, accompanied by the soft sounds of a man who seemed to be apologizing. Though, once the door was fully open, the larger goon cried out in a tone of voice that was anything but soft, prior to rushing toward Hector's body. Then, while the man frantically checked Hector, Rudi slipped out the door—only to face the smaller goon, who looked at her in surprise before reaching for a weapon inside his jacket. But Rudi pointed her gun at him first—and he lifted his hands in surrender.

“Sshhh,” she whispered, with a finger to her lips—a finger that was shaking.

An instant later, Rudi ran toward the staircase on the other side of the hallway, while listening to the two goons call out to each other. This short journey seemed to take forever, but she eventually reached the stairs, just as the larger man shouted, “Stop!” Which was followed by the whizzing of a bullet by her ear—which, in turn, caused her to scream and practically jump down the stairs.

Quickly, she reached the ground floor—getting there just as a couple of bullets hit nearby, barely missing her. Once again, she screamed—and she ran toward the front

door of the house, which Dutch was holding open for her.

“Don’t come back,” he whispered as she flew past him. The man then closed the door after her, and waited. He waited until he saw the goons get to the bottom of the steps—and he reopened the door and told them: “She went this way!”

Hurriedly, the two men rushed to the entrance, and, after the larger one knocked Dutch onto the floor, they ran down the stoop to the sidewalk.

“Fucking assholes!” Dutch hollered from his knees, before slamming the door closed.

The men reacted to this by briefly turning toward the direction of the sound, prior to looking down the street in both directions—and seeing Rudi in neither.

“You go this way,” the larger goon ordered the smaller one while pointing to his left. Which was just before he took off to his right.

A SHOELESS RUDI ran down the wet and cold sidewalk, with her arms flailing about and her eyes as wide as they could possibly be. She wasn’t even sure how long she had been running. All she knew was she had finally woken—for the first time since entering the crack house.

But this only made the horror worse—a horror she knew she might not be able to extricate herself from. She was so lost in this thought that she didn’t even realize she still had a gun in her hand. Though—when a man stared ominously at the weapon as she passed—she tossed it into a nearby garbage can before continuing on.

RUDI CAME UP to an intersection where sat a homeless man, who smiled at her while remembering all the kindness she had showed him in the past months—and

he sweetly called out her name.

But Rudi didn't react to this, and the man soon saw why. He saw the larger goon rambling toward her.

"Stop right there!" the goon screamed as he came to a stop at the edge of the sidewalk.

Rudi didn't respond at all, so the goon aimed his weapon at her and steadied it, wanting to make sure he wouldn't miss this time. However, just as he pulled the trigger, he was pushed over onto the street—by the homeless man.

Cursing loudly, the goon rose to his feet, and he saw that Rudi was gone, along with the man who pushed him.

DUTCH ENTERED RUDI'S former room, and, when he saw Hector's corpse, he tsked a bit while shaking his head irreverently.

Afterward, he walked over to a closet door and opened it, exposing his two associates.

"Good job, boys," he told the men.

"I still don't understand," one of them said, before pointing at the dead man and adding, "Why'd you have us kill him?"

"Maybe I'm getting soft," Dutch replied, with one of his toothy smiles.

Chapter Thirty-Three

MARIA WAS WATCHING TV by herself in her dorm room when she suddenly heard loud and incessant knocking on her door.

“Who is it?” she uttered, with a bit of fear.

“Open!” Rudi screamed, while continuing to pound her fists against the door. “Fucking open!”

Stunned, Maria jumped up and rushed to the door, and she started opening it when Rudi burst inside—knocking Maria onto the floor at the same time.

“Rudi?” Maria muttered, not quite recognizing her. “Is that you?”

Rudi didn’t reply. She just opened a bureau drawer and yanked out the few clothes she hadn’t packed for Christmas vacation. Then, she tossed her mattress onto the floor, exposing the small amount of cash she kept there for an emergency.

“Where have you been?” Maria called out, still not acclimated to Rudi’s appearance—and, when she got a whiff of her, she grimaced before adding, “What have you done to yourself?”

“Bag!” Rudi screamed, before turning to Maria.

“What?” Maria replied, as she stood up.

“I need a fucking bag!”

Maria responded by grabbing Rudi, who just pushed her away and howled, “Leave me alone!”

“I won’t!” Maria howled back, prior to grabbing her friend again. She also yelled, “Mrs. Goodwin is out of her mind with worry! She’s been calling me every day—and has been here at least three times already! Your stepdad

came, too. And Jared and Vicki—they've been out on the streets looking for you, along with your boss—sometimes half the night. Even Dennis is worried!"

All this clearly moved Rudi. But she soon shook her head and pushed Maria away again while saying, "I gotta get out of here!"

"Why?" Maria hollered.

"I'm in big fucking shit!"

"Let me help you!"

"You need to stay away from me!"

"Rudi—we all love you! Do you have any idea how much? Do you even care?"

"That's why I have to get out of here!"

"No!"

Once more, Maria grabbed Rudi—and she started dragging her toward the bathroom by the lapels of Hector's overcoat.

"What are you doing?" Rudi screamed.

"It's called an intervention," Maria replied.

"Maria, I could kill you!"

"Go right ahead. Because the last time you needed me I wasn't there—and that's never happening again!"

Quickly, Rudi pulled away from Maria, leaving her holding the coat, which she dropped before grasping the back of Rudi's T-shirt and continuing her dragging. And while Rudi continued to resist, she didn't resist all that hard—mostly because she was exhausted, in every possible way a person could be exhausted.

Eventually, Maria got Rudi into the bathroom, and she pushed her into the tub, before pouring cold water upon her from the shower, much as Rudi had done to her months earlier.

"Do you know it's February?" Maria asked.

Rudi didn't exactly respond—either to Maria or to the

freezing water. She just rolled into a fetal position.

“All the time you’re helping others,” Maria went on. *All the fucking time.* You help strangers and homeless people. You even help people who hate your guts! You, you’ve helped me so many times I can’t even count them. But now it’s your turn, whether you like it or not.”

“I fucked up,” Rudi mumbled, with a couple of shakes of her tucked-in head. “I fucked up.”

“We all do,” Maria insisted.

“Not like this. I fucked up badly.”

“Why, Rudi? Why?”

Rudi didn’t answer—she just kept shaking her drenched head.

“Tell me why!” Maria shouted.

“I miss him!” Rudi shouted back, after raising her teary face. “I miss him so much! I literally can’t live without him.”

With a swell of emotion, Maria fell to her knees and she hugged Rudi—and she told her: “I know.”

“No, you don’t,” Rudi told her back, as she cried on her shoulder. “No one knows. Tommy made me ten-foot-tall, and now, now I can’t even reach the floor. Fucking hell, love is the worst drug there is.”

“I’m gonna make you better, Rudi.”

“No one can.”

“And not just me. We’re all gonna help. Because, because it’s we who can’t live without you.”

AFTER MARIA HELPED bathe and clean Rudi—which wasn’t so easy with Rudi falling asleep all the time—she also helped her friend cut and dye her hair, and she even gave Rudi some of her makeup—which reminded Maria of when Rudi did the same for her in the high school bathroom. Then, as Maria watched Rudi

slowly dress, she saw her approaching human again—and Rudi told her why she was in trouble, which more than shocked her.

“Are you sure you killed him?” Maria gasped.

“I’m not sure of anything,” Rudi replied. “But they obviously think I killed him. They must be related somehow, because I don’t know why else they would’ve chased me for so long—and risked firing a gun with everyone around. Drug dealers usually care about only one thing: themselves.”

“Maybe we should go to the police.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I have to find out who this guy was first. I gotta find out if he’s a member of some big drug family. If so, I’m fucking dead.”

“But the police—”

“—They’ll just throw me in jail. If not for killing this guy then for all the coke in my system. There’s probably enough to charge me with intent to distribute.”

“But—”

“—In prison I’m even more dead, Maria.”

“So, what are you gonna do?”

“I have to get out of here—fast!”

“Why?”

“I don’t know where any of my IDs are! They could be coming here right now. I need to hide out somewhere.”

“Hide?”

“Yes, hide!”

“I, I think I might know a place.”

“Where?”

“The last place anyone would ever look for you.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

A MAN WITH a passing resemblance to Hector sat in an upscale Georgetown apartment, wearing a gray wool sweater and khaki slacks. He was in his late twenties and calm looking, and was reading the English edition of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Long ago, he read the original version and was interested in how it would be translated. Though, as he got to the last paragraph of one of the first chapters, he was interrupted by the ringing of the phone next to him.

For a few seconds, he thought about letting it ring until he finished the page he was on. But, right after these seconds, he sighed a bit and laid open the book on a nearby end table—and he answered the device.

“It’s me,” came the voice of the larger goon.

“Where are you?” growled the calm man as he reflexively rubbed his aching head—something he often did whenever he had to listen to the goon’s voice. “Has that boy been whoring it up again?”

“Actually, I have some bad news.”

“I don’t like bad news.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry—just tell me the bad news.”

“Your cousin is dead.”

The calm man barely reacted to this, and afterward he simply said, “What is the bad news?”

“I . . .” mumbled the goon.

“What happened?”

“Some crack whore killed him.”

"I could curse my father for making me use that useless idiot. Well, if that is all you have to say to me . . ."

"No. The girl, she disappeared."

"So?"

"She disappeared with the coat."

"What coat? What are you talking about?"

"Hector had this clever idea to hide the bill of lading in the coat."

"That was indeed clever of him. He probably saw it in a movie."

"I think so. Anyway, he thought it would be safe there."

Suddenly, rage flared within the formerly calm man—and his eyes lit up—and he howled—"How could she get this coat with you two by his side at all times?"

"We, we weren't by his side," reluctantly replied the goon.

"You fool! I gave you one stupid little thing to do—and you can't even do that!"

"I'm sorry."

"What did you just say?"

"Nothing."

"I will shoot you myself!"

"It's not our fault—he forced us to wait outside."

"It is your fault! Do you have any clue what you've done?"

"We'll find her, Eduardo—I promise."

"How?"

"I heard some bum call out her name. And we've seen her before—with some fat bag lady. That's how this all started. You see, Hector made a pass at—"

"—I don't want to hear anything more about Hector! You get me that bill of lading or you're as dead as him—both of you!"

Eduardo then slammed the phone down. Though he calmed himself again, and he soon picked up the receiver and dialed a number.

“Hello?” came a female voice.

“Yes, this is Eduardo Guzman. I need to speak with the National Security Advisor, and I need to speak with him right now.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

RUDI, WHO WAS again wearing Hector's coat and holding a paper shopping bag of her things, stood outside the Sigma Nu house with Maria—and she shook her head over and over.

"This is the dumbest idea in the history of dumb ideas," she muttered.

"It's the perfect idea," Maria insisted. "The perfect place to hide."

"Me living in a frat house?"

"*Fraternity.*"

"What?"

"They don't like it when you say 'frat.'"

"Ugghh. This is dumb, Maria."

"You have a better idea?"

"Yes! I can run as far from here as possible."

"Now that's dumb."

"Why?"

"You'll have no money, no friends—and lots of people will see you. And let's be honest here—you're not exactly the type of person who goes unnoticed."

Rudi sighed, just before Maria dragged her inside the house—and she subsequently dragged her into the main room, where a handful of brothers were watching TV.

"Is Patrick around?" Maria asked.

"I think he's in the back room," one of them replied.

The two women then walked down the corridor and entered the small room where Rudi first met Dennis—something she recalled quite vividly.

"Hey, Patrick," Maria said to a red-haired man of

about 21, who was playing darts with a few other guys.

Smilingly, Patrick turned to her and said, "Hey, what's up?"

"I don't know if you know Rudi," Maria said back, while pointing to her friend.

Patrick replied by offering Rudi his hand, while trying to ignore how awful she looked—and he told her: "I've seen you around."

"Me, too," Rudi told him back, before shaking his hand.

"Patrick is the chapter commander," Maria went on.

"What's going on?" Patrick asked.

"I heard you're looking for a new boarder."

"Yeah. The last guy split a few weeks ago. No notice—no nothing. It's really put us in a bind. Do you know someone?"

"Rudi," Maria answered, with a nervous little smile.

"*Rudi*. You're joking, right?"

"Her previous lodgings were, were substandard. She needs a place to stay."

"A girl living in a fraternity house?"

"She's not your typical girl."

"Still . . ."

"Can we at least see it?"

PATRICK RELUCTANTLY LED Rudi and Maria to the second floor, where he stopped and pointed to an open door a short distance away while saying, "That's the only full bathroom in the house. It's got two showers, but that's for nearly twenty guys. And there's no bathtub."

Maria responded by turning to Rudi questioningly. But Rudi just shrugged, knowing it was a lot better than where she didn't bathe for six weeks.

The three afterward continued on to the third floor, and they soon reached a wooden ladder.

"It's up there," Patrick told the two, while pointing the way. He also started upward, followed by the women. "As you can see," he went on, "there's no door or any real privacy."

Before long, they reached the attic and Rudi looked around the place, which was about the size of her dorm room in spite of the low ceiling—with a basic single bed, a small refrigerator, and a broken-down couch.

"It's pretty shitty," Patrick remarked, clearly trying to dissuade both of them.

"It's all right," Rudi mumbled, knowing it was a lot better than where she un-lived the past six weeks.

"How much is the rent?" asked Maria.

"Three hundred a month," Patrick replied.

Once again, Maria turned to Rudi questioningly—and, once again, Rudi shrugged.

PATRICK LED MARIA and Rudi down the stairs toward the foyer, and, as he did, he started shaking his head—right before uttering, "I'm not gonna lie to you guys—I don't think this'll work out. I see all sorts of potential problems."

"Maybe he's right," Rudi told Maria.

"Rudi really needs this place," Maria pleaded with Patrick. "Please."

The three eventually reached the ground floor, and, after thinking about it for a few moments, Patrick sighed and said to them: "Okay—we'll give it a try. But she has to be out of here by Pledge Weekend—that's right after finals."

"No problem," Maria exclaimed, unable to hide her excitement.

Rudi, though, was far less excited. Actually, she wasn't excited at all. But when Patrick again offered her his hand, she reluctantly shook it.

"Welcome," he murmured.

"Thanks," she murmured back.

Right then, Maria took a checkbook from her purse—and, while Rudi watched her write out a check, she said, "I'll pay you back soon. I promise."

"You've already paid me back," Maria replied with a smile. "You've paid me back many times over." She afterward handed Patrick the check, just as Dennis entered the house—and he looked at Rudi with both surprise and shock, with the shock deriving mostly from how bad she looked. Though the shock quickly disappeared, replaced by concern.

"You all right?" he whispered.

"Yeah," she answered, while avoiding his eyes.

"Rudi's our new boarder," Patrick told Dennis, with a bit of a grin.

"A girl living in a fraternity house?" Dennis gasped.

"She's not your typical girl," Maria interjected.

"That's for sure," Dennis said with a smile—a smile Rudi couldn't help notice.

THAT EVENING RUDI and Maria sat on the broken-down couch in the attic, eating a pizza Maria had bought from the Rathskeller.

"Not the greatest pizza ever," Maria uttered, as she put down her slice. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Rudi replied—and she meant it, as while the pizza tasted awful the first time she tried it with Dennis, this time it was the best food she had ever eaten, and she savored every bite.

"I'll buy you some clothes tomorrow," Maria went

on.

"You don't have to," Rudi insisted.

"I have to," Maria insisted back. "You barely have enough for a few days. There are lots of other things I need to buy you as well."

"Thank you. I, I'm beginning to sound like a broken record."

"I actually have to admit something," Maria retorted.

"What?" Rudi retorted back.

"I really like helping you like this."

"What do you mean?"

"For a long time now I've thought our relationship was way too one-sided. And now, now we're at least approaching even."

"We're way more than even."

"Are you gonna call Mrs. Goodwin?"

"Right after dinner."

"You can use my calling card."

"*Maria.*"

"What?" Maria innocently muttered, before taking the card from her wallet—along with some twenties—both of which she offered to Rudi.

"I can't take that," Rudi muttered back, with a shake of her head.

"You can, and you will. That's an order. And you better follow it if you don't want to go back into the tub."

"There's no tub here," Rudi said, with a little smile.

"Take it," Maria said back, while holding the cash and the phone card in front of Rudi, who reluctantly took it.

"Are you gonna tell Mrs. Goodwin you're here?" continued Maria.

"No," Rudi answered. "And neither are you."

"But—"

"—Please, Maria."

"All right. But I'm gonna tell Jared and Vicki you're here."

"Leave them out of this. They've got enough to worry about."

"You should've thought about that before you befriended them."

Rudi chuckled just a bit at this.

"You're almost back to your old self," Maria exclaimed.

"You need glasses," Rudi growled.

"Some sleep, some decent food—and you'll be all brand new. Then what?"

"Like I said before, I have to find out who that guy was—and find out just how much trouble I'm in."

"How?"

"I guess, I guess I'll check the newspapers tomorrow. There was also the dead guy's passport."

"What about it?"

"He had a passport from a place called the Republic of Miskitia."

"Never heard of it—and I got A's in Geography."

"I've never heard of it, either. All I know is that the men were speaking Spanish, and they looked Hispanic."

"Maybe it's somewhere in South America. You always hear about these new countries forming."

"Maybe."

"I actually have an uncle who was in the Merchant Marines. He's been like everywhere. I can ask him about it."

"All right."

"The only thing is that he's difficult to get a hold of."

"In the meantime," Rudi stated, "you and Sandra should find a new place."

"Why?" Maria asked.

"If they find out where I lived . . ."

"We'll be fine."

"All right—but if anyone asks either of you about me, just say you haven't seen me since Christmas."

RUDI AND MARIA SLOWLY walked down the stairs together hand-in-hand, with Rudi feeling tired, but better. Much better.

Soon, they reached the foyer and peeked their heads inside the main room, where lots of guys and many women were watching a pornographic video—with every eye there seemingly locked on the screen as if in a trance.

Rudi, though, grimaced, and—seeing this—Maria apologetically murmured, "This is a frat, after all."

"*Fraternity*," Rudi corrected. She then turned to Maria and added, "Do they watch this shit every night?"

"Not every night. But often. Tonight's actually 'Porn Till Dawn Night.' The little sisters organize it every semester."

"I can't believe you're part of this," Rudi said, while pointing at the TV with a shake of her head. "This is so sick."

"I don't know," Maria said back—"some of it's okay."

"*Maria!*"

"Don't you have a phone call to make?"

"Ugghh. I'll see you."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

Maria then kissed Rudi on the cheek and Rudi slowly headed down the hallway to the pay phone, with her head down.

Chapter Thirty-Six

MRS. GOODWIN ANSWERED the phone herself—something she had done a lot of in the past weeks, always hoping the call would bring relief.

Right away Rudi, who was sitting on the floor underneath the pay phone, could hear the hope in the woman's voice, but she was so embarrassed that she couldn't say a thing. She actually had been dreading this moment since Maria brought it up, feeling that she had let her mother-in-law down—and, in a very big way, had abandoned her.

"Is someone there?" Mrs. Goodwin uttered.

"It's me," softly spoke Rudi.

"Rudi?" the woman gasped, sounding as if she were about to pass out.

"I'm so sorry, Mom."

"Are you all right?"

"Maybe."

"What does that mean?" Mrs. Goodwin screeched.

"It's a long story," Rudi replied, with her voice breaking a bit. "A long terrible story."

"What happened?" Mrs. Goodwin pleaded, with her voice breaking as well.

"The memories, they caught up with me."

"I'm sorry, Rudi."

"You have no reason to be sorry."

"I should've never sent you away."

"It's not your fault. The memories would've found me wherever I was."

"Please come home."

"I can't."

"I promise I won't make you go anywhere again. You can stay in that room of yours all day long if you want, just as long as you're home."

"I can't, Mom."

"Then I'm gonna take the next plane down there—or to wherever you are!"

"You can't!"

"Why not?"

"I'm in a lot of trouble."

"I'll help. I'll get the best lawyers."

"It's not that kind of trouble. At least not yet. You have to stay away from me."

"I won't!"

"There are dangerous people after me."

"I'll hire someone. I'll hire a whole fucking army!"

"Mom, if anything ever happened to you, that would be it for me. Do you understand what I'm saying? I couldn't take it. If you care about me, you'll stay away until I can figure this all out."

"Surely I can help."

"You're helping right now. I love you so much."

These magic words, all by themselves, caused Mrs. Goodwin to break down in tears, especially as Rudi had never said them to her before.

"What's wrong?" Rudi asked, as she began to cry as well.

"I love you, too!" the woman replied.

"I promise," Rudi continued, "I promise that as soon as I get myself out of this mess nothing will keep me from you."

Mrs. Goodwin didn't reply. She just kept weeping.

"We're still going to Europe this summer, aren't we?" Rudi asked, trying to pick up her mother-in-law's spirit.

"Of course," the woman answered. "I have it all planned out."

"I can't wait. I'm never gonna leave your side the whole time. You can even pick out all the restaurants. And maybe, maybe I'll even wear a dress now and then."

"But, Rudi—"

"—I got you a really nice Chanukah gift," Rudi interrupted.

"The only gift I want is you," Mrs. Goodwin insisted.

"I lost it—the gift. I lost almost everything, including my life. But I want you to know, I want you to know that I still have your ring and pendant. I may have hit below bottom but I never lost them, and I never will."

"I don't care about them!"

"I do!"

"They're just things. Lousy things."

"It's what they represent that matters."

"Oh, Rudi—you, you must need some money."

"I'm fine."

"Don't shut me out! Please don't shut me out!"

"Maria lent me some."

"I'll send her a check."

"All right. Just as long as you let me pay you back."

"Rudi, have you not figured it out yet—money means nothing to me! You mean everything!"

"You mean everything to me, too, Mom. I swear you do."

"Where are you staying?"

"I'm not gonna tell you and neither will Maria—and you'd never find out yourself. So, just stay home."

"I'll go through every fucking building in the city if I have to!"

"Please, Mom—I'll call you every day. I promise. But please stay home."

“Every day?” the woman muttered.

“Every single day,” Rudi stated.

AS DENNIS WALKED through the front door of the house he saw Rudi sitting on the floor crying into the pay phone.

This shook him. It shook him even more than seeing her earlier. It also made him want to cry—and he further had a near irrepressible urge to rush over to her and take her into his arms, and do anything to make her tears go away.

This urge frightened him, as he had never felt such an urge before—with anyone. It frightened him so much that he rushed up the stairs to his room.

RUDI CONTINUED TO sit on the floor by the pay phone long after she hung up with Mrs. Goodwin. She sat there and tried to compose herself. Then, even after she accomplished this, she still sat there. She sat there until her face was completely dry—and afterward she rose and peeked inside the main room, through the back entrance.

Lots of people were still there watching porn, but, not seeing Maria, Rudi decided to go to bed. Though, before she did, she happened to glance at the actors on the screen—and glanced at them perhaps a few seconds longer than necessary. And, while trying to convince herself that she wasn’t titillated by this even a little, she mumbled, “How disgusting.”

“You got a problem?” bellowed a deep voice from nearby.

Slowly, Rudi turned her head, and she saw J. D.—a huge heavysset guy with short black hair, who was sitting in a big white easy chair a few steps away from her, and

who was sneering at her.

With her own sneer, she replied, "What if I do?"

"Fuck off," he barked.

"I bet that's what you'll be doing right after watching this," she barked back, and—without waiting for a reply—she started down the corridor.

"I can't believe we're letting a chick stay here!" he shouted.

"I'm not a 'chick'!" she shouted back.

"A psycho chick!"

Rudi ignored this, and headed up the stairs—and soon she reached Dennis's room on the third floor, from which she could hear "How Soon is Now?" playing from inside the closed door. This surprised her. It surprised her that he wasn't downstairs watching porn, and it further surprised her that he was listening to the song by himself, and not as a means of seduction.

Then, she suddenly wondered if there actually were someone in there with him—and she leaned her ear up to his door. But all she could hear was the voice of the singer—the one who sang like he really meant it.

Before long, the song ended—and started again. At the same time, Rudi raised her hand to knock on Dennis's door—because she, too, wanted to hear the song. She wanted to hear it all night long. But she stopped herself. She stopped herself at the last second and headed up to her new home, feeling more and more fatigued with each step.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

RUDI SLEPT FOR more than a day, and when she finally awoke with the rising sun she felt almost good. And she felt even better when she saw the stacks of new clothes in front of her bed, along with makeup and toiletries, and all kinds of food. There was also a big bouquet of flowers—one that Jared and Vicki had left the day before, along with a get well card that mentioned the two would be visiting her again that evening at 9:00.

Rudi smiled at all of this, grateful not only for the wonderful friends and family she had, but also for being alive so she could enjoy them. Though she soon realized she needed to take a shower before the horde of testosterone rose from its sleep. So, after grabbing a towel, soap, and shampoo, she rushed down the ladder.

AS RUDI FINISHED showering a robe-clad Patrick, who was carrying a towel and his shower bag, stopped behind an angry-looking J. D., who had similar items and who was waiting with four other angry-looking guys.

Slowly, J. D. turned to Patrick and growled, “What’s the point of having two fucking showers if we have one fucking chick living here?”

Patrick shrugged, just as the shower came to a stop—and, not long after this, Rudi exited the bathroom wearing her towel.

At once, she and J. D. glared at each other—and he also growled, “You better have left some hot water in there.”

“There’s not enough hot water in the whole world to

cover your body,” she growled back.

This caused him to furiously start toward her—and he was only stopped by Patrick—and only barely.

RUDI ENTERED THE Gelman Library wearing—in addition to Hector’s overcoat—a wool cap and sunglasses, along with a GW backpack—all of which Maria had bought for her.

Just then, she took off the sunglasses and approached the security desk, which was manned by a small young man with big bushy brown hair and a scruffy face, who looked a little familiar to her. And he seemed to recognize her as well.

“Can I see some ID?” he asked.

“Ah, I don’t have any. I lost it.”

“I’m sorry, but you can’t come in without ID. You can get a replacement at the registrar.”

This exasperated Rudi, and she thought about arguing, but she quickly realized that the last thing she wanted to do was draw attention to herself. So, she just muttered, “All right”—and headed out the door.

“Didn’t you go to Columbia High School?” the man suddenly called out.

Rudi responded by turning to him and saying, “Yeah. For a little while.”

“I thought I recognized you. I’ve seen you at Vintage Vinyl as well.”

“I think I remember you, too.”

“My name’s Nick. Nick Levi.”

“Rudi.”

“Rudi Weiss. Yeah, you’re the girl who beat up Owen Connors.”

“That was a long time ago. We’re actually good friends now.”

"I kinda remember that, too. I also remember your boyfriend was . . ."

"Well, I better go get a new ID."

"It's okay—go ahead."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

Rudi then entered through the turnstiles and headed toward a door leading to the Reference section downstairs.

"Hey!" Nick shouted.

Instantly, she stopped and spun toward him—and he said, "Sorry."

"About what?"

"Your boyfriend."

Rudi nodded, before rushing off in the direction of the door.

RUDI WENT TO the newspapers section, and she read through the last few editions of both the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times*.

But there wasn't any mention of Hector's death, and she tried to determine whether this meant something—good or bad. Though all she could conclude was that the police hadn't found the body and therefore weren't likely looking for her. But she knew other people likely were. Other people who probably didn't want it known that Hector was dead. Other people who were likely far worse than the police.

With this in mind, Rudi went upstairs and found several books about the Latin-American drug trade in the stacks. But she couldn't find anything about any Guzmans.

Afterward, she returned downstairs and went through every map and encyclopedia she could find, looking for

some mention of Miskitia. However, she couldn't find anything about it. So, thinking Maria might've been right about it being a new country, she walked up to a bald-headed librarian and asked him.

"There's no such country," he told her.

"You sure?"

"Absolutely positive."

"Not even a new one?"

"I follow world events very closely, young lady. You certain you're not pronouncing it wrong?"

She then spelled it for him—and his answer was: "You certain you're not spelling it wrong?"

"Pretty certain," Rudi replied.

"Sorry, I can't help you."

WHEN RUDI RETURNED to the Sigma Nu house she peeked her head into the main room—wondering what kind of debauchery they were watching now.

Like the night before, the room was packed with people watching TV, only—unlike then—it was all men, and strangely—instead of watching pornography—they were watching *General Hospital*. Even stranger, they seemed far more enthralled by it than they had been of the porn. Some of the guys were literally sitting on the edge of their seats.

"You guys watch soap operas?" Rudi uttered, with even more disgust than she displayed the night before.

"Sshhh," Johnny pleaded. "Frisco is just about to propose."

"I can't believe you!"

"Shut up!" J. D. hollered, from his white perch in the back.

"Who's gonna make me?" Rudi hollered back.

"You're not gonna like it if I have to stand up."

"I don't like it even when you're sitting."

Angrily, J. D. started rising, and Rudi headed down the corridor to call Mrs. Goodwin. Though when she got to the pay phone she realized that it probably wasn't a good idea to call the woman from the same phone, especially this particular one. But while there she called someone else.

"Hello?" Jeannine said as soon as she picked up.

"Hi," Rudi mumbled.

"Rudi?"

"Yeah."

"Where have you been? Do you know everyone's looking for you?"

"I know. I'm sorry."

"What happened?"

"I had, I had a relapse."

"Oh, baby."

"See, I'm not as strong as you thought."

"No one is. So, when are you coming in?"

"I can't right now. People are looking for me."

"The police?"

"Worse."

"Worse? What did you get yourself into, girl?"

"I don't know, but I can tell you that I'm scared."

"Me, too. Is there something I can do?"

"Has anyone been looking for me?"

"We all have. Even some of the homeless people. You don't know how much people care about you. I care about you."

"I know. Thank you."

"So, who do you think are looking for you?"

"I don't know. Drug dealers, probably. The guys who were chasing me were two huge gorillas in expensive suits."

“I haven’t seen anyone like that.”

“If you do . . .”

“Where are you?”

“Just leave a message with my roommates. They’ll get it to me.”

“Anything else I can do?”

“Pray maybe?”

“What do you think I’ve been doing?”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

UNDER THE DIM light of a flickering lamppost, Thelma and her shopping cart stopped beside a set of large garbage cans—and she leaned down and started sifting through them.

Soon, a white van parked in front of her, and so when a big blue Mercedes sedan reached a nearby intersection the two goons inside could only see the van.

“How long do we have to keep looking for this woman?” the shorter man asked while trying to keep his tired eyes open as he drove.

“How long do you want to live?” the larger man replied. He then took one last look around and motioned his colleague forward. The car afterward sped off, with its tires screeching—only a handful of seconds before Thelma pushed her cart past the van.

THE VERY MOMENT Jared and Vicki reached the top of the attic steps Rudi rushed up to them and gave them warm hugs—and she thanked them not only for the flowers but for all they had done in trying to find her.

Vicki, who was carrying a paper lunch bag, responded by looking around the room, and she shook her head, before saying to Rudi: “You’re not living here.”

“It’s all right,” Rudi insisted. “It’s much better than where I was before. It’s not even close.”

“You can’t live in a frat house!”

“*Fraternity.*”

“Whatever. You’re coming to live with us—and we won’t take no.”

"It's way too dangerous, Vicki. People are after me. You shouldn't even be coming to see me."

Vicki sighed, and she shortly thereafter followed Rudi to the couch along with Jared, and the three sat down, with Rudi in the middle.

"What happened?" Vicki whispered, after gently putting her hand on top of Rudi's, much like she had on the day they became friends. "Was it because of the wedding?"

"No," Rudi whispered back. "Don't think that for a second. Your wedding was so beautiful, and I loved being part of it."

"Then what was it?"

"Despair and addiction don't mix very well."

Understanding this, Jared gripped Rudi's other hand, and he told her: "We're here for you, Rudi—always remember that."

"Oh," Vicki uttered, "before I forget—we brought you something." She subsequently handed Rudi the paper bag and added, "Here's the Nicoboli I promised you."

With a bit of a grin, Rudi took the bag, and she pulled out a large and warm calzone.

"It's been frozen awhile," Vicki told her. "But I heated it up before we came. Go on—give it a try."

Rudi, though, was hesitant.

"No meat," Jared insisted, with a grin of his own. "Just cheese."

Rudi grinned some more, and she took a bite of the calzone, and, once she swallowed it, she hung her head down.

"Not good?" Vicki asked.

"It's wonderful," Rudi replied. "You're wonderful. I don't deserve friends like you."

"Stop that," Vicki growled. "You're sick, just like me."

"Not like you."

"It's the same thing. And just like me you're gonna get better. If I can have hope, so can you."

These words caused Rudi to raise her head and smile at her friend—and for a moment she couldn't believe Vicki was the same person she once despised. Then, she said, "So, how was the honeymoon?"

"Terrific," Vicki said back.

"Not boring?" Rudi queried, with a smirk.

"Not boring," Vicki told her. She also blushed a bit, prior to turning to her husband, who blushed as well—though not just a bit.

"And married life?" Rudi asked.

"No complaints," Vicki answered, looking as if the happiness were about to explode out of her.

"In fact . . ." Jared began—though he was interrupted by Vicki, who shook her head at him.

"What?" Rudi uttered.

"This isn't the time," Vicki uttered back.

"What?" Rudi repeated, with a lot more firmness.

At first, Vicki and Jared wouldn't say anything. However, soon they slowly turned to Rudi, before exclaiming in near unison: "We're pregnant!"

"Both of you?" Rudi exclaimed back, with a big smile on her face.

"It feels like it sometimes," Vicki told her. "He gets worse morning sickness than me." Vicki then clutched her husband's thigh and added, "And worse cravings, too."

Rudi laughed at this, and she especially laughed at how much Jared blushed. Though the laughter faded when she thought of something.

“What is it?” Vicki inquired.

“What about your medication?” Rudi inquired back.

“Can you take it while you’re pregnant?”

“I have to go without it.”

“Is that smart?”

“There’s some risk and complications, but the cancer isn’t at an advanced stage. The doctor even said if I’m gonna have a baby, now’s the time. So, in a way, it’s a miracle child.”

“I’m so happy for you.”

“That doesn’t mean I haven’t had my doubts,” Vicki went on.

“What doubts?” Rudi asked.

“Do you think it’s right to bring a child into the world when I might not be there when she needs me the most?”

“I was without my mother growing up, and, I won’t lie—it was rough. But the alternative would’ve been worse. Much worse.”

“Actually we . . .” Jared began, before Vicki again cut him off.

“What?” Rudi demanded.

“You have enough to worry about,” Vicki replied.

“Just tell me.”

Briefly, the couple glanced at each other, prior to turning back to Rudi. Which is when Vicki muttered, “We were kinda hoping . . .”

“That you’d be the baby’s godmother,” Jared added.

“Really?” Rudi uttered in shock. “You’d really want me to be your baby’s godmother after all that’s happened to me?”

“Really,” Vicki said with a smile. “You don’t have to give us an answer—”

“—Yes!” Rudi interrupted. “Of course, I’ll do it!”

"You should really think about it, because—considering the circumstances—it's likely not to be such a ceremonial role."

"It's still yes!" Rudi cried out. "A hundred times yes!"

Vicki reacted by hugging her friend, who hugged her right back.

"We're even naming the baby 'Rudi,'" Jared said.

Upon hearing this, Rudi was way more than shocked—and she broke Vicki's embrace and hollered, "Get out of here!"

"The only question is," Jared went on, "whether it will be with an 'i' or a 'y.'"

"It's gonna be an 'i,'" Vicki insisted—"I just know it!"

"I don't know what to say," Rudi told the two while shaking her head.

"Now you have a reason to get better and stay that way," Vicki told her back—and, while pointing her finger, she added, "A big one!"

AS DENNIS APPROACHED his bedroom door he heard voices coming from the attic, and though he knew it wasn't right or "honorable" to listen to someone else's conversation, he found himself drifting toward the ladder, and, once there, he hovered.

"Who are these people?" Jared asked Rudi.

"I don't know for sure," Rudi replied. "But until I find out I can't leave here."

"They're that dangerous?" uttered Vicki.

"They were shooting at me," Rudi answered.

"Oh, my God."

"I'm gonna ask Reverend Samson about these guys," Jared uttered. "He knows about everything that goes on down there, including this new shit on the streets."

"Don't get him involved," Rudi insisted.

“Why do you think he ministers there if it’s not to get involved?”

Right then, someone touched Dennis’s back—and he jumped, and spun toward Maria, who murmured, “Hey”

“Hey,” he murmured back, with great embarrassment, before heading toward his room.

Watching this, Maria smiled knowingly, prior to walking up to the attic, where Jared and Vicki were saying their goodbyes to Rudi.

“Hi,” Maria awkwardly said to everyone there, still not accustomed to the three being friends, much less good ones.

Everyone said hello back—after which Maria pointed downstairs and whispered, “Dennis was listening.”

“Just great,” Rudi uttered with lots of exasperation. “Now he knows, too.”

“He cares about you, Rudi. He cares about you a lot.”

“That’s the problem.”

IT WAS LATE at night when the blue Mercedes came to a stop at a red light—a vehicle now driven by the larger goon.

Briefly, he thought about running the light, as there was no one around—but, considering his bad luck of late, he decided against it. He then heard snoring—and he turned his head and saw his smaller colleague sleeping against the passenger door. And, while he tried to ignore it, after a few seconds of it, he punched the man’s arm—causing him to wake.

“What?” the smaller goon gasped.

“If I have to be up,” the larger one replied, “so do you.” He subsequently returned his attention to the light, which was still bright red—and added, “How much fucking longer?”

Seemingly in reply, the light turned green, and he was just about to step on the gas when he noticed something in his rearview mirror. He noticed Thelma a couple of blocks back, rambling across the intersection with her shopping cart.

At once, the man smiled, and, after shifting the car into reverse, he sped backward toward the woman.

“What are you doing?” screamed the smaller goon.

“Saving our lives!” the man replied.

Seeing the car coming at her, Thelma became frightened, and she rushed across the street with her cart prior to entering the grounds of an abandoned junk yard—one whose decrepit fence was broken in many places.

Soon, the Mercedes came to a sharp stop in front of the spot in the fence where the woman entered—and the smaller goon jumped out of the car and followed her. Then, the car sped off, and turned left at the next block before smashing through the remains of the front gate of the yard.

As for Thelma, she ran as fast as she could while pushing a heavy shopping cart—which wasn’t very. In spite of this, she didn’t give a thought to ditching the conveyance, as it would’ve been like abandoning her right arm—and it was not long before the smaller goon was just steps from her, even though he was far from the fleetest man. This led Thelma to reach in the cart for her stick. She reached for it just as the Mercedes pulled up a short distance in front of her and came to a screeching halt.

Though Thelma didn’t stop. Instead, she slammed her cart into the driver’s side of the car—smashing the door in. The goon, however, was able to get out through the passenger door—and he screamed, “You fucking bitch!”

“I’ll fucking kill you!” Thelma screamed back, after grabbing and brandishing her stick. Then, noticing the smaller man coming to a stop behind her, she added, “I’ll kill both of you!”

“Don’t be like that,” the smaller goon cooed, with a little smile. “We just want to ask you some questions about that crazy-looking girl we saw you hanging around with.”

“I don’t know shit,” Thelma replied.

“We’ll see,” he replied back as he clutched her, which was just before she cracked her stick over his head—causing it to split apart, and causing the man to tumble onto the ground unconscious.

Unfortunately, seconds later she, too, was on the ground—the result of the larger goon pushing her. Afterward, she turned herself around and saw the man standing over her. She also saw him placing a pair of brass knuckles over his fingers.

“One way or another you are going to answer,” he said.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

THE CALM MAN sat in his apartment trying to remain calm as he held the receiver to his ear.

“So,” he said, right after the larger goon told him the news, “when shall I shoot you two? Is Tuesday good for you?”

“We have a plan, Eduardo.”

“You can hear the excitement in my voice.”

“You know junkies—they’d sell out Christ for a fix.”

“Is this going somewhere?”

“Somebody must know where this junkie girl is. Another junkie must know. So, we’re gonna splash cash all over town until we find her—our own cash. We just need some time.”

“You don’t have any.”

“Please, Eduardo—what are you going to lose by giving us another month or two?”

Reluctantly, Eduardo thought about this. He thought about it for a long time, while desperately trying to come up with something.

Chapter Forty

RUDI WAS LYING on her bed in the attic doing absolutely nothing when someone downstairs called out, “Rudi, you have a phone call!”

At once, she jumped off the bed, and she flew down the stairs and picked up the receiver.

“It’s me,” Maria uttered, with a bit of gloom in her voice.

“What happened?” Rudi uttered back, quickly recognizing her friend’s tone.

“Your boss just called.”

“Yeah?”

“She wanted you to know about this woman.”

“Who?”

“Her name’s ‘Thelma.’”

WEARING HER WOOL cap and sunglasses, a dazed Rudi walked inside George Washington University Hospital, passing through the very same entrance President Reagan had after he was shot a few years earlier. And, as soon as she got the number of ‘Thelma’s room, she hurried to it.

At the threshold, Rudi stopped in shock—seeing Thelma lying not far away, unconscious and badly beaten. And, for nearly a minute, Rudi didn’t move. Though eventually she not only entered the room but also pulled up a chair next to the bed—and she took off her sunglasses and cap before gently grasping the woman’s heavily callused hand.

Soon, Thelma began to wake—and she couldn’t quite

comprehend who was holding her hand.

"It's me," Rudi murmured, "Gertrude."

"Gertrude?" Thelma murmured back. "You, you look better."

"I don't feel better."

"But your hair's still fucked up. And your makeup, too."

"Thanks. Are you okay?"

"Don't worry—I didn't tell those assholes shit about you."

"So," Rudi uttered, while starting to fall apart—"they, they did this because of me."

"Who cares why they did it?" Thelma growled. "It makes no difference."

"It does!"

"It was my choice not to talk. *Mine*."

"I thought you didn't care about anyone but yourself."

"Only sometimes."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm not. I'm never sorry, and neither should you."

"Can, can I ask you something?" Rudi mumbled.

"Maybe," Thelma mumbled back.

"Are you, are you my mother—my real mother?"

Thelma reacted to this question by looking deeply into Rudi's eyes, and, without any hesitation, she said, "No. I'm not your mother, real or otherwise. But I wish I were. Because there's nobody like you. There's nobody like you anywhere."

These words made Rudi lose what little control she still had, and she hugged Thelma. She hugged her long and hard—and when she finally released her, the woman was again unconscious.

Still, Rudi took her hand again, and held onto it, wanting Thelma to know she wasn't alone—and that she would never be alone ever again. And, late into the night, Rudi continued holding the woman's hand. She did so right up until the moment Thelma passed—and afterward Rudi cried and cried, in spite of what the woman had told her.

A YOUNG MALE orderly rolled a gurney containing a heavy corpse up to an open office, where sat a small woman in her thirties, who was wearing a white lab coat and eating a pastrami sandwich.

The woman responded by looking dubiously at both the body and the orderly, before unemotionally uttering, "Does this one have a name?"

"Actually," the man replied, "the police were able to ID her." He then walked over to the foot of the gurney and lifted up a chart, prior to saying, "Her name was Mona. Mona Weiss."

Chapter Forty-One

RUDI WAS INCONSOLABLE after Thelma's death, firmly believing she had been the cause of it—and nothing Jared, Vicki, or Maria said to her could change this.

For many days, she did nothing more than sulk and listen to her music, while barely leaving her room. Then, one evening she heard a small party going on downstairs—the noise of which kept disturbing her malaise. So, she got off her bed and headed downstairs—and, as she reached the foyer she saw Nick standing by himself against the staircase, holding an empty beer cup in his hand. And she uttered, “Hey.”

Startled, he jumped a bit, before turning toward her and responding in kind with a little smile—relieved to see someone familiar.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Not much,” he answered. “My roommate’s thinking about rushing here, and he dragged me along.”

“What about you?”

“Me?”

“Are you gonna join?”

“Are you kidding—look at me.”

“What about you?”

“I’m not exactly the fraternity type.”

“Neither are they.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. Why don’t you give them a chance.”

Nick shrugged. Though he also lifted up his cup and said, “I think I’ll get another beer.”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

Rudi then watched Nick enter the main room—after which she turned around and saw Dennis smiling at her.

“What are you grinning about?” she growled.

“I heard what you just said to him,” he replied.

“Listening to other people’s conversations is a bad habit.”

“You know, maybe we should make you rush coordinator.”

Rudi sneered at this and walked off down the corridor, with Dennis smiling at her without control. What’s more, he didn’t even want control.

“Dennis!” suddenly came a recognizable male voice from behind him—and Dennis spun around, and, with great surprise, he saw his father a few steps away.

“Dad, what are you doing here?” he muttered.

“Well,” the man replied with a bit of a smirk, “back in my day Sigma Nu alumni were invited to all events, regardless of what chapter they attended.”

“It’s still true, but . . .”

“Why don’t you introduce me to everyone.”

RUDI POURED A glass of soda from a bottle at the bar in the back of the main room, and she afterward sat down in J. D.’s big white easy chair—and she watched the people in the room mingle.

Soon, J. D. entered with two guys quite familiar to her—Brad and Pete, and she couldn’t help notice that Brad’s nose still looked a bit broken. She also noticed how Pete’s right arm didn’t seem to move quite right.

“I’m telling you,” J. D. said to the two, “this is the best house on campus. It’s common knowledge.”

Right then, Brad and Pete saw Rudi, and they stopped in both shock and fear.

“What’s wrong?” J. D. asked.

"Wha . . . what is she doing here?" Brad mumbled, with his hand shaking slightly as he pointed at Rudi.

"She's just a boarder," J. D. replied, while glaring at Rudi—a glare she happily returned, just as he added, "A temporary one."

"You know," Pete said to Brad, "I think, I think Sigma Chi is having a party."

Brad nodded, and the two rushed out of the room and the house as fast as they could, almost tripping over their feet. Which caused J. D. to fume—and, once this peaked, he turned to Rudi and growled, "Why are they so afraid of you?"

"Maybe you should ask yourself why are you *not* afraid of me," Rudi growled back.

"I'm shaking."

"If you were, there'd be an earthquake."

At once, J. D.'s face turned red, and, after pointing upstairs, he howled, "this is a private fraternity event."

"There are girls here," Rudi retorted, while nodding at a few in the room.

"They're little sisters. Or will become one."

"Well," Rudi uttered, after putting her feet on top of a nearby coffee table, "Maybe I'll become a *little sister*, too."

"You're sitting in my chair. Get out of it."

"Fine," she told him with great exasperation, prior to rising up and taking off.

"You're not long for here, Weiss," J. D. told her back.

"None of us are," she replied as she approached the front of the room, where Dennis's father was talking to his son with his back to Rudi.

"You promised me you wouldn't see her anymore," the man quietly hollered.

"I didn't promise you anything," Dennis replied.

“Tell me, how’d you like to join the ranks of all the homeless people around town?”

All of a sudden, Dennis saw Rudi a short distance away—along with her frown, and he loudly coughed into his fist—causing his father to turn toward Rudi and force the kind of phony smile endemic to politicians everywhere.

“This is my dad,” Dennis muttered.

“Hi,” she said to the man as coolly as possible.

“And this is Rudi,” Dennis added.

“I’m glad to see you’ve been found,” the congressman remarked.

“Me, too,” Rudi remarked back.

“You put quite a scare into your mother-in-law.”

“I know.”

“I actually know her—and I knew your father-in-law, too.”

“I didn’t.”

With that, Rudi brushed past the man and headed up the stairs, with Dennis’s eyes locked on her—something his father noticed with lots of exasperation.

LATE SUNDAY AFTERNOON Rudi was glumly listening to “Moonlight Serenade” on her bed when she heard a knocking sound.

Instantly, she took off her headphones and uttered, “Come in”—and Patrick climbed the final steps of the attic ladder, and, while looking a bit embarrassed, he said to her: “Hi.”

“Hi,” she said back, with a bit of wonder.

“I have to tell you something.”

“What?”

“Personally, I’ve got no problem with you. But you’ve rubbed some of the brothers the wrong way. At the

meeting tonight there's going to be a motion to throw you out—and if it passes, there's nothing I can do about it.”

“I understand,” she said matter-of-factly, as if she had been expecting this—even if this was anything but true.

RUDI STARTED PACKING right after Patrick left, knowing exactly what the outcome of the vote would be—and she was able to stuff almost everything Maria had bought her into the backpack.

Then, once night fell, she decided not to wait for the election results—and, after putting on Hector's coat, the wool cap, and the sunglasses, she put the backpack over her shoulders and headed down the ladder, even though she had no idea where she was going. However, as she reached the landing leading to the foyer, she heard the meeting in progress down in the main room, and she decided to sit down and listen to it—just for laughs, she told herself. And, about ten minutes later, they broached the subject of her, and her removal.

“She's a complete psycho,” J. D. told the brotherhood. “It's common knowledge. Forgetting the pledges she scared away, she's disrupted this whole house. I know, I know we need the money, so I'll pay for the attic myself until we find another boarder.”

“Well,” Patrick said, with a bit of a sigh, “there's a motion on the floor. All—”

“—Can I speak?” suddenly interrupted Dennis, right after he raised his hand.

“The floor's yours,” Patrick replied, with a hopeful smile.

At the same time, Rudi leaned forward a bit in anticipation of Dennis speaking—not sure at all what he would say.

Slowly, Dennis rose off the couch, and he told everyone: "There's no denying Rudi can be obnoxious. But that adjective can be applied to most of us. All of us, actually. Take a look around the room—we're the jerks no one else can stand. Think about it, what other fraternity would take us? Hell, you even gave a bid to a total asshole like me."

"You were a legacy," Johnny interrupted.

"Okay, so you had to give me a bid," Dennis went on. "But you didn't have to become my friends—the first real ones I've ever had. Rudi's a lot like us . . . well, apart from her you-know-what. Yeah, she's a little too loud, and she doesn't quite fit in—and she can piss you off to no end. But there's this wonderful decency in her—kinda like the decency that's in each of us."

"She's gotta go!" J. D. insisted.

"She's got nowhere to go!" Dennis insisted back. "Did you ever wonder why she's here in the first place? Do you think she wants to be living amongst a bunch of filthy frat rats? She *needs* us. She does. Let her stay. Please. If not for her, then do it for me. Because she means a lot to me. An awful lot."

Dennis subsequently sat down, and Patrick said to the brotherhood: "Well, we have a motion on the floor—all those in favor of kicking Rudi out raise your hands."

He afterward looked around the room, and, a short time later, he uttered, "All right—it's unanimous: Rudi stays."

For nearly a minute after hearing this, Rudi didn't move, as she couldn't believe what she just heard. She couldn't believe how Dennis had stood up for her—and, even more importantly, she couldn't believe they were actually letting her stay. Eventually, though, she rose to her feet and headed back upstairs, wondering when she

was finally going to stop thinking the worst of everyone when they almost always disappointed her.

RUDI COULDN'T SLEEP that night, with her mind so focused on Dennis and all the wonderful things he had said. She could remember every word of his speech, and every intonation of his voice. She could even imagine how he looked when he said it. She also couldn't stop feelings from rising inside her—feelings she thought were long dead.

Sure, she told herself, maybe she could never really love Dennis, especially not the way she loved Tommy—but she liked him a lot. An awful lot. She liked him so much that she found herself rising off her bed, and she further found herself heading down the wooden ladder—and not long after that she came up to Dennis's room, from which she could hear "How Soon is Now?" playing.

Like during her first night living in the house, she raised her hand to knock on his door. Only this time she softly did. And, a few seconds later, the door creaked open a little—and there was Dennis, wearing nothing but boxers.

"Hi," he whispered.

"Hi," she whispered back, while trying to avoid looking at all the muscle on his arms and chest and abdomen.

"What's wrong?" he asked, after she didn't add to her hello.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"You," she replied with a bit of a smile, "you really should've said '*fraternity* rats.'"

For a second he couldn't understand what she was talking about—and then it hit him. And he smiled, too—

though it wasn't just a bit—after which he told her: “Listening to other people’s conversations is a bad habit.”

She responded by standing on her toes and giving him a sweet kiss on the lips—doing so while caressing his cheeks with the tips of her fingers.

Soon, she felt these cheeks tremble a little as the first wave in Dennis’s life overtook him—a wave that rose just as she once described it. Only he wasn’t scared at all, and he knew he would never be scared again as long as she was with him.

As for Rudi, she hadn’t anticipated the kiss would mean much to her, as their previous kisses hadn’t meant anything at all—in spite of all the heat they generated. This kiss, though—this kiss made her sing, and before she knew it she was trembling just like him, and she only wanted to tremble some more. Unfortunately, her toes started to ache, and she reluctantly broke their kiss. Which was just before she murmured, “Well, I better go back to bed.”

“You want to hear the rest of the song?” he asked, after pointing backward to his room with his thumb.

“Actually,” she replied, “I’d like to hear all of it.”

Chapter Forty-Two

DURING THE WEEK that followed Rudi and Dennis only got closer, even if they didn't reenact their kiss or anything like it.

Every day, he would bring her dinner and sometimes lunch, and they would talk away their evenings while listening to Dennis's record collection—a collection that amazingly didn't contain a single record she didn't like, and one that he allowed her to listen to whenever he wasn't around. Steadily, the two discovered just how much they loved being with the other—enjoying not only the other's presence and touch, but also the sound of their voice. They also had ever-increasing difficulty saying goodnight—and both found themselves smiling themselves to sleep every night afterward.

WHEN SATURDAY MORNING came Rudi went to Dennis's room to see if he wanted to do something.

But he wasn't there. So, she went downstairs and saw a group of about a dozen guys painting the main room—a group that didn't include Dennis.

"Anyone seen Dennis?" she inquired.

"He had some family emergency," Rich replied.

"If you ask me," Johnny added, "it was just to get out of painting."

Not knowing what else to do, Rudi turned and headed upstairs. But something stopped her—and this same something led her back into the main room and up to Patrick, who was painting a corner along with J. D.

"Hey," she uttered.

Smilingly, Patrick turned his paint-splattered face toward her and uttered back in kind.

"Would you like some help?" she asked.

"Sure," he answered, before pointing across the room at some supplies. "Grab a roller."

Rudi nodded and headed over there, with Patrick grinning at J. D., who just shook his head in dismay.

WHILE MOST OF the brothers put only a few hours into painting, Rudi worked the entire day. She even enjoyed it, especially as it somehow made her forget all her worries.

"Calculus is just killing me," suddenly came the voice of Tom, the boy with glasses who hit on Rudi that first night of school.

Slowly, Rudi turned to her left and saw him a short distance away talking to Chuck.

"There's no way I'm gonna pass," he went on, while shaking his head. "No fucking way."

"What's killing you?" Rudi asked.

Tom responded by turning to her in surprise and saying, "What?"

"What in calculus is killing you?" she reiterated.

"Everything."

"Give me a for instance."

"Partial fractions, for instance."

"Yeah, they're a bitch."

"Tell me about it."

"But there really are only three variations of problems. So, you can train yourself to solve them, even if you don't understand them."

"Yeah?"

"I could show you later if you want."

"Really?"

“Sure.”

Tom smiled at this, and at her. Though not far away J. D. was doing anything but smiling. He still didn’t like Rudi, and it angered him that he was the only one who didn’t like her.

BY THE END of the day only Rudi and J. D. were still painting, and he was still painting only because he didn’t want to stop painting before she did.

Suddenly, the two turned to each other and glared. Though the glare wasn’t as strong as it was before, no matter how hard the two tried to make it so. Then, just as suddenly, Dennis, who was wearing a red-and-blue tie and a white dress shirt, entered both the house and the room—and he grinned at the two of them.

“Nice of you to show up, *brother*,” J. D. remarked with a sneer.

“Family before pleasure,” Dennis remarked back with a smirk. Which J. D. didn’t appreciate—and he tossed his roller into a nearby tray prior to storming out of the room.

“What’s his problem?” Rudi whispered to Dennis.

“He just needs to get laid,” Dennis whispered back. “Never mind his growl—he’s actually the nicest guy in the house.”

“Get out of here.”

“It’s the truth. I’m telling you I’d throw myself in front of a speeding car for him. Or at least a small tricycle.”

Rudi chuckled at this—and Dennis kissed her cheek.

“You’re gonna get paint all over yourself,” she afterward told him, before picking up a small towel and using it to wipe his lips. Which was just before she added, “So, what was the family emergency?”

"To my father," Dennis replied, "everything is a family emergency. Of course, if everything is an emergency, nothing is."

"But what was it about?"

"*This*," Dennis told her while rubbing his fingers. "That's what it's always about. He needed my mother and I for a photo op so he could get money from some people, or to funnel money back into our district. Or both. It's a never-ending cycle."

"It sounds like I had more fun painting," Rudi said.

"How long have you been painting?" Dennis said back.

"A while."

"And *why* are you painting?"

"I don't need a reason."

WITH A PARTY for the new pledges roaring in the freshly painted main room, Rudi entered and saw Chuck standing by himself, looking longingly at a woman across the way—a woman who was speaking to a friend.

"Well?" Rudi said to him, as she stopped beside him.

"Well what?" he said back.

"Talk to her."

"What if she's not interested?"

"What if she is?"

"Still . . ."

"Go on," she told him, before giving him a small push—one that almost knocked him off his feet.

Though once he regained his balance he turned to Rudi with great trepidation—and she reacted to this by waving him forward with both hands. And he reluctantly complied.

Rudi then turned around, and she saw Nick standing next to her, with a pledge pin on the jacket of his suit—

something she grinned at. She also told him: "So, you did it."

"I just hope I won't regret it," he told her back, with lots of doubt on his face.

"You won't. I've been told by very reliable sources that they don't haze at all. Quite the contrary."

"I see a pledge without a beer!" Patrick jokingly called out from not far away.

"I think they're calling your name," Rudi murmured.

"All right," he murmured back before heading toward Patrick and his ever-welcoming smile.

Just then, Dennis grabbed Rudi by the arm, and he led her onto the dance floor, where they slow-danced to Chaka Khan's "Through the Fire"—a song that seemed to have been written about them and for them—and only for them. And, even when the next song came on—one much faster—the two continued slow-dancing, and continued listening to Chaka's velvety voice.

LATE THAT SAME night Rudi was awoken by a sound.

At first, she didn't know what it was or where it came from, but she quickly realized it was the sound of people arguing.

Soon after this—while wearing an oversized jersey—she got out of bed and walked over to the window of the attic. There she saw two guys from a neighboring fraternity picking on Nick a short distance from the house—and, when they pushed him to the ground, she ran down the stairs, acting purely on instinct. And—with this very same instinct—she ran out of the house and hollered, "Leave him alone!"

For a few moments, the two men didn't react, but, when Rudi started marching toward them with her fists clenched, one of them said to the other: "Hey, that's that

psycho chick.”

Rudi’s reputation—ever since the incident with Brad and Pete—had grown to the point that many at the school—including these two—truly believed she had killed two guys with her bare hands. So, they ran off as fast as they could, with Rudi shouting, “You fuck with Sigma Nu, you fuck with me!”

Before long, she reached Nick, who was a bit bruised and very drunk, and she brought him to his feet. Then, she walked him back toward the house—and, as they approached the front stoop, a handful of brothers came running out and helped the boy inside. Which was just before J. D. rushed outside carrying a big baseball bat.

Once again, he and Rudi glared at each other. But J. D.’s glare soon turned into a grudging smile, and a nod of his head. And though Rudi tried hard not to return his smile, she did so anyway.

AFTER THE INCIDENT outside the house, Rudi was greeted by smiles and affection by every brother she encountered, including J. D.

For a while this disconcerted her a little, but as the days and weeks went on and this continued, she slowly came to enjoy it—and them. She even became something of a den mother—always there to help anyone out, whether it was with girls, homework, or just the complexities of life. She also came to love every boy there—including J. D., who no longer minded when she sat in his big white chair.

ONE SUNDAY NIGHT, while the brothers were having their weekly meeting, Rudi was lying on her bed listening to a tape Dennis had made for her when someone knocked at the entrance to the attic.

"Come in," she said, after removing her headphones—and Dennis walked up with a strange smile on his face.

"What's up?" she asked, a bit suspiciously.

"Can you come downstairs for a minute?" he asked back.

"The meeting's over already?"

"No. That's why we need you to come downstairs."

"What are you talking about?"

"Come on down, Rudi Weiss," he called out, as he emphatically waved her toward the ladder with both arms.

She sighed, but eventually she got off the bed and followed Dennis down the stairs and into the main room, where all the brothers were congregated, with the same strange smiles Dennis had.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

"Just now there was a motion on the floor," Patrick replied, before winking at J. D., who blushed just a little.

"What kind of motion?" Rudi inquired.

"As you probably can imagine," Patrick continued, "only men can become brothers here. It's actually written in the bylaws. But we checked and there's nothing in these same bylaws about women becoming honorary brothers. And, by unanimous consent, that's what you've just become."

"What?" Rudi muttered, not certain how to react to this. She wasn't even certain whether it was something good or bad.

All of a sudden, J. D. stood up holding a large gift-wrapped box, and he said to her: "This is for you. We all chipped in, even me."

"What is it?" she uttered, still in a state of disbelief.

"Get your ass over here and find out," he uttered

back.

Hesitantly, she walked over to J. D. and took the box—and, just as hesitantly, she unwrapped and opened it, exposing a yellow Sigma Nu jersey with her name stitched on the back.

“I sure hope you guys weren’t expecting me to wear this,” she told them, with a big happy smile on her face.

“Put it on!” they started chanting. “Put it on! Put it on!”

“All right,” she finally relented, and she placed her arms inside the garment.

“You have to take your T-shirt off first,” Johnny quipped—to the laughter of everyone in the room, including Rudi, who then quipped back, “Dream on, brother.”

Afterward, she put on the jersey and struck a reluctant pose—to the cheers of all her brothers, including J. D., who further wrapped one of his big arms around her and gave her an equally big kiss on the head.

Chapter Forty-Three

FRIDAY NIGHT RUDI walked down the stairs to find a large group of her brothers standing in the foyer, along with all the pledges.

"What's up?" she asked, as she came to a stop on the bottom step.

"We're taking the pledges out to Beefsteak Charlie's," Dennis replied, with one of his smiles. "All the ribs and shrimp you can eat—and all the beer, wine, and sangria you can drink."

"Well, have fun."

"You're coming, of course."

"Dennis, you know I'm a vegetarian—and you know I don't drink."

"They've got a great salad bar," he retorted, after grabbing her arm—"and you can get soda, too."

"No," she emphatically retorted back, for lots of reasons—the restaurant's menu being the very least.

"It's your brotherly duty," he told her while dragging her toward the door.

"Dennis!" she cried out.

"You hardly ever leave the house."

"And you know why," she whispered.

"Nothing's gonna happen with us around," he whispered back.

"Yeah, I'm sure they'll be real frightened of you."

Ignoring this, Dennis kept pulling her.

"At least let me get my coat and cap," she insisted.

"You don't need any coat or cap," he insisted back—"it's warm out."

“But . . .”

Right then, the wave of men behind her pushed her forward. Though they also kept her well hidden in the moonless night.

AS THE MULTITUDE crossed the park facing the White House Rudi saw something that made her pause.

It was a half-dozen homeless men in the distance—men she knew well, and she wanted to say hello to them. However, she was afraid of exposing herself, and then Dennis put his arm around her and forced her ahead.

WHILE THE GUYS were finishing their first servings of baby back ribs and their third round of beer pitchers, Rudi returned with her second helping of “rabbit food,” as J. D. called it.

Grudgingly, she had to admit Dennis had been right—the salad bar was good. She also had to admit that she was happy she had come—and happy to be around everyone. But she really became happy when she sat down and started nibbling on a carrot while noticing Dennis staring at her from across the table—staring as if what she was doing were the most special thing in the world. She not only smiled at this, but felt warm everywhere—and this feeling only increased when he leaned over the table and whispered into her ear: “You make the world spin.”

Playfully, she pushed him away, even though this was the last thing she wanted—and afterward she forced herself to turn away from his grin. Which is when she saw all the gluttony around her—something that made her grimace and feel a bit nauseous. That is, until an idea popped into her head—an idea that led her back to the salad bar, where she got two large plates.

On one she piled cold shrimp from a huge bowl in the center of the bar, and, after taking it and the other plate back to the table, she stole a rib from every guy nearby and put it on the empty dish.

Seeing this, Dennis figured it was just some form of protest. But she kept doing it as further helpings of ribs came, until there was a mountain of meat in front of her—and he finally asked, “What are you doing with all that?”

“You’ll see,” she answered, just as the waiter brought a sixth order of ribs to many at the table—an order the man stated would be their last.

“Whoa,” J. D. uttered, as he wiped his big greasy chin with the back of his hand—“it’s supposed to be all you can eat!”

“The manager didn’t even want me to give you these,” the waiter uttered back. “No one’s ever had more than four orders. Not even the sumo wrestlers that were here last month.”

“What a rip-off!”

“Don’t mind his growl,” Rudi interjected—“he’s actually a sweetheart. Just bring us the check. And do you think I could have a doggy bag?”

“Sorry,” the waiter replied, with a shake of his head—“no doggy bags allowed on all-you-can-eat.”

Rudi replied by motioning the man toward her, and he leaned forward—after which she whispered something into his ear—something that stunned him. And he whispered back, “I’ll see what I can do.”

A short time later, the man returned with the check. Then, just as he was about to walk off, he looked around in all directions before handing Rudi a large insulated bag—one that had been hidden between his hand and the tray.

“Keep it out of sight,” he murmured. “Or it’ll be my job.”

“I promise,” Rudi murmured back, as he took off.

“That asshole’s getting a shitty tip,” J. D. remarked seconds later.

“Oh, no he isn’t,” Rudi remarked back. “You’re giving him the biggest one you’ve ever given.”

“And if we don’t?”

“You won’t like it if I have to stand up.”

J. D. responded with a flood of laughter—laughter that seemed would never stop. Though, when it finally did, he himself paid the entire tip. A huge one.

AS THE MULTITUDE left the restaurant Rudi hid amongst the men so the manager wouldn’t see what she was carrying—and, once they reached the park across from the White House, Rudi told her brothers: “I’ll be right back.” Then, even though she knew it would expose her, she marched off toward the homeless men with the doggy bag.

“Where you going?” Dennis asked, as soon as he realized where she was heading.

“I’ll be right back,” she repeated.

“You want some of us to go with you?” he called out, with lots of concern in his voice.

“No,” she called back.

“You sure?”

“I’ve never been surer of anything.”

Soon, Rudi reached the men, who were shocked to see her.

“Rudi?” they all uttered, more or less in unison.

“Hi, guys,” she said with a gentle smile.

“What happened to you?” one of the men asked.

“I got into some bad shit,” she replied. “I’m still in it

actually.”

“We were looking for you.”

“I know—and you don’t know how much that means to me.”

“Whatcha got there?” another man inquired, while pointing at her bag—the smell of which was intoxicating him.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you guys about,” Rudi told him. “Actually, I have a big favor to ask.”

“What’s that?”

“You see, I was just at this restaurant, and some jerks ordered this gigantic meal and then split before it came. And they were just gonna throw it all away.”

“Really? What kind of meal?”

“Oh, I don’t know—ribs and shrimp, I think. Anyway, I was wondering if you guys might be able to find someone who’d like it.”

“We, we might be able to help.”

“Thank you so much!” Rudi cried out, before giving the man a hug and a kiss on the cheek—something that made him blush a bit. She afterward handed him the bag and said, “I’ll see you guys soon.”

“You better. We miss you.”

“I miss you, too.”

Rudi subsequently started backing up, and, after turning around, she returned to the multitude, who looked as if the air had just been knocked out of them.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Dessert’s not agreeing with us,” Dennis answered.

“What dessert?”

“A big piece of humble pie.”

“You guys should be proud of yourselves,” she told them, prior to pointing at the homeless men in the distance, who were clearly enjoying the food. “Look at all

the people you fed. I bet there aren't many fraternity guys who can say that tonight."

"But tomorrow," Dennis muttered—"tomorrow they'll be hungry again."

"You know," Patrick interjected, "you see these people all over the place. They're literally everywhere you go. And we just ignore them. If they were cats or dogs we'd help, but because they're human beings we just ignore them."

"If you'd like to do more . . ." Rudi began.

"Actually," Patrick replied, "we've been looking for a community project."

"I know just the thing."

Rudi then put her arms around Dennis and Patrick, and, as everyone walked home, she told them her idea.

AFTER THE MULTITUDE got back to the house, Rudi and Dennis watched TV together late into the evening in the darkened main room—with her leg on top of his and their faces glowing—and their hands in constant search of one another.

However, as midnight approached, he stretched his arms and said, "Well, we have a big day tomorrow."

"Yeah," she said back, before the two stood and headed up the stairs hand-in-hand.

As they made their way, Rudi couldn't help wish Dennis would ask her to spend the night. She wished hard. But instead, when they got to his door, he asked her something else. He asked her if she was planning on attending the White Rose formal the following weekend.

"It's gonna be at the Willard Hotel," he told her, "not far from where we were tonight."

"That's not for me, Dennis," she told him back, with an emphatic shake of her head. "It's not me, period."

"The thing is I need a date."

"Something tells me you won't have a hard time finding one."

"Maybe, but there's only one girl I want to go with."

"You'll make do. You always do."

"Is that so? Tell me, have you seen me with another girl since we met?"

This statement sounded so preposterous to Rudi that she sneered at Dennis. But, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't think of even one woman she had seen him with. Though this gave her no comfort, as she suddenly realized that caring about her that much was dangerous.

"I better go to bed," she uttered, while pointing toward the ladder. "We have a big day tomorrow." She afterward turned around and headed off.

"Just think about it," he called out.

"I don't even have a dress," she called back. "And I'm not getting one, either."

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, as Reverend Samson returned to the mission after an interfaith breakfast, he was stunned to see a dozen young men on his roof repairing it.

He was so stunned that he thought he was witnessing a vision—and this made him recall the last visions he experienced.

Don't take the brown acid.

These were the infamous words—more or less—of the announcer at Woodstock—words that came just a few minutes too late as far as Samson was concerned. Though the terrible trip that ensued made him rethink his life, and its purpose, which eventually led him to where he was standing at the moment.

Suddenly, the mission doors swung open and Rudi

exited wearing her wool cap and sunglasses, and carrying both a white pail filled with liquid and a stack of plastic cups.

“Rudi!” the minister yelled with great joy, as he spread open his arms.

With lots of happiness herself, Rudi put down the pail and the cups, and she rushed into the man’s arms and hugged him.

“You don’t know how worried we were about you,” he whispered.

“I know,” she whispered back with a smile. “I know.”

He then broke their embrace and uttered, “Are you okay?”

“Better,” she replied, prior to pointing at her brothers and saying, “Well, you’re finally getting your roof fixed.”

“I should’ve known your hand was in this. Man, it’s just like what I said before, one day all of GW will be helping in my mission.”

“It’s just one fraternity,” Rudi retorted.

“A *fraternity*?” Samson retorted back, with so much shock that he almost tipped over. After which he added, “That’s even more amazing.”

“That’s them.”

Slowly, the minister turned to the young men on his roof and he called out, “Can I get you boys something?”

“Beeeeeeerrrr!” Johnny called back from his knees, with a big mallet in his hand.

Everyone around Johnny laughed, but Patrick glowered at him, before turning to Samson and saying, “Sorry about that, Reverend.”

“That’s quite all right, son,” the minister replied, with a bit of a chuckle. “I was your age not that long ago.”

“How about some lemonade instead?” Rudi interjected, as she picked up both the pail and the cups.

Chapter Forty-Four

SUNDAY EVENING MARIA visited Rudi in the attic, and, when she saw the Sigma Nu jersey her friend was wearing, she almost fell backward down the ladder.

Noticing Maria's surprise, Rudi proudly turned her body, so her friend could see the name stitched on the back. Actually, she was so proud of what her brothers had done at the mission the day before that she promised herself she'd wear the jersey every week until it fell apart—and maybe even afterward.

"Oh, my God!" Maria cried out. "I can't fucking believe it!"

"I think this proves anything is possible," Rudi replied, both unable and unwilling to hide her smile.

"So, it's true?" Maria uttered. "I thought people were joking when they said you joined."

"It's sorta true," Rudi uttered back.

"Wow, if only the 17-year-old version of yourself could take a time machine and see you at this moment. She would explode."

"Have I changed that much?"

Maria responded by taking Rudi's hand and telling her: "In none of the important ways."

The two then sat down on the broken-down couch and Maria attempted to hand Rudi some cash.

"I have enough," Rudi insisted while waving her off. "More than enough."

"Mrs. Goodwin keeps sending me tons of money," Maria insisted back. "What should I do with it?"

"Just keep it for now," Rudi told her. "I'll give it back

to her as soon as this is over.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Maria said, as she returned the cash to her pants pocket, “I finally got hold of my uncle.”

“And?” Rudi asked, with a bit of hope.

“It turns out I was wrong. This Miskitia isn’t a new country. It’s actually an old one.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was a kingdom about a hundred years ago. But now it’s part of Nicaragua.”

“Nicaragua?”

“You know, the country where they’re fighting that civil war. My uncle says that Miskitia is one of the areas supporting the Contras. They’re the ones fighting the government.”

“Strange,” Rudi muttered.

“What?” inquired Maria.

“How come I couldn’t find anything about it in the library?”

“It was probably listed under its English name, Mosquito.”

“I don’t know if this helps me at all,” Rudi said with a bit of a sigh.

“Sorry,” Maria said back.

“Who could these guys be?”

Maria shrugged.

“I’ve known of a lot of drug dealers,” Rudi went on, “but I’ve never heard of a single one from Nicaragua.”

“What about the White Rose?” Maria asked, hoping to change the subject.

“What about it?” Rudi asked back.

“Are you going?”

“Are you kidding? Me at some formal dance? Look, I haven’t changed that much.”

“Dennis has been asking me all sorts of questions.”

“What kind of questions?”

“I’m not saying.”

Chapter Forty-Five

A SHORT BUT solidly built man in his thirties warily approached a junkie, who was leaning up against a mailbox and looking only half alive.

Undeterred by Rudi's insistence that she could solve her problems herself, Mrs. Goodwin not only didn't call off the private investigator but redoubled her efforts by hiring a second firm—which, in turn, sent this short but solidly built man down to Washington. The man, whose name was Collins, had been there now more than two weeks without turning up anything. He actually had come up with only one clue—from a DEA agent who once worked for Collins' boss at the FBI—an agent who hooked him up with a man who was working undercover in the area and had seen someone matching Rudi's description at a notorious crack house. Though, when Collins went to this house, the colorfully dressed man running the place—a man with a toothy smile—asserted he had never seen anyone like Rudi. Which was kind of the truth.

The truth was also Collins was getting desperate—and not just because his boss was pressuring him for results. He was further tired of living out of a hotel—and he missed his family, especially his newborn son. So, he was willing to try anything. He even followed Maria for a few days—and was now approaching a random junkie. And, after taking out a picture of Rudi, he said to the man: "Have you seen her?"

At first, the man didn't reply, but when Collins asked again, he muttered, "What do you want?"

Collins responded by asking a third time, and he was just about to walk away when the junkie said, "Maybe."

"What maybe?" Collins asked.

"There's something in my eyes."

Collins smirked, right before taking out a roll of cash and peeling off a twenty, which he handed to the junkie, who replied, "I have two eyes."

Again, Collins smirked, and he gave him another twenty—knowing it wasn't his money anyway.

The junkie then looked at the picture, and though he didn't recognize the girl in it, he recognized her description—and he also recognized a huge potential payday. And, while leaping at this opportunity, he uttered, "I'm pretty sure her name is Rudi."

Instantly, Collins' jaw unhinged—something that caused the junkie to smile. He even rose off the ground a bit.

"See," he afterward said, "that forty dollars was a bargain."

"Where can I find her?" Collins demanded.

"That's gonna cost you a lot more, friend."

"How about I just beat it out of you?"

"That won't help. It won't because I don't know where she is right this minute. But I do know a couple of guys who do. And I'll set it up, for the right price."

"How much?"

"A grand."

"I'll give you a hundred."

"Five hundred."

"Two-fifty."

"All right," the junkie said, prior to reaching out his hand.

"You'll get the money when I see the girl," Collins told him.

“All right. Come back tonight.”

“Here?”

“No, in that house over there,” the junkie replied, while pointing the way. “That’s where I live.”

Warily, Collins turned in the direction of the man’s finger and saw a condemned building—one of many like it in town, and, while thinking of his newborn son, he said, “No way.”

“Here’s fine then. I’ll have them come here at nine tonight.”

COLLINS ARRIVED AT the mailbox at a quarter to nine.

There was no one around, so he took the time to check his pistol, and check it again. But even well past nine there was still no sign of the junkie—or anyone else. And something told him to get out of there while he still could. But, because he already promised his boss he had a hot lead, he instead waited some more. He waited until he heard a voice call out, “Hey!”

Collins responded by spinning around, and he saw the junkie on the front stoop of the condemned building waving him over there.

“I said, no!” Collins hollered. “I’m not going in there.”

“She’s inside,” the junkie insisted.

“Who?”

“Rudi!”

“Tell her to come out.”

“She can’t. She can’t come anywhere. And she doesn’t look too good.”

Collins sighed, but, after feeling the holster beneath his jacket, he reluctantly approached the building—and, even more reluctantly, he walked up the steps and into

the house, which was illuminated somewhat by light from the street, which poured in through both the open door and the house's broken windows. Then, he entered the foyer, and the junkie greeted him with a smile.

"Where is she?" growled Collins.

"This way," the junkie replied, while pointing deeper inside the building.

Collins, though, didn't move. He just paused in thought. He paused a long time.

"Come on," the junkie pleaded—and eventually Collins followed him further, just as the front door of the house slammed closed.

With lots of fright, Collins spun around, and he saw the larger goon inching his way toward them—while placing a pair of brass knuckles over his fingers. So, Collins reached inside his jacket for his gun. But, at the same time, he felt a piece of cold metal pressing against his temple—and the shorter goon told him: "I wouldn't do that."

"Shit," Collins murmured, with his thoughts only on a baby boy fast asleep in New Jersey. "Fucking shit."

IN THE EARLY hours of the morning the two goons left the condemned building.

Unfortunately for them, Collins knew almost as little about Rudi's whereabouts as they did. Though they were still able to glean one small but possibly significant clue: the name of a certain girl and where she lived. Along with this information, they also had a photograph Collins once possessed—one given to his boss by Mrs. Goodwin. A photograph of Maria and Sandra from Rudi's wedding.

Chapter Forty-Six

EARLY SATURDAY NIGHT Rudi was sitting alone in the main room watching TV when Chuck entered, wearing a tuxedo and holding the hand of a young woman in a light blue dress—the same young woman Rudi had pushed him toward during the party many weeks earlier. He also had a big grin on his face, which Rudi saw and smiled at, before saying, “How’s it going?”

“Incredible,” he muttered. “It’s going incredible.”

“I can see.”

“Are you coming tonight?”

“Nope.”

“Does Dennis know this?”

“If he doesn’t, he’ll figure it out soon.”

“All right. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow.”

The couple then skipped out of the house together, and Rudi returned her attention to the TV. But as the hour got later her thoughts were anywhere but on the screen. They were on a certain Ken doll.

She just assumed Dennis would’ve been begging her all day to go to the dance, but she hadn’t seen him at all—and she started wondering if he had perhaps taken her advice and asked someone else. And this infuriated her, in spite of herself.

Then, a little before eight, Dennis entered the house and walked up to the threshold of the main room in a T-shirt and jeans, while carrying a black garment bag over his left shoulder and a single white rose in his right hand. And he smiled at Rudi, who wouldn’t even look at him.

“So, who’s the lucky girl?” she growled, between her clenched jaws.

Dennis shrugged, prior to saying, “You probably don’t know her.”

This infuriated Rudi even more, and, with a face turning redder by the second, she spun toward Dennis and pointed at the garment bag—and barked, “That your tux?”

“No,” he answered, before unzipping the bag and exposing a strapless red gown—one that not only took Rudi’s breath away but just about everything else.

“You’re gonna look pretty funny wearing that tonight,” she mumbled, while numbly gazing at the dress.

“Ah,” he replied, “but you won’t.”

IN THE BALLROOM of the Willard Hotel almost everyone associated with Sigma Nu was on the dance floor—brothers, pledges, little sisters, and their dates—all swaying to Van Halen’s “Hot for Teacher.”

Suddenly, the doors to the hall swung open, and standing there was Dennis in a custom-tailored tuxedo, with Rudi grasping the white rose with one hand and Dennis’s arm with the other. She was also wearing both the strapless red gown and an embarrassed grin.

Seeing her like this, the entire room stopped dancing and gawked at her—and, when this finally wore off, they hooted and hollered and whistled at the two as Dennis led her inside.

“Let’s dance,” he told her.

“Not to this,” she pleaded, before coming to a stop on the edge of the dance floor.

“Not a big fan of Van Halen, eh?”

To this she gave him a look that said, “You’ve got to be joking”—and he turned to the DJ across the room

and raised his hand, before loudly snapping his fingers.

Smilingly, the DJ looked at Dennis, and then he scratched the needle across the record, prior to starting his other turntable. And “Heaven” began to play.

“You had this all planned out, didn’t you?” Rudi uttered, with a big smile.

“Guilty!” he uttered back, with an even bigger smile, as he took her hand and led her onto the dance floor, where—after she waved at Maria and Sandra—the two started slow-dancing.

“I have to admit,” she whispered to him, “you’ve worn me down.”

“You’ve worn me down, too,” he whispered back. “And I like it.”

She responded by gripping him tightly, and she continued smiling, unable to believe she was there, and that she was happy she was there—and with him. She was even happy about what she was wearing.

“I hope you know I don’t put on a dress for just anyone,” she murmured.

“I know,” he murmured back. “That’s the only thing that makes it special.”

Just then, he dipped her—causing her to shriek a little, and after lifting her up again he queried, “Did you notice anything special about this place?”

“It’s beautiful,” she replied, after looking up at all the glass chandeliers.

“Anything else?”

“I don’t know.”

“You know that it’s not just a ballroom.”

“It’s a hotel.”

“And you know what else it is?”

“What?”

“It’s not a fraternity house.”

He afterward took something out of his pants pocket and put it in her hand.

"What's this?" she asked as she felt a piece of metal.

"The key to the best room in the house," he answered. "It's up to you to decide what to do with it."

RUDI PUT THE key in the lock and tried to turn it, which wasn't so easy with Dennis holding her from behind and nibbling on her ear—making it difficult for her to concentrate on anything else.

Though she eventually got the door open, and the two jumped inside the Jenny Lind Suite, where Rudi became stunned, as the place looked like the royal quarters of some fairy tale, with furniture and fixtures that exceeded even the princess' apartment—and countless rooms abutting from everywhere.

"I had to book this place weeks in advance," Dennis told her, while enjoying the fact that he had finally impressed her.

"Like I said," she told him back, "you've worn me down."

"Wait till you see the rest of the place," he cried out, before grabbing her hand and dragging her further inside. Then, they went up a set a stairs—at the top of which was a circular window with a perfectly framed view of the Washington Monument.

"My . . ." Rudi gasped when she saw it.

But she didn't have much time to enjoy the sight, as Dennis kept dragging her through room after room until they reached a bedroom—one that had an immense, dome-like ceiling as well as a wrought-iron canopy bed. All of which made Rudi somehow even more stunned.

While smiling at this, Dennis released her hand and walked over to a silver bucket standing on a table by the

bed—and to the bottle cooling inside it.

Finally, Rudi came out of her stunned state, and, with her hands on her hips, she growled, “Dennis, you know I don’t drink.”

Dennis, though, just kept smiling, right before lifting a magnum of sparkling apple cider, which caused Rudi’s mouth to open so wide that he could have stuck the whole bottle inside it.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“I can’t believe it,” she mumbled.

“What can’t you believe?”

“That someone would go to so much trouble for me.”

“You’re worth every trouble there is, Rudi Weiss.”

Right then, she looked as if she were going to melt. But instead she rushed up to Dennis and leaped into his arms, and she began kissing him as hard as she could while feeling them both tremble. In spite of this, Dennis somehow managed to shake the bottle and pop its cork—sending cider splashing all over them.

“Aaaaahhhh!” she screamed with joy as the two became drenched—and she afterward pushed Dennis onto the bed and began mauling him. Though she quickly stopped when she noticed he wasn’t mauling her back.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered.

“I’m nervous, believe it or not,” he whispered back.

“Get out of here,” she uttered, even though she could see he was telling the truth. She could see this when she looked into his eyes.

“I’m serious,” he insisted. “I’ve never been this nervous, not even before my . . .”

“It’s gonna be beautiful,” she told him, before sweetly kissing his slightly shaking hand.

“You’re so beautiful,” he told her back.

“No.”

"You are. And every day you're somehow more beautiful."

Again, she looked into his eyes, and again saw that he meant it.

"I want this," he pleaded, "I want this to be my first time."

"It will be," she replied.

"Only you can make it happen."

The two soon kissed—slowly and surely, and yet desperately—and they removed each other's clothes in the same way. Then, while continuing their kisses, they caressed each other with their arms and legs and cheeks, and discovered every inch of themselves—sending both of them into an euphoric state that wouldn't cease to rise.

Finally, this state overloaded, and she felt his heart pounding against her—and hers replied in kind as if there were but one organ between them. And wanting them to be one everything, she rolled him on top of her, and, after wrapping her legs around his backside, she began slowly pushing him inside her.

"Oh," he muttered, while shivering all over from the impossible friction. Never had he felt such pleasure or even imagined it. He didn't even expect it, with his mind so focused on pleasing her.

As for Rudi, she tried to mutter something back, but she couldn't speak, or even see. All she could do was feel—feel his body becoming hers—and she wasn't even sure if the tremors she felt came from him or from somewhere inside of her. Nor did she care.

It wasn't long before he could move no farther. But this didn't stop the intensity of their coupling. It somehow only grew as they began to drown in each other.

"Go," she eventually mumbled, with her fingers clawing at his shoulders and her eyes stinging from both their

perspiration. "Go."

At first, he didn't move—he couldn't. He existed somewhere else. But her cries persisted and eventually something listened to them, and this something rose itself off her—only to plunge even further than before. Together, they shrieked and shook as if they had been shot with electricity—something that happened over and over with each plunge—and somehow even increased. And soon she could barely keep him on top of her.

"Rudi!" he bellowed through his quivering jaws. "I can't, I can't . . ."

"Go!" she yelled, with her nails now digging into the small of his back, after having left a trail of red all the way down his spine. "Go!"

Suddenly, he felt his whole body being torn apart, and the same force exploded into her—tearing her apart as well, prior to sending both them and the mattress tumbling to the floor.

Afterward, for a while they didn't move or talk or even breathe. They just were—and only for each other.

"Nothing's like this," he somehow murmured. "Nothing."

Desperately, she wanted to murmur something back—something that would express what she felt, and how she felt about him. But she knew no words could say it right. So, she just kissed him. She kissed him as sweetly as she did that night by his door, and she held him as tightly as she could. And she wouldn't let go.

Chapter Forty-Seven

WITH THE SUN slowly rising over Thurston Hall, the blue Mercedes sedan—which showed no signs of the battering Thelma gave it—parked in front.

For days now the two goons had been tailing Maria. Though she led them nowhere until the night before when they saw Rudi and Dennis enter the Willard Hotel about an hour after Maria had with Sandra. Which was a sight that had surprised them, as they had been expecting a junkie and not some princess clad in red. For many seconds they weren't even sure if it were the same person.

Then, once they were, they weren't certain what to do, as Rudi wasn't wearing the overcoat. So, they conferred with Eduardo over the car's phone—and did so again multiple times during the night and the early morning.

Finally, Eduardo came up with a plan—one they were just about to execute. To this end—right after Sandra exited the dorm and started jogging—the larger goon got out of the car and entered the building's lobby, where he saw a security guard snoozing nearby.

The goon smiled at this and started forward.

"Can I help you?" suddenly asked the guard, upon waking.

At once, the goon stopped, before turning to the man—after which he smiled once again and said, "Yes, I'm going to see my cousin Maria. Maria Gonzalez. She lives up in unit 931. Many times I have been here before."

The guard responded by looking over the goon, and,

finding him a plausible cousin for a Maria Gonzalez—and wanting to go back to his snooze—waved the man through.

MARIA WAS WATCHING television alone in her room when she heard a soft knock.

Quickly, she got up and walked over to the door and opened it, exposing the goon, who was sweating and breathing hard—the result of having run up the stairs.

“Can I help you?” she asked, with a bit of bewilderment.

“Are you Maria—Rudi’s friend?” the goon asked back.

“Yes.”

“My name is Juan. I work at the Willard Hotel. Perhaps you know it.”

“I was there last night.”

“Well, your friend Rudi has been in a terrible accident.”

“My God!” Maria gasped. “What happened?”

“Some crazy men with guns—two of them—they shot her.”

“Oh . . .”

“Please come with me. She begged me to find you. She wants to see you before it’s too late.”

Chapter Forty-Eight

RUDI AWOKED WITH the soft light of the sun streaming through the windows of the dome-like ceiling. She also awoke with a smile—one that seemed the natural state of her face.

Right then, she was still clutching Dennis, and he was still clutching her—and they were both still on the floor, along with the mattress. Though, after she noticed the strong odor of apple cider everywhere—especially on herself—she gently removed his arms, and, with great difficulty, she rose to her unsteady feet. Then, with even greater difficulty, she headed off in search of a bathroom.

Eventually, she found one—one with another circular window, which had another magnificent view of the Monument. And there she took a long shower while recalling every moment she had spent with Dennis—not just the night before, but from the night she met him. Even the bad moments she didn't mind, as they now seemed like necessary pieces of a complex puzzle that couldn't be solved otherwise.

She was in love, she knew—even though it was impossible, and, just as importantly, she was alive. With this realization, she turned off the water and heard the sound of another shower, somewhere off in the distance. And, after drying herself off and putting on a white robe, she went looking for this other bathroom—and, when she finally found it, she stepped inside and saw the key to the room by the sink.

“Hey!” she called out.

“Hey!” he called back, from behind a stained-glass

shower curtain.

“You okay?”

“No. And I’ll never be okay again.”

“That seems to be going around.”

“Come on—get in here!” he howled.

“I just took a shower,” she replied.

“Take another one!”

“We’ll never get out of here.”

“So?”

“I’m gonna get dressed,” she told him, knowing if she didn’t leave at this very moment there was no hope of ever doing so—and, after grabbing the key off the sink, she added, “I’ll check us out and meet you downstairs.”

“*Rudi!*” he pleaded.

“We can continue this back home.”

“Yeah?”

“If you have the strength.”

“I’ll find it!”

“I just hope I can find the exit.”

RUDI WAS STILL smiling when she got off the elevator in the red dress and looked toward the front desk.

A small line of people were waiting there, including Johnny and Rich, who were near the end of the queue and engaged in a quiet conversation. And she rushed up to them, stopping behind an elderly man who was standing in back of the two. Then—before she could even say hello—she heard Rich say something that made her pause.

“I guess we’re gonna have to pay up,” he murmured to Johnny.

“Yup,” Johnny murmured back.

“We almost made it. If she could’ve just held out for another month or so. Shit, what’s it been now—six

months?”

“Seven, I think. But let this be a lesson to us: if the great and omnipotent Dennis Winston says he’s gonna nail someone, he’s gonna nail someone.”

Subsequently, the two fell silent, and they stayed that way as Rudi boiled behind them, with everything at once becoming clear to her.

Dennis never loved her, she now knew—or even liked or respected her. It was all just a big joke to him, and she was the biggest joke of them all.

Suddenly, the elevator door opened and Dennis exited.

Right away, he saw Rudi near the front desk, and he called out, “Rudicakes!”

This word caused Johnny and Rich—in near unison—to slowly turn their heads, and they saw both Rudi and her fury.

“Oh, shit,” Rich mumbled.

Ignoring both this remark and them, Rudi spun around, and—while brandishing her fists—she angrily marched toward Dennis, whose smile quickly disappeared.

“What’s wrong?” he gasped, as soon as she stopped in front of him.

Her response was the flinging of the key at his feet.

“I don’t understand,” he uttered.

“I don’t have silver to give you,” she howled—“let alone thirty pieces of it!”

“What are you talking about?”

“How much?”

“How much what?”

“How much did you win for fucking me?”

“I . . .” Dennis muttered, before looking over at Johnny and Rich by the front desk, who both had guilty

and embarrassed expressions. "I can explain."

"No, you can't!"

Rudi then spun around and stormed off, and Dennis rushed off after her—and he grabbed her shoulder while crying out, "Please, Rudi—"

"—Get off me!" she cried back, before taking hold of his arm and flipping him over her onto a heavy wooden coffee table—sending it and him smashing to the floor.

At once, excruciating pain shot through his back. But this was nothing in comparison to watching the girl he loved rush out of the hotel.

"Rudi!" he screamed, while clutching his spine. "Rudi!"

RUDI'S ANGER HADN'T abated a bit by the time she returned to the fraternity house. Nor did it abate after she ran upstairs and tore the red dress off her body.

Just then, as she stewed—feeling both humiliated and disgusted at herself—she decided she was moving out immediately, even if she still had nowhere to go.

"Rudi!" a boy suddenly called out from downstairs. "You have a phone call!"

"I'll be down in a minute!" Rudi hollered, before hurriedly putting on a T-shirt and jeans. She afterward grabbed the remains of the dress and headed down the ladder—and, after throwing the garment at Dennis's door, she rushed down the stairs and yanked the receiver from the pay phone before howling, "Yeah?"

"They got Maria!" Sandra howled back.

"What?" Rudi muttered, with all her hate dissipating instantly.

"They said they're gonna kill her!" Sandra went on.

"Slow down!" Rudi yelled. "Start from the beginning."

"I, I . . . when I came back from my run this morning the phone was ringing. And some guy said they had Maria and that they would kill her if you don't give them back some overcoat."

"Overcoat?"

"What's going on, Rudi?"

"I don't know."

"Should we call the police? They told me not to."

"Where do they want me to bring it?"

"They said there's an old warehouse on 1st and N Street, Southeast."

"All right."

"They said by noon."

"All right! I'll be there!"

"Rudi, if anything happens to her . . ."

"Nothing's gonna happen to her!"

With a mixture of fury and fright, Rudi hung up—and she raced up to the attic. She raced even faster than she had minutes earlier. Then, after she found the overcoat, she carefully looked it over.

"No one kills over a coat," she told herself, before starting to feel around the garment, without finding anything unusual. Afterward, she searched through every pocket, but there was nothing but the junk she herself had put there. Finally, she checked the lining, and, in the back of the coat near the bottom, she felt something—and she ripped the fabric away. Under which she found a printed document—a bill of lading for nearly two million barrels of Iranian oil. Which was something she shook her head at, not understanding it at all.

DENNIS WAS STILL clutching his aching back when he entered the house.

But he tried not to think about it. He tried to focus

on the only thing that mattered—and he kept trying to do this as he limped up the steps toward Rudi.

Finally, he reached the third floor, and he saw the red dress in front of his door—and, as fast as he could, he rushed down the hallway and up the ladder. After which he saw Rudi staring at a piece of paper.

“Rudi, you gotta—” he began.

“—Do you know what this is?” she interrupted, while holding up the document.

“What?”

“I asked you a fucking question!”

Quickly, he stumbled toward her, and took the paper—and, after glancing at it, he said, “It, it’s a bill of lading.”

“I can fucking read!” Rudi barked. “What does it mean?”

“It’s kind of like a receipt,” he replied, before again glancing at the document. “For oil, in this case.”

“Why would it be so important to someone?”

“I . . .” Dennis mumbled as he looked over the document a bit more carefully.

Soon, shock crossed his face—something Rudi noticed.

“What is it?” she screamed.

“Rudi,” he gasped, “this, this is a negotiable instrument.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s like a bearer bond. This piece of paper by itself could be worth . . . I don’t know—it could be worth tens of millions. What are you doing with it?”

Suddenly, Rudi understood. She understood almost everything—and she grabbed the document from Dennis’s hand and said, “I need to borrow your car. Right now.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

THE ELDORADO SPED down Pennsylvania Avenue, with Rudi sitting in the front passenger seat with her arms crossed and her right hand clutching the bill of lading.

"You didn't have to come with me," she growled.

"Nobody drives this car but me," Dennis growled back, with one hand on the steering wheel and the other on his spine. "Nobody."

Rudi didn't reply. She just turned her head away from him.

"I guess," he uttered, "I guess there's no point in saying I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you just fuck me," she mumbled, even though this was the last thing she wanted to think about.

"What?"

Furiously, she spun her head toward Dennis and howled, "Why didn't you just fuck me at that stupid Christmas party? You've had lots of other chances, too. What were you waiting for?"

"By then," he muttered, "by then the bet meant nothing to me. I know—you have no reason to believe me, but it's true. It meant nothing—no matter how hard I tried to make believe it did. It, it was all just stupid bravado anyway. Everyone thinks I'm some kind of god, but the truth is I'm as insecure as everyone else. That's probably why I've slept with so many girls—just to prove I really was that god everyone thinks I am. But I can tell you this didn't make me any less lonely—only more so. Only with you am I not alone."

Slowly, Rudi lowered her head.

“Please, Rudi,” he pleaded.

“I believe you,” she softly told him, after a long deep breath. “I don’t know why I do but I do.”

“Rudi—”

“—Look, I have to deal with this first.”

“What is this?”

“Just get me there.”

“This address—it’s in a really dangerous area.”

“I don’t fucking care! It’s not the address I’m afraid of!”

“Rudi, you’re scaring me.”

“Just drive faster!”

THE ELDORADO CAME to a stop in front of an immense warehouse—one that was crumbling apart. It also had a gate that was open just a bit.

Right then, Rudi reached for her door, and Dennis reached for his, too—and he said to her: “I’m going with you.”

“No, you’re not,” she said back. “Just go home.”

“I won’t!”

With lots of exasperation, Rudi thought for a few seconds, prior to dropping the document onto her lap. After which she sighed and muttered, “All right.”

“We should really call the police,” he went on. “I saw a phone booth . . .”

Unfortunately, he couldn’t complete his sentence. He couldn’t because Rudi’s fist hit his chin, and he fell back against his door unconscious. Rudi afterward picked up the bill of lading and started to leave. Though she suddenly stopped. She stopped and kissed Dennis sweetly on his chin.

AS RUDI REACHED the entrance to the warehouse she folded the document into a square and put it in her back pocket. Then, she entered the darkened building.

"Hello?" she called out as she stepped farther inside. "Is anyone here? Maria?"

There was no reply, so she continued on, while calling out Maria's name every few seconds.

"Where is it?" abruptly came the accented voice of someone right behind her.

Rudi replied by spinning toward the voice, and she saw it belonged to the smaller of the two goons.

"Where's the coat?" he demanded.

"Where's Maria?" she demanded back.

Instead of answering, he grabbed her arms and hollered, "Give it to me!"

"Fine!" she hollered back, before kneeling him in the groin, causing him to collapse onto the ground gasping in pain.

"Where is she?" Rudi yelled.

"Fuck yourself," he mumbled, with his hands clutching his wound.

Suddenly, a fit of anger overtook her and she slammed her foot onto his head, pounding it against the concrete and knocking him out.

"Damn!" she then screamed, prior to calling out for Maria again—this time much louder than before.

"She's in here!" came another accented voice from far away—a voice that echoed throughout the building. And Rudi headed toward it.

DENNIS AWOKE, NOT certain what hurt more—his back, his chin, or his pride.

"Why couldn't I fall in love with a pacifist?" he muttered, before realizing Rudi was gone.

He then called out her name—and, when that accomplished nothing, he tumbled out of the car and onto the street, before raising himself up and stumbling toward the warehouse.

RUDI CAUTIOUSLY ENTERED a large empty hall that had many thick beams, which was lit by a handful of large holes in the ceiling that allowed the sun to seep inside.

Underneath one of these holes in the distance she spotted the larger goon, who had his big right arm around a frightened Maria, with his left hand covering her mouth. Rudi also saw a man standing next to them—a man she had never seen before, who was both calm looking and holding a gun.

“Funny,” Eduardo said, as Rudi steadily approached, “you don’t look like a crack whore.”

“Sometimes looks aren’t deceiving,” she replied.

“Where is our colleague?”

“He had an accident.”

“Accidents seem to happen a lot when you are around.”

“People should be more careful.”

“I will make certain that I am very careful.”

“Let her go,” Rudi told him, after coming to a stop a safe distance away—or, at least what she hoped was a safe distance.

“Where’s the coat?” Eduardo asked.

Rudi responded by taking out the folded-over document from her jeans, and she showed it to him while saying, “This is what you want, isn’t it?”

“Bring it here.”

“Let Maria go. Let her go and I’ll drop it.”

“Oh, you’ll drop it, all right.”

Eduardo then aimed and fired his gun, sending a bullet into the upper right corner of Rudi's chest.

HEARING A GUNSHOT, Dennis moved faster as well as deeper into the warehouse—and he soon came upon the unconscious goon.

He also noticed a bulge in the man's jacket—and, after pulling away the garment, he saw a holster, and the gun inside it. And, with great hesitation, he reached for the weapon.

WHILE RUDI GRIPPED her bleeding chest and tried to ignore the intense pain, Eduardo stood over her reading the bill of lading, with the goon by his side—holding a now frantic and teary-eyed Maria.

"It was nice doing business with you," the calm man soon said to Rudi, as he folded the document and put it in his inside jacket pocket.

"This has something to do with that stupid war, doesn't it?" she muttered.

"It has everything to do with it. You see, your congress—quite shortsightedly—decided to stop funding us."

"Us? You mean the Contras."

"Correct. So, we've had to get a little creative with the accounting. It's actually an amazing example of international cooperation. Your government secretly sells weapons to Iran so they can fight Iraq, and they in turn release Americans held hostage in Lebanon. And the proceeds of these sales go to us. Everyone wins. Well, everyone except you and your friend."

"What, what were you doing in a crack house?"

"Unfortunately, we've needed to find alternative sources of funding. But now, now we can get out of that

awful business.”

“The guy who died there . . .”

“That was my cousin Hector.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? You saved me a bullet, and for that I’m eternally grateful. I want you to know that we aren’t all like that scum and these two buffoons of mine. Most of us just want the same freedoms you have here. So, I do hope you don’t take this personal, because it’s not. Under different circumstances we might’ve even been friends.”

Right then, Eduardo raised his gun—and, as he did, Dennis tried to aim his own weapon from in back of a beam by the entrance to the hall. Which wasn’t easy with his hand shaking so much—shaking because all he could see were the big eyes of the doe—the one his father shot long ago.

Before long, Eduardo carefully aimed his gun at Rudi’s head, and she, in turn, looked up at the man with her fluttering eyes. But he wasn’t all she saw. She also saw Tommy standing behind him—and she called out his name.

Frightened by this, Eduardo spun around, without seeing anyone. Though, after faintly hearing something somewhere, he shouted, “Who’s there?”

“You’ve come for me,” Rudi murmured to Tommy, as she teetered on the precipice of unconsciousness, with the pain suddenly fading. She even smiled. She smiled at the thought of eternity with him. But Tommy just shook his head, and he afterward nodded toward the spot where Dennis stood with his shaking hand.

At the same time, Eduardo—after assuring himself there was no one around—once more pointed his gun at Rudi’s head, and he began to press down on the trigger. However, just before he could fire, a bullet flew at his

foot—causing him to jump back, and causing the scared goon next to him to raise a crying Maria in front of his body for protection. The man also pulled out a gun from his holster and fearfully pointed it, in no particular direction.

“Who are you?” Eduardo hollered.

“Someone who’s a dead shot from this distance,” Dennis hollered back—while using his left hand to keep his right one steady. He then added, “Which you’re gonna find out if you don’t drop your gun.”

Eduardo, though, didn’t do anything. He just thought over all the possible permutations of what could happen.

“You wouldn’t want me to start a countdown,” Dennis went on. “Because I’m real bad in math. I might just fire before I get to zero.”

Eduardo responded by carefully putting his gun on the ground, and he raised his hands in surrender.

“The asshole next to you, too!” Dennis continued. “Tell him to drop it!”

Eduardo nodded at the goon, who didn’t make any move to lower his weapon. So, Dennis shot him in the foot—and the man hollered in pain prior to releasing both his gun and Maria, who instantly fell upon her friend and hugged her.

“Rudi!” she cried out, with tears pouring down her face. “Rudi!”

“Now get out of here!” Dennis hollered at the two men.

But neither moved.

“Ten!” Dennis called out. “Seven . . . three . . .”

“All right!” Eduardo called back. “We’re going!” However, before he did, he looked down at Rudi and told her: “I can find you again. And your friends.”

“You won’t have to,” Rudi gasped, right before she

fell unconscious.

Eduardo nodded at her anyway—and marched off, followed by the limping goon.

AFTER EDUARDO AND the goon left the hall, Dennis rushed up to Rudi, who was still being held by Maria, who was still crying.

“Let me take her!” he cried out.

But Maria wouldn’t budge. So Dennis pushed her away and kneeled down to pick Rudi up—and he saw blood pouring out of her chest, just like what he had seen in the vision he had of her the night they met.

“She’s gonna die!” Maria howled.

“She’s not gonna die!” Dennis howled back, prior to lifting Rudi up.

THE ELDORADO SPED up Pennsylvania Avenue—much faster than it had sped down it.

Maria was driving, and Rudi was lying on Dennis’s lap in the front passenger seat, with Dennis trying to stem the flow of blood with the jacket of his tuxedo.

Since leaving the warehouse, Rudi had been coming in and out of consciousness, but by this time she had been out of it for more than a minute, and Dennis was becoming frantic.

“Come on, Rudi!” he yelled. Afterward, he turned to Maria and yelled at her. He yelled, “Faster! Fucking faster!”

“My foot is already on the floor!” she yelled back, as she wildly wove through traffic with tears pouring down her face.

“Then push it through the floor!”

Dennis then returned his attention to Rudi—and, not knowing what else to do—he started singing. He sang

Black Flag's "Rise Above"—a song that always pumped him up. But no matter how loud or passionately he sang it, Rudi was just as lifeless.

"Goddammit, Rudi!" he shouted. "Goddammit, if you don't come to I'm gonna start singing Van Halen! I swear I will!"

"I'll kill you," she breathlessly mumbled.

"She's alive!" Maria hollered, while continuing to cry.

"She's alive," Dennis repeated, before crying himself as he cradled Rudi in his arms, while silently whispering all sorts of oaths to himself.

THE ELDORADO MADE a sharp stop in front of the emergency room entrance of George Washington University Hospital, and Dennis flew out of the car with Rudi in his arms—and he stormed inside the building.

"Get my mom!" he screamed, as he fell to his knees. "Somebody get my mom!"

Right then, he looked down at Rudi, and he could see that her eyes were open just a little—and he told her: "Don't worry—my mom—she helped operate on Reagan."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Rudi replied, with just a little smile—one that overjoyed Dennis.

RUDI THOUGHT SHE was in some strange ever-changing dream. One second she was in one place and in one time—and the next second she was somewhere entirely else.

Suddenly, she felt herself moving down a corridor, and she looked up and saw a tall woman walking alongside her—a woman who was wearing a surgical outfit. And, even though this woman's face was covered by a mask, Rudi could somehow tell she was smiling. She was

smiling right at her.

“So, you’re the girl my son can’t stop talking about,” the woman murmured, with a thick accent.

“Can, can I ask you something?” Rudi murmured back.

“You can ask me anything.”

“How . . . how do you say ‘thank you’ in Czech?”

“*Děkuji*,” the woman replied.

Chapter Fifty

TIME KEPT ENDLESSLY spinning in Rudi's strange dream—a dream with thousands of faces of people she knew and loved, along with just as many places and moments.

Then, she drowsily came out of it. She came out of it and found herself in a hospital bed, feeling lightheaded. She also felt someone holding her hand.

Slowly, she turned her head—and saw the late afternoon sun coming through the windows, as well as Mrs. Goodwin.

The day before, the woman rushed to the airport the moment after Maria called, and, upon discovering no commercial flights were leaving for hours—she chartered her own. Then, once at the hospital, she barely left Rudi's room—and barely stopped praying.

"This is becoming a habit," Rudi muttered to the woman, who seemed to be both smiling and crying at the same time.

"Perhaps one day we'll break it," her mother-in-law muttered back.

"Don't count on it," Rudi replied, with her eyes becoming irresistibly heavy.

"How are you?" the woman asked.

"Been better," Rudi answered, prior to falling back asleep.

THE NEXT TIME Rudi opened her eyes it was dark out. But as Mrs. Goodwin was still holding her hand, she didn't sense any time had passed.

“Where’d the sun go?” she softly asked, while looking a bit dazed.

“You’ve been sleeping for more than five hours,” the woman softly answered.

“Did I miss anything?”

“Lots of visitors. Actually, you’ve had lots of visitors ever since I’ve been here.”

“Yeah?”

“There’s been Maria and her friend—and Jared and his wife, who, by the way, happened to mention how they’re naming their child after you.”

“Yeah.”

“They also said something about making you the child’s godmother.”

“Yeah.”

“I suppose you’ll tell me they don’t have any special reason for doing these things.”

“I don’t know.”

“Your boss came by as well—a couple of times. Once with a very eccentric minister. They were telling me about all the people you’ve helped in such a short period of time. My head was spinning.”

“It was nothing.”

“There you go again.”

“Listen to you talk—raising all that money to fight AIDS and not telling me about it—even after I practically accused you of doing nothing. So, maybe, maybe I really am my mother’s daughter.”

“Speaking of which,” Mrs. Goodwin nervously mumbled, before involuntarily releasing Rudi’s hand. “I’ve been talking with my lawyer, and I, I’ve started the paperwork.”

“Paperwork?”

“To legally adopt you. That is, of course, if it’s all right

with you.”

Smilingly, Rudi retook Mrs. Goodwin’s hand, and she told her: “I don’t need any paperwork to know you’re my mother. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Oh, Rudi,” the woman cried out, before gently falling upon her daughter—a daughter she held like a newborn. She then added, “After my husband died, I thought I’d never be happy again. But you make me so happy.”

“You make me happy, too.”

Suddenly, Mrs. Goodwin broke her embrace, and, after wiping her eyes, she told Rudi: “I almost forgot, there were a bunch of fraternity boys here—a whole army of them, all at once.”

“Yeah?” Rudi uttered.

“Yeah. And they, they were strangely saying you were one of their brothers.”

“Yeah,” Rudi replied—a bit bashfully.

“I’m not even gonna ask how you managed that,” her mother replied back.

“It’s not as wild as you think.”

“Nothing about you is, at least under the hood. Under there is the sweetest girl in the world.”

“No one’s ever called me that before.”

“Well, you better get used to hearing it. Because I’m gonna be saying it a lot—and there’s not a thing you can do about it.”

THE FOLLOWING MORNING when Rudi awoke she was in pain, and, even worse, she was alone—something that intensely frightened her. Though a few minutes later Mrs. Goodwin came to the door, and, with a happy smile, she said, “You’re up.”

“I’m up.”

“How are you today?”

“All right.”

Just then, the woman peeked down the hallway, and she looked at something.

“What is it?” Rudi asked.

“Remember when I told you about all those fraternity boys?” her mother asked back.

“Yeah.”

“Well, there’s been one in particular. One who’s been lurking the halls almost every time I look. And it doesn’t seem as if he’s slept much.”

“Does he look like a Ken doll?”

“That’s the one!”

Involuntarily, Rudi turned away from the woman a bit.

“Is he that ‘no one special’ you weren’t talking about?” Mrs. Goodwin inquired.

“I don’t know,” Rudi replied. “I don’t know what he is.”

“His name is Dennis Winston, am I right?”

Rudi nodded.

“I actually know his father a little,” the woman went on. “My husband knew him well—said he was the worst man alive.”

“Well,” Rudi said, “sometimes the apple falls far from the tree.”

“Would you like to speak to him? Dennis, I mean.”

Rudi responded by turning to her mother, but she didn’t know quite how to answer her.

DENNIS SHEEPISHLY ENTERED the room, and, even more sheepishly, he sat next to Rudi, who smiled at him and said, “*Děkuji.*”

This word caused Dennis to smile back. He also uttered, “*Není záč.*”

"What does that mean?" Rudi asked.

"It was nothing," Dennis answered.

Rudi chuckled at this.

"What's so funny?" he inquired.

"It doesn't matter," she told him.

"So, so you're not mad at me anymore?"

"You're the only reason I'm alive. Maria, too."

"There's something I have to say."

"Me, too."

"Me, first."

"All right."

"I . . ." Dennis began, after lowering his eyes a bit, "I'm not Tommy, and never will be. Nor am I Superman or Byron. I'm just one big set of flaws. But I . . ."

"You're wonderful," she murmured as she took his hand.

"I am?" he murmured back, while feeling as if he were floating up to the ceiling.

"Yes. And you're gonna make someone very happy one day."

"Someone?" Dennis gasped, as he quickly tumbled to earth.

"I'm going back home," she told him. "Back to New Jersey."

"What?"

"I don't belong here. I never did. I only came because some stupid doctor said I needed to get away from my memories. The truth is, the truth is that I've just been hiding from them. But no more."

"But I . . ."

"Let's not ruin that one night," she interrupted—knowing exactly what he was about to say and not wanting to hear it, fearing she wouldn't be able to stop herself from saying the same thing back. "It was beautiful," she

added, "in spite of everything that happened afterward. But it's never gonna happen again."

"So . . . when are you going?"

"I don't know. Soon."

"How soon?"

"How soon is now?"

"What does that mean, Rudi?"

"I don't know—in a couple of days. Probably."

"Can I come by again?"

"Maybe you shouldn't."

"*Rudi.*"

"Please. Please let me go."

A SHORT TIME after Dennis left an unhappy-looking Mrs. Goodwin returned with a policeman, who had been notified by the hospital that Rudi had been shot.

"This gentleman here wants to ask you some questions," the woman uttered while nodding toward the officer. "But I don't think you should talk to him without a lawyer."

"It's all right," Rudi replied.

"But—"

"—It's all right."

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I am about anything."

The policeman then walked up to Rudi—and, after taking a pen and a notepad from his jacket, he said, "Who shot you?"

"I don't know," Rudi answered.

"Male, female? Age? Color?"

"I don't know. I didn't get a good look."

"Do you know why they shot you?"

"I have no idea."

"Where did this happen?"

"I don't remember."

The man sighed, and returned both his pen and notepad before saying, "You should expect a visit from a detective in the coming days."

"Why?"

"He'll be asking the questions."

The policeman afterward left, and Mrs. Goodwin whispered, "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Later," Rudi replied. "I promise."

"As long as you're safe I really don't care."

"I've never felt safer than I do right now."

Rudi then lifted her hand toward her mother, who rushed over and grabbed it.

"When can I go home?" Rudi subsequently asked.

"It's up to you," the woman replied.

"I wanna go home now."

"If it's because of that detective . . ."

"It's not because of him."

"Then what's the rush?"

"There's someone I need to visit."

Chapter Fifty-One

DENNIS FELT PUNCH-DRUNK as he stammered into the fraternity house. He also felt as if part of him were still in the hospital.

"Your dad called," spoke Chuck from the main room, just as Dennis reached the foyer. "Actually, he's been calling a lot."

Dennis shrugged, but headed toward the pay phone—and, even though his father was the last person he wanted to speak to, he phoned the man.

"Where have you been?" the man howled.

"Out," Dennis replied.

"I'm your father, dammit. You can't give me the common courtesy of returning my calls?"

"What do you want, Dad?"

"I'm speaking tomorrow night at a dinner for the Family Research Council, and I need a family. I'll pick you up at five sharp."

"That's the only reason you had me, isn't it?"

"What are you talking about?"

"So I could accompany you somewhere."

"I don't like your tone of voice."

"Well, I don't like you at all."

"Just be ready at five o'clock tomorrow night—wearing the suit we bought you for Christmas. And get a damn haircut!"

With that, the line went dead—and Dennis went up to his room, where he stayed for the rest of the day and into the night, thinking of only one thing—or rather, one person.

Then, late in the evening, he realized something. He realized he couldn't let Rudi leave the hospital and his life without telling her the words he couldn't express earlier—words he likely couldn't've expressed even if she had let him express them. He even practice saying these words over and over—and afterward he ran out of the house and to the hospital, not even willing to wait until morning.

However, once there, he found Rudi's room empty, and when a nurse told him that Rudi had already gone home, he almost collapsed.

DENNIS DIDN'T EVEN bother going to bed when he returned to the fraternity house. He just crashed on one of the couches in the main room, barely sleeping at all. And the next morning he just sulked there for hours—something everyone couldn't help notice, especially J. D.

Finally, the big man had had enough, and he growled from the threshold of the room: "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Dennis replied, before turning his head away.

"What-is-wrong?"

But Dennis wouldn't say anything. So J. D. walked up to him and repeated his question—this time in a much firmer voice.

"Rudi," Dennis finally answered, after a long drawn-out sigh. "She went back to New Jersey. For good."

"Come with me."

"Where?"

"Just come with me!"

Dennis sighed again, but he eventually got up, and, with his head down, he followed J. D. out of the room and down the corridor.

"You want me to steal you another newspaper machine?" J. D. asked as the two slowly headed toward the back room.

"That's okay," Dennis answered, while unable to prevent a small smile from appearing on his face.

"Cause you know I would, don't you?"

"I know."

"I'd do anything for you."

"Even lay out in front of a speeding tricycle?"

"Even that."

Just then, the two reached the back door of the house, and J. D. opened it—exposing both the driveway and the Eldorado.

"Go after her," J. D. commanded.

"It's not that simple," Dennis insisted.

J. D. responded by grabbing Dennis's car keys from a nearby hook and saying, "Sure it is."

"I don't even know where she lives."

"Then find out."

"I, I gotta be somewhere tonight."

"You gotta be in New Jersey."

Carefully, Dennis thought it over. But still he made no move for the keys.

"Let me tell you something," J. D. muttered, with no small amount of emotion, "if I had someone even half as special as Rudi I'd be halfway through Delaware right now."

MARIA APPROACHED THURSTON Hall with her mind elsewhere—back in the warehouse, where her short life had almost ended.

Suddenly, someone called out her name—and she stopped and turned her head—and she saw Dennis across the street in his convertible.

"Hey," she said to him.

"I'm looking for Rudi," he said back.

"Isn't she in the hospital? I was just about to head over there."

"She went home—to New Jersey."

"She did?"

"You, you wouldn't happen to know her address and how I can find it?"

Maria smiled at this. She smiled large.

DENNIS HAD BEEN driving for hours, with his foot pushed almost constantly to the floor, and his mind focused on what he would say to Rudi.

He had long decided to throw out everything he planned the night before, thinking now that he couldn't just express how he felt in words. He knew the words meant little—that anyone could say them without meaning them. He knew he had to express them in a way she couldn't possibly doubt.

But how? he asked himself over and over. How?

Then, all of a sudden an epiphany struck—and his face lit up. Though it didn't stay that way for long, as he heard a police siren ring out from behind him.

"Not again," he uttered, before heading off onto the shoulder of the road.

Chapter Fifty-Two

MRS. GOODWIN'S SILVER Jaguar coasted down a scenic tree-lined road.

Inside the vehicle, the woman glanced at her daughter in the front passenger seat. She also glanced at her melancholy. Then, she smilingly told her: "You know, while we're changing your last name we could change your first as well."

"I think I'm just gonna keep it," Rudi replied.

"I thought you hated 'Gertrude.'"

"I did. But someone named me that for a reason. And besides, Gertrude Stein was one of the greatest writers there ever was."

THE JAGUAR MADE a right turn into a cemetery and Mrs. Goodwin parked in the near empty lot.

"It's right over that hill," she then said to her daughter, while pointing the way.

"All right," Rudi mumbled.

"You want me to come with you?"

Rudi shook her head.

"Are you sure?" the woman asked.

"I need to do this myself," Rudi answered.

"All right."

With lots of hesitation, Rudi grabbed her backpack off the floor, and, after finding sufficient strength, she opened her door. But, before she stepped out of the car, she turned around and hugged her mother—and she told her: "I love you so much."

"I love you, too," the woman whispered.

Rudi afterward broke their embrace and got out of the car, and, with great pain—both physical and emotional—she slowly made her way toward the hill.

ELIZABETH RUSHED DOWN the hallway, with the sound of a bell echoing off the walls—and, after opening the door, she saw a tall young man with blond hair—a man she had never seen before.

“Can I help you?” the woman asked.

“Yeah,” Dennis nervously replied. “I’m a, I’m a friend of Rudi.”

“She’s out right now with her mother, but she should be back soon. Would you like to wait inside?”

“Actually, Rudi once mentioned . . .”

WHILE CLUTCHING HER painful wound, Rudi came to a stop beside Tommy’s grave, which was right next to an empty plot—a plot in which she knew she’d one day lie.

There she stood for nearly a minute before kneeling in front of the tombstone, upon which was written: “Loving Son and Husband,” and she tried unsuccessfully to control her emotions.

“Hi, baby,” she eventually whimpered, with her eyes beginning to water. “You’ve been visiting me so much of late that I, I thought it was time to return the favor.”

Soon, Rudi sat on the grass, and she added, “I want you to know, I want you to know that I’m gonna do what you said. I’m gonna live. I’m gonna live big. I’m gonna live so big that when we meet again—when we meet again for good—you’ll be proud of me. I’ll be proud of me, too.”

Rudi then paused awhile, before opening her backpack and taking out her “Moonlight Serenade” tape—

and she said, "I brought you something."

Subsequently, with a shaking hand she leaned the cassette against the gravestone and muttered, "I don't want you to think I'm never gonna listen to this song again, because I am. I, I'm just not gonna listen to it all the time."

Suddenly, she started crying, and, just as suddenly, she put her hand on the stone and caressed the letters of Tommy's name with her fingers—and she murmured, "I know you understand, and I know you love me. And I love you, too."

She afterward kept crying. She cried for many minutes. She cried so long that she thought she'd never stop. But finally the tears ceased and she stood up, and she reluctantly headed back over the hill.

And she didn't see the spindles of the cassette start to move.

AS THE JAGUAR eased its way down South Orange Avenue Mrs. Goodwin couldn't help peek at Rudi's teary and downcast face every few seconds, and she wished she could say something to her—something that could uplift her.

Though all she could come up with was: "Next time, next time we're doing this together. We're gonna visit both our husbands together."

"I always wanted to meet him," Rudi told her.

"He would've loved you."

"You think?"

"He wouldn't've had any more choice than I have."

THE JAGUAR TURNED onto Mrs. Goodwin's driveway. Though it then came to a sudden stop.

“What’s wrong?” Rudi uttered, with her eyes still lowered.

“Well,” her mother answered, “if it isn’t that ‘no one special.’”

Slowly, Rudi lifted her wet face, and, with great surprise, she saw Dennis a short distance away, sitting on top of his Eldorado with a look mixed of both longing and hope.

“He even brought dinner,” Mrs. Goodwin went on.

“What?” Rudi mumbled, before seeing the box of Reservoir pizza beside Dennis on the hood. And, understanding exactly what this meant, she slammed open her door and burst out of the car—and, forgetting all her pain—she rushed toward that someone special and his big box of love.

the end