



Achilles Other Heel  
By Tulsa Brown

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# CHAPTER ONE

"I want you to know how proud I am of you," my father said.

We were sitting in the living room, me in the black leather chair, him on the ottoman in front of me. He had his trench coat on over his lab jacket, briefcase by his feet, hands clasped in front of him. Our knees almost touched.

"I mean, you've really stuck it out. What are we at -- three weeks?"

"Plus five days in the hospital," I said.

"Well, that's terrific." A lock of pale hair fell across his eyes. He'd needed it cut for a month. "I'm really impressed. And even though this meeting's important, I wouldn't go if I wasn't so...impressed."

"I said I could do this."

"I know, but it still takes willpower. Enormous willpower. Hey, I know it's not easy, Lee."

I smiled faintly. I'd spent every hour of daylight in the desert, melting into the black leather sofa, nailed down by gravity and despair. Nights I was awake pacing in my room, a single thought flashing like a beacon every fifteen seconds, blinding me. But I resisted falling asleep because then I dreamed, the same vivid and beautiful dream running on an endless loop, just me and my gear and my True Love. It was so powerful it wrenched me awake with sweaty hope, then sent me plummeting, curled up in the dark, hollowed out by sorrow and longing.

"One day at a time," I quoted.

"That's the way." He leaned forward, the scent of his cologne mingling with the chemical smell on his lab coat, sharp and distinctively dental. "I know you're going to make it this time. You're smarter, we all are. You're going to beat this once and for all."

I nodded. Please, I prayed. Oh, please, already.

"Okay." My father reached for his briefcase and stood up. My fingers pressed into the black leather, holding myself still. But he paused at the door that led to the garage. "What are you going to do tonight?"

"Oh, I don't know. Watch TV." I leaned forward to scoop up the program that was on the coffee table. I flipped through it until I noticed the silence.

"You haven't forgotten about the plan, right?"

"You'll have it by Monday," I said.

"I meant what I said. Think of the long term. With a tutor you could get through grade twelve and do university prep in one year, and I've got friends in every department at the University. If there's something you want to do, we'll find the way..."

I couldn't stop myself. I got to my feet and began drifting toward the door, curling the TV guide into a tube in my hands.

"Dad, if you're not all right with this, just stay home."

He grinned, caught. "No, it's...I'm so impressed. Really. See you later."

I hung in the open door, watching him get into the car. A Lexus, it was his second new one since I'd come to live with him in Toronto a year and a half before. He'd bought this one last February, right after I went into the hospital for the first time. My father didn't drink. He would have saved a lot of money if he did.

I was savoring it -- the garage door rising, the engine humming, the faint puff of exhaust like perfume. He'd already begun backing out when he stopped, and the driver's window slid down.

"Brenda will be home by six," he called.

I waved at him, smiling. I knew what time the bitch got home.

I closed the door and leaned against it, feeling the last vibrations tingle through my hands. Then I locked it and bolted up the stairs, two at a time. It had been twenty-six days and I was going out.

My father has a joke name and doesn't know it. Ken Dahl. I'd seen pictures of him in university, standing with the other men training to be dental technicians, and I had a hard time picking my father's face out of the crowd. They were all Ken dolls, smooth and thin-legged and bland. Some were already leaning forward, hunching like squirrels as they prepared for a life in the lab.

My father had to move to Toronto when I was seven, leaving me, my mother and my brother Reine in Thunder Bay. I grew up knowing Ken Dahl was a legend in teeth, that he made crowns and implants for the rich and powerful, taught at the university and lectured around the country. But he was not a dentist.

"He could never work in the mouth," my mother told me. She sent a wry glance at Reine. "Or so he said."

For someone who wasn't a dentist, my father still made money. His house had impressed me the first time. I'd arrived at dusk eighteen months ago, exhausted and still shaken by the fact that I'd actually come, and I was a little awestruck by the male palace: grey, black and more grey, highlighted by gleaming chrome. It reminded me of a doctor's waiting room or a laboratory. I stood in the mirror-tiled foyer with two duffle bags, one clothes and one books, and hung onto Chelsey's collar. My golden Labrador Retriever was whining with excitement, standing then sitting again, trying to thrust her nose into everybody's crotch.

"Does she shed?" Brenda asked. My father's wife kept well back, arms crossed. A fine chain hung from her neck, the gold cross at the end squashed between her melon breasts. Brenda was leery of both of us, but my dog looked better than me. I'd shaved my head only a few weeks before and my skull was covered with blonde fuzz, like down. After fifteen hours on the road I looked like a scarecrow in chemo.

My father had his hands in his pockets, jangling his change nervously, eyes fixed on Chelsey as if he couldn't believe she was the same golden puppy he'd put into my arms ten years before.

"I talked to your mother," he said. "And Reine."

My brother could have told a lot of stories about me, many of them true. But then I had some about him, too.

The jingling coins were too much for Chelsey. She cried out suddenly, then again, her strange little strangled sound, like a hiccough.

“Oh, my God, she’s choking. You’re choking her!” Brenda tried to grab my hand from her collar.

“No,” I said. “That’s how she sounds. He had her vocal chords cut.”

She let go of my arm as if it burned her.

“At the vet’s,” I explained. “He said she barked too much.”

My father was looking at me now, too, his pale face blank with disbelief.

“Reine?”

I started to stroke Chelsey’s broad head, and she looked up at me happily, tongue lolling. A dog’s eyes can tear you to pieces. “I was at school,” I said softly.

There was a moment’s silence, then my father bent down, reaching for one of my bags. “Well, we’ll get you enrolled here right away. It’ll be a new start,” he said.

The rush in my chest caught me by surprise.

“Thanks. I could use one.”

I let go of Chelsey and she darted away. I followed my father up the stairs with my other bag.

“Uh...shouldn’t we put her in the yard?” Brenda started. “It’s fully fenced.”

“Oh, relax. She’s not a puppy,” Dad said cheerfully. “She’ll be fine. Here, Chelsey. Here, girl...”

He was cut off by the sound of a steady stream hitting the immaculate grey carpet.

\* \* \*

In the master bedroom I went through my father’s clothes, methodically diving into pockets I knew well. Brenda’s pastel uniforms were hanging on the other side of the closet, but I ignored them. Brenda kept her money in her purse, zippered shut and hugged tight under her arm. All she kept in the closet was hope, a dozen maternity dresses hanging neatly, tags still attached. At thirty-five she was ten years younger than my father, but that wasn’t the same as young. The clock was running.

I had seven dollars before I left the room, nine once I did the hall closet and the laundry room. I caught glimpses of myself reflected in the glass and chrome, moving with robotic precision, my cheeks beginning to flush. My body knew this routine.

No, I told myself. I’m only going out for a beer.

I went to my bedroom to get dressed. With my back to the mirror I stripped off the sweatshirt and pants that had been my uniform for the past few weeks. In the hospital I had the real thing, a loose pullover top and drawstring bottom in mustard yellow, and little plastic covers for my shoes. One young Native woman with doe eyes and a reed body tried to knot the top under her tiny breasts, to give it some shape, some sex appeal. But the uniform did its job. There was no distinction among us. Hookers and airline pilots, junkies and alcoholics, we were all one legion.

On medical and legal forms, I always put down that I'm six feet tall, even though I'm just under. Someone once told me I had a runner's legs, long and sinewy, but I'd put more work into my arms and torso, exercises for my traps, lats and deltoids -- archery muscles. In Thunder Bay, I'd been on the high school squad, but no archer is ever part of a team. He shoots for himself.

I hadn't brought my bows with me to Toronto. Your body can fall away fast, I discovered. In the past year I'd forgotten about food for long stretches, waking some mornings to a stranger in the mirror, cheekbones that seemed to leap out of my face, blue eyes bright with a biological need that was low on my priority list. I could look scary fast. It made me laugh, but not very hard. It's not the kind of face you can take shoplifting.

I'd been eating on a regular basis for twenty-six days now. When I zipped up my jeans the fabric pulled snug across my ass, and I was relieved and optimistic. Maybe I'd get more than a beer tonight. I pulled on a white T-shirt and then a denim shirt over that, and I could finally face the mirror.

I grinned at that man because I remembered him, his rectangle face with a jawline you could cut your hand on, someone had said. My latest buzz cut was growing out, had become just long enough to flatten on the top of my head. The edges were still very white with bleach, but blonde underneath, as if I'd been dusted over with powdered sugar. Or cocaine.

I glanced around the room and my eyes fell on the black knapsack in the corner. I'd carried my whole life in that bag this past summer, my house slung over my shoulder: a change of clothes, a toothbrush and three books -- The Iliad, The Odyssey, and The Nature of Alexander. I kept a neon orange hockey ball, too, crosshatched by countless scrapes from Chelsey's teeth.

I hesitated, my hand on the light switch, looking at the knapsack. You don't need it, I told myself. You're only going out for a beer.

The floor of my bedroom suddenly began to vibrate, a low rumble under my feet as the garage door opened.

"Shit."

For a moment I stood still, listening to the heavy thud of the Pathfinder's door, the clatter of keys, the bouncy step of rubber-soled shoes. But one little dental hygienist was not a problem. I swooped lightly down the stairs.

Brenda was at the kitchen counter, sorting through the mail with her back to me, still in her pink uniform. Her shoulder-length brown hair was highlighted red lately, pulled back with clips and pins. She'd gained weight since I'd moved in, but not where she'd wanted to.

"Suction, Brenda," I hissed behind her. "More suction!"

She whirled around, mad but not surprised.

“So you do have clothes,” she said, looking me up and down. “Where’s your dad?”

“Emergency dental summit. All the crowns of Europe.” I started boldly toward the hall closet. I heard her follow me, alarmed to see me in motion. I’d been a dead man for three weeks.

Her face tightened when I tugged on my black and white nylon jacket, but she forced up something that was almost a polite smile. Dealing With Difficult People had been on her night table for weeks, on top of the Bible.

“So. Where are you going?”

“To get laid. Lend me some money,” I said.

Her hands were clenched at her waist, fingers locked. “You know, Lee, you’ve really impressed me since you’ve been home from the hospital this time. I almost have to ...admire you for facing your problems honestly and committing to your recovery -”

“Brenda.” I touched her arm and she twitched. “I’m not likable. Don’t strain yourself. Just give me the money.”

The performance fell away. “No. Absolutely not. And if you walk out that door I’m phoning your dad. You agreed to the curfew, you signed your name to it, and I know your dad wouldn’t allow this.”

I wriggled into my runners without untying the laces. “What if I get home before he does? Don’t you want a night to yourself?”

The thought crossed her face in a flicker of hope, then she hardened again. “But you won’t get back. And I won’t be an enabler to your sickness.”

“Ooh, you read the take-home sheet from the hospital. Did you get some on in vitro, too?” She flinched - a direct hit. I grinned wickedly. “I’ll be a donor. Get a cup.”

“You’re a pig!” She stepped back, face white.

“Yes, I am. And if you give me twenty bucks I’ll go away.”

She’d caught herself and was holding still, one hand on the wall.

“No. Because I can wait until Monday, Lee. You won’t be in school and you haven’t even looked for a job. You’ve been pissing the days away and your dad knows it. You don’t think he has the backbone to throw you out, but you’re in for a shock. You’re not going to use us anymore. You’re not going to lie to us, steal from us. We’ve treated you fairly and we don’t deserve -”

“But what if you do? What if I’m exactly what you deserve?” Brenda stiffened, mouth drawn tight. I took a step closer. “You knew he had a family. Which commandment is that? Did you ever ask him what stories he told my mother all those nights he was out with you? Or did you tell him what to say?”

She had already been there, I could see it in her stricken face. Her eyes were liquid, but she held it all together.

“You think nothing can touch you,” Brenda whispered the words. “But sin is sin, Lee, whether you believe in it or not. And you give God every possible chance. You know, I’m not even going to cry when you get it.”

It wasn’t a curse or a threat, just a quiet certainty in the viral vengeance of the Almighty. It should have been funny. I’d already tested negative twice.

My smile was hard. “What a fine little Christian mother you’re going to be,” I said, closing the door behind me.

I was halfway down the driveway when I heard it open again, a violent yank on the metal parts. The sight of Brenda’s face shocked me, the rawness of it, the wet, bleary trails of mascara and tears. She always went to her room to cry.

“I loved him!” she blurted. “You’ve never loved anyone, not even her! You’re not capable of it.”

For an instant the words froze me, pinned me to the spot like an arrow, stuck quivering in my bones. There are some things you never expect people to say, even in hate. The gust of pain forced my breath out, then a knee-jerk of fury shoved me a step forward. You don’t know me, I wanted to yell at the house. You don’t know who I loved.

But the cry was locked in my chest. The door slammed shut, the deadbolts clicked into place. I was left standing on the driveway with hollow legs and pockets full of stones. At last I forced my trembling self to turn and walk, then faster, the coins jangling as I slipped into a run.



# CHAPTER TWO

I knew the clubs wouldn't be in motion yet, so I got off the subway at Eaton Centre, looking for anyone I knew. I'd spent a lot of my summer there. Malls are ideal when you're not living anywhere in particular - air conditioning, food courts, bathrooms -- and this was a five-star establishment. There were hundreds of stores on three levels, trees and shrubs, even a waterfall next to one of the escalators. Riding up, people threw money into the pond below, making wishes. Eaton Centre was an entire eco-system for thieves.

Traffic at the entrance I chose was busy, day clerks and shoppers heading home. A security guard glanced my way and my heart skipped -- I'd been banned from this mall on a regular basis -- but luckily the minimum-wage personnel changed regularly. I strolled in unnoticed, glad to be anonymous again.

A cluster of young people huddled at the base of the escalator, seven or eight that I knew in passing. A young woman named Sherise sat on the edge of the wish pond, gently rocking her baby in a stroller. Across the polished floor, two security guards lingered near a lottery ticket terminal, hands on their belts as they watched Musaphir, waiting for him to step over the line.

Musaphir was more cinnamon than black, a gazelle with a mop of shoulder-length dreadlocks, thin frame draped with layers of clothing, his whole fall wardrobe. He looked sixteen. I'd been astonished to learn he was twenty five. I'd never slept with him, but I liked him. Now I found myself wondering how much I could like him, if I tried.

"Are you Christians?" Musaphir called to the guards, not loud enough to be considered a shout. "I am. I became a Christian this morning, on Queen Street. I accepted Jesus into my heart as my personal savior. And then I got lunch." He was twinkling with mischief. "And now I love you. I love you all!"

Musaphir blew them a kiss and I saw their stoic faces twitch. He was treading 'lewd and lascivious behavior,' a standard ejection and one of my personal favorites. Then Musaphir noticed me and the game fell from his body. He grinned as I strode up, but there was a quiver of vigilance running through him. I was new again. I looked like money.

"Ahoy, Lee. Are you a Christian?"

"Not today," I said.

"Too bad. It's a decent meal." He punched my shoulder lightly, a little shove of recognition. "So, where have you been?"

"Disneyland." The smell of him wafted over me, acrid and painfully familiar, and my stomach flipped. Street is not the smell of sweat. It's not the musky scent of a man who's been working in the sun, or the smell of dirty laundry. It's utterly unique, sharp and sour and nearly cheesy, human odor compressed and concentrated by living in the same clothes until the fabric was stiff and lustrous with oil.

I smelled my own summer on his body and in that rush my True Love leapt twenty-six days and slipped an arm around me, shouldering out every other thought. She caressed me in warm waves, murmuring miss you, miss you against my naked skin. I was reeling, overwhelmed. I dropped into a crouch in front of the baby's stroller, as if to say hello. Sherise smiled down at me, her mousy hair tucked behind her

ears, a man's jacket lapping over her tattooed knuckles. The damp heat beamed from my forehead, gathered in all the crevasses of my body, swells of unspeakable lust.

Get out of here, I told myself. Get away from them now.

"So where's the party?" I asked.

"Anywhere, if you're buying," Musaphir said. I was suddenly aware of his legs next to me, how the whole group had edged in and surrounded me hungrily, the street smell of them washing over me, sucking me down like an undertow.

I got to my feet, the word on my lips, and that's when I saw the key. It lay like a small silver fish on the bottom of the wish pond among the pennies, nickels and dimes. I blinked to be sure. It was no bigger than the joint of one of my fingers, a key for a suitcase or a locker. I tingled with a strange sense of euphoria, or luck. I wanted that key, but there was no discreet way to get it.

"Sorry, Mus, I'm broke," I said, stepping up onto the ledge of the pond. "I even have to borrow a quarter for the phone."

I plunged down into the water with one foot, the cold shock running up my leg. Sherise gave a little shriek and her baby began to cry. I reached in, groping for the tiny shape. Success! I was soaked to the shoulder, but I had it. At the edge of my vision I saw the security guards leap into action -- playing in the pool was a no-no. I pulled out, streaming water, and burst toward the escalator.

"Stop, you little jerk!"

I took the moving stairs three at a time. The mall had thinned, but it wasn't empty. I barreled along, dodging surprised shoppers, my one wet runner squeaking and slipping. Even with bad traction I was faster than the guards, and I heard them falling away behind me.

But they did have radios. I discovered three more uniforms blocking the Dundas Street exit, ready for me. Time for a new strategy. I slowed abruptly to a walk and clasped my hands behind my head, letting the key fall down the back of my shirt. My pursuers caught my elbows so hard they lifted me off my feet.

"I didn't get my wish. I wanted my money back," I said, my face pressed against the wall.

Legally they couldn't frisk me without a police officer present, but I had to turn my pockets out. I couldn't convince them the pile of my father's silver was really mine.

"You're scum," one of the rental cops said. "That pond's a children's charity, for God's sake."

"It's not even wet! I'm telling you, this is my money."

"Then you're going to donate it right now, asshole. And you're going to walk out of here with a smile, or I'll call Metro Police and we'll have you charged."

"For a few bucks in change!"

His eyes were as grey as his uniform. "I'd do it for a quarter."

I was almost vibrating with the injustice, but I could see the night through the glass mall doors, lit up by

passing headlights. And the key had lodged in the waistband of my jeans, tiny and strange, like an itch.

I lifted my hands in a gesture of surrender and started backing away.

“You’re eighty-sixed,” one of them said. “I don’t want to see you again.”

“Get a job, loser,” another called. “Stay out of the wishing wells.”

I walked out, my face burning, one arm and one leg clammy in my wet clothes. Now I was dead broke, didn’t even have subway fare home, never mind money for a beer. I needed a miracle. I tugged up the back of my T-shirt and retrieved the key, reading the numbers stamped into the metal head. I stopped in my tracks and whirled around, jogging back to the mall, choosing another entrance.

It was a locker key. I wasn’t even surprised it wound up where it did, probably tossed out with a handful of change by someone riding up the escalator. But how long ago? Had the locker already been opened by a mall duplicate, or would I meet the owner, frantically rifling her purse? And what could I hope to find - - somebody’s shopping or schoolbooks?

I had to know. The lockers weren’t far from the entrance, tucked into a side hallway. People stared at me, my wet arm and leg, but I ignored them and strode up to cubicle 179. When I inserted the key a dollar coin rolled out of the slot, which I caught before it hit the ground. Inside the cubicle was a soft black leather case with a handle. I pulled it out with easy nonchalance, my heart running. Lifting the flap, I saw the grey edge of a laptop computer. I closed the locker gently, trying not to smile, and walked smoothly into the street again. I was looking for a pay phone.

\* \* \*

Cocaine is my First Love. In the clubs downtown I’d sampled everything, from the long, wavy drunk of roofies to the flash-card picture show of special K. But coke brushed those trifles aside, strode into my life like Alexander the Great and clasped my hand, lifting me to my feet. I’d read that he really did that, walked the ranks of his men, encouraging each with a touch, a handshake, a joke. After that his tired soldiers roared like bulls into battle. A word from Alexander made heroes out of ordinary men.

I smoked heroin before I ever injected it. We’d make a bed out of tinfoil, shake out the dose and ignite it. At first we passed it around, but too much was wasted, blown off in the air. So then we stood shoulder to shoulder in a tight little ring, faces thrust into bliss. I don’t even smoke cigarettes, but I never coughed, and I didn’t vomit. I was a natural. This was True Love. I could feel the white smoke roll through my body; in my mind’s eye I saw every exquisite curl, an explosion in slow motion, power and glory rolling on and on, one mesmerizing frame at a time.

In that moment I was no longer one of Alexander’s soldiers, I was Achilles himself, the demi-god created by celestial fire, not quite divine, but mighty and beautiful and almost invulnerable. I was the greatest champion of the Trojan war and the gods themselves sprang up to catch the spears hurtling at my body.

On Valentine’s Day, two months after my eighteenth birthday, I rammed my car into a light standard on Eglinton Avenue at sixty kilometers per hour, and walked away from it. I got five steps and collapsed. I spent the next twenty-four hours in Emergency with a concussion and lacerations to my left arm, then five more days in the chemical withdrawal unit, roaring. That’s where I met the most ravishing woman in the world.

Louise was the triage nurse in detox and all medications were prescribed through her. In her early forties, her face had an oriental roundness to it, as luminous and patient as the moon. She wore her fading brown hair back in a loose bun, strands always working free and floating around her in a wispy halo. I quickly discovered that Louise was immune to flattery, and she'd heard every sad story and chronicle of pain there was to tell.

"My arm is just killing me. The stitches have been throbbing for hours. I wouldn't care except I'm afraid it's going to set off a migraine. When I get them, they're blinding. It's like a fist with spikes coming out of it; even the light hurts. If I don't get Demerol or some 292's I'm going to be curled up on the floor."

Louise nodded sympathetically. "Lee, I want you to see something," she said, pulling out a large manila envelope.

It was the police photo of the wreck. I almost didn't recognize my car, the white Camaro my brother had bought for me. I'd hit the standard dead on, driven it deep into the front end, crumpling the hood into a gaping jaw of jagged metal. I couldn't have destroyed it better if I'd been trying.

I stared at the grainy black and white photograph, my temples pulsing. It didn't look like an accident you walked away from.

Louise was silent, but I could feel her waiting expectantly beside me. I shoved the picture back into the envelope with a trembling hand and forced up a grin.

"Don't tell anyone I'm immortal," I said.

\* \* \*

Mattie met me at the door of his apartment in a T-shirt and boxer shorts, hair glistening, fresh from the shower. He was in his late thirties, robust and swarthy, muscles stacked like bricks on his stocky frame. I knew Mattie had been married, but not recently. His shirt said Easy Does It, an AA motto.

"Jesus, what'd you do - swim for it?" he said, looking my wet clothes up and down. But I saw a glimmer of excitement as he pulled the laptop out of its case and swung it onto the clean kitchen table. He plugged in and the two of us hovered like surgeons while it clicked its way to life.

I'd done a lot of business with Mattie in the past. He processed a variety of goods, but I knew he liked what I brought him best: disc players, camcorders, palm pilots. He said he could always move the toys. I hadn't seen him in months, though. It was a well-known house rule that unless you were clean and sober, you shouldn't even knock on Mattie's door. Those who did were eligible for a free flight. Down the stairs.

Now the apartment was emptier than I'd ever seen it. The only visible product was a shoulder-high pyramid of cigarette cartons. Yet I knew business had to be brisk to keep a place like this. The gleaming kitchen opened to a living room furnished in smooth desert colors, pinks and browns and beige. Glass patio doors ran the whole length of the far wall, an expensive, glittering postcard of Toronto the Good.

I almost missed Angelista, his daughter. She was curled up in an armchair, wearing headphones as she watched the big screen TV, legs folded, nested like a bird. Her straight dark hair was tucked behind her ears, and her hand was to her mouth, nibbling one of her fingernails. She was still in her school uniform, dark green with a plaid skirt and knee socks.

Angie was thirteen and didn't talk to me or anyone else I'd ever seen in Mattie's apartment -- maybe she wasn't allowed. By the same unspoken rule no one acknowledged her. It was as if an invisible wall divided the parts of Mattie's life. But sometimes I felt Angie's shy gaze follow me around the room, and it made me uneasy. Matt was strict, but he was still in a bad business to have a kid.

"Finally, take off," Mattie murmured when the screen lit up. The keyboard mouse was a tiny, sensitive button he could hardly maneuver with his thick finger. But he caught on after a moment and as he called up the programs, I felt dizzy. I'd really scored -- breathtaking speed, brilliant graphics. But the jewel of the bundle was a state-of-the-art desktop publishing package. Mattie whistled in spite of himself.

"I think we just shut down a magazine," he laughed.

On impulse I leaned over and unzipped a pocket on the leather case, rummaging until I withdrew a disc.

"Maybe it's Saturday Night," I said, sliding it into the drive. We called up a main page with an odd logo -- a muscled male arm bent at the elbow, fist clenched, bicep bulging with power. The word ARM was etched into the background in heavy block letters, military caps. We tried to open it, but the files were security coded and couldn't be accessed without a password.

"Jesus, it's something," Mattie said cheerfully, leaning forward in his chair. I thought so, too, and that it might be worth money. I released the disk and slid it into my inside jacket pocket.

"Four hundred," I said.

Mattie snorted a laugh. "Screw you. I'll be lucky to get two. It's probably registered somewhere and I'm really not doing hardware anymore. Business is changing...like you don't know how much. I'm almost in retail now."

"So don't sell it. You need it, Matt."

"For what?" There was a curl to his lip, but his stocky fingers rested possessively on the grey edge.

"Because you don't have one."

"But what would I do with it? File my taxes?"

"Angie could use it for school." The words were out before I could stop them. She must have heard her name, even through the headset, and looked over. Mattie shot me a dark look and waved his hand at her; she turned dutifully away. Then he leaned close and his voice dropped.

"Look, I'm in the middle of something right now. I'm short on cash. I'll have it in two days."

I felt a bolt of frustration at the lie. Matt was never without money, that's why I used him.

"Well, that's great." I stood up and yanked the cord out of the wall. "But my train leaves tonight."

For a minute he just watched me pack up the unit. I wrestled it into the leather case and was fiddling with the flap, when he got abruptly to his feet.

"Wait," he ordered and strode into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. I felt a tidal wave of relief. If he came up with a hundred dollars, I'd take it. I knew other people who could process this for me, but I

wasn't interested in waiting. From the moment I'd pulled the case from the locker my mind had been racing with calculations, dollars per drugs per minute, factoring in the cleanliness of my system and guilt. I'd be all right, I decided, as long as I stayed away from the two I loved best. No coke and no junk and this would be a joyride. I swayed a little, fingers drumming the sides of my legs as I watched Mattie's bedroom door.

"I like your hair. It looks like sparks, or white flames around your head."

Angie's voice startled me. She'd slid the headset off and was staring at me, brown eyes shining.

"Thanks." I sniffled, suddenly conscious that my nose had begun to run, in excitement or anticipation.

"I always thought that if I had a horse, that's what I'd call him -- Flame," Angie said. Her gaze pinned me, a cross between a child's boldness and a woman's amusement.

I nodded with a twitch of a smile, feeling like a stain against the wall. What the hell was taking Matt? I sniffled again and ran my sleeve across my nose.

"You should take something for your cold," she said.

"I will." Right away.

A little cat curl of a smile was on her lips.

"He doesn't think I know all your names but I do, Lee." She seemed to taste the word.

Anxiety was a fist against my stomach, not a punch, but a sharp row of knuckles, digging in.

The bedroom door opened and Angie turned obediently toward the TV, but she didn't put on the headset. Mattie didn't notice. At the table he fanned packets out in front of me like a hand of cards. Four fifty-dollar, pre-cut fingers of cocaine. Mattie was in retail, all right.

I felt as if someone had booted me in the back of the knees, yet I pulled out a chair and sat down with deft precision. Mattie sat, too, leaving a clear view to the living room. No matter. My heart was doing handsprings, back-over flips. I didn't even tremble as I opened the packet closest to me. I was in real time now, the most beautiful time, anticipation like a lover's hand gripping my thigh, hot breath against my neck.

"I've got scruples," Matt was saying. "No crack, no animal trunks. Only recreational." His face was shining. "Go easy. This is beautiful, seventy percent, I swear to God."

There was a second as I leaned into it that I felt their eyes, Mattie's subterranean hunger and Angie's bare curiosity. She was up on her knees to see me better. The fist plunged deeper into my belly, squeezing my breath out. And still I dove off the cliff and into the flare of my First Love.

I was out the door in a blink, spiraling down the flights, leaping to the landings. I paused only once, a glittering thing in the dim foyer, and leaned on the railing.

"You're a bad father, Matt!" I shouted up the stairs.

I cut into the night, as swift and weightless as an arrow singing.

# CHAPTER THREE

The air was velvet against my skin and Toronto's lights soared up in fountains of sparks around me. I was on familiar ground, heading toward the club strip, and my gaze touched on every face that flickered past. Yet it occurred to me I didn't know who I was looking for. I tried to conjure up images of friends, even lovers, and it was like clutching at wisps of smoke. What did it mean when you couldn't remember the people you'd slept with?

Turning a corner, I noticed an odd gathering in the distance, a crowd of hundreds that filled the courtyard park of City Hall, skimmed over by beacons. They spilled into the street, too, which had been cordoned off and blocked by police cars. Curiosity drew me over.

A small band was playing on the stage, which was overhung by a huge banner: Sea of Love, Cherish the Homeless. And then in smaller letters, The Unitarian Church is Your Partner in Caring.

The cherished were over at the barbeque. What must have started out as a food line had disintegrated into an impatient mob that hemmed in the volunteers behind the grill. The rest of the crowd was a mixed bag, a few suits and lots of jeans, dignified old men in caps, barrel-shaped women with bulldog jaws and Julius Caesar haircuts. A television crew must have been on hand, but the last remnants were packing up now, the main trucks already gone. The police leaned against their cruisers, thumbs hooked into their belt loops.

Some people were handing out pamphlets. Mostly men, they wore black armbands and had the taut earnestness of missionaries, yet I doubted that they were Unitarians. When a pamphlet was thrust at me, I looked down at it without uncrossing my arms.

## *Join the War Against Hatred.*

"I already have a war, thanks," I said.

"Take it, man," the man urged, "because hate is hurting your city and it's hurting your life. Hate and discrimination are the reason people are sleeping on the street in this country we call civilized. There are groups in this city so evil, they should be underground. I mean, we're talking Nazis here. But they're out and they're active, and this racist government gives them perfect freedom to spread their filth -"

I leaned toward his ear. "I'm really beginning to hate you."

"What?"

"Blow me."

He stepped back, face crumpling into a hard smirk, too cool to be shocked, but shocked anyway.

"Yeah. Right. Good talking to you, man. Get yourself a burger." He kept backing away, still watching me, the smirk twisting into a sneer. "There are people who are doing something for the world, asshole!"

I had a sudden, sweet vision of his face grinding into the grass, into the world he was saving, but the next moment an electric tremor ran through the crowd.

“Shit,” a cop said softly.

A small battalion strode across the street toward the park, less than fifty men that was still a solid block of square shoulders and hard faces. They carried no signs, their message was painted on their clothes: Flaming hammers and triumphant fists, swords and crosses. 88. White power. Even the men in jeans and leather jackets had the look, rigid expressions that marked them from the same legion.

The band on stage had stopped and scattered applause sprang up, faltered and died. A man with a bullhorn stepped out from within the regiment. Short and solid, he wore a brown leather jacket, white dress shirt and blue jeans. His round face was accented by wire-rimmed glasses and a red farmer’s cap.

“You are being lied to, Toronto.” His voice blared through the megaphone. “This is not a Christian event -- it was organized by terrorists! The Anti-Racist Militia hides behind the Unitarian church, but they are responsible for systematic violence against innocent citizens -”

“Innocent?” someone in the crowd yelled. “Nazi boneheads have no right to talk about innocence!”

“And your City Council gives them money to do it! Metro Toronto hands over your hard-earned tax dollars to hooligans. Two years ago the A.R.M. swarmed a lawful gathering with bricks and fire extinguishers, putting three in hospital. Six months later they caused twenty thousand dollars damage...”

I’d edged my way to the front. Hecklers were still calling insults and both sides were shifting restlessly, glaring across at each other. The speaker doggedly tried to hold his ground.

“...the funeral of a prominent businessman, the Militia threw garbage and excrement, desecrating the tomb, traumatizing the family...”

“I’ll show you what I believe!”

A rugged young man had broken from the ranks and now stood brazenly in open space. His hair was a dark dust over his skull and he had a gunfighter’s stance, feet and shoulders squared, hands open at his sides. There was nothing special about his clothes -- black jacket, boots and jeans -- but it was his face that caught me. Blunt and determined, there was no doubt he meant what he said.

“I’m willing to walk out here and put my ass on the line. What about you, chickenshit?”

“We’re not afraid of you,” a heckler called.

“Then you walk out to me if you’ve got the balls. Come on!”

An empty soft drink can hit him on the arm. He whipped around, ready to lunge, but his friends caught him and pulled him back, struggling and swearing. Just then metal flashed in the corner of my eye. I saw two men in the crowd hoist a full garbage can between them. They vaulted forward into open space, a few furious steps to gain momentum.

I didn’t think. “Look!” I shouted.

The speaker wrenched around and the can soared past him, hitting the walkway in a ringing crash of paper plates and wet food. There was a single breath of stunned quiet, then the cry went up, a gust of outrage and disbelief and war.



The park exploded into a wild scuffle, people shoving and shouting, some trying to get away, others locking into the brawl. A sudden blast of white pain against my left ear sent me staggering. I looked up to see the twisted face of the pamphleteer who'd wanted to save my city from hate.

"Fascist! I knew you were one of them," he brayed.

The hot gust came up from my balls. I threw myself at him, grabbed his wiry body and grappled with his flailing arms. He was stronger than he looked, but my brother had taught me to fight. I kicked at his feet, booting him off balance. As he fell forward I caught him in a headlock, and slammed my knee into his narrow guts, once, twice. He crumpled to the ground. I stood over him, heart thudding.

"Good man! You nailed the faggot."

I turned. The hulk in front of me had shoulders like a bull, and a tattoo of a flaming sword up the side of his thick neck. His massive arms could have broken me into kindling.

"I nailed him," I said.

The sea of love had deteriorated into a crashing squall. One of the priests was on the stage, pleading for peace while spectators at the edge of the park threw food and bottles. There was blood now, and the police were making inroads. A riot crew had arrived and was pressing in, squashing brawlers with their shields, and it woke me. This wasn't my war.

I pushed my way to the road, where another small riot was in progress. Six men were dancing on a car with all their might, crumpling metal and kicking in what was left of the glass. The television crew had returned and was filming intently, while the cherished homeless clapped and cheered around the spectacle.

That's when I saw the man. He was standing in a shop doorway, hands clasped, watching the destruction of the car. I guessed he was about thirty, handsome in a grave way, blonde hair clipped short, shades of gold and savannah brown. He wore a gray suit and crisp white shirt, burgundy tie knotted so tightly under the collar I wondered how he could breathe.

It was his expression that touched me, the lines drawn at the corners of his eyes and mouth, not anger or horror but...sorrow. Genuine pain. It made me think of a face a young king would have, too soon. I passed him in a moment and he didn't glance at me. But I had an impulse, a mental flash of sliding my finger along his neck and into his collar, tugging loose his tie.

I was out of the worst now, shouts and sirens falling away behind me, and I slowed to a jog. The side of my head was throbbing and the rest of my body felt ragged and stretched, a boat in the shallows, hull scraping the rocks. The clock had wound down and I needed to dose, seriously.

You know, My True Love whispered, the Metro Needle Exchange van passes out free gear on Dundas. That's just a few blocks from here. There's sure to be someone you know, who'd be happy to make a trade for what's in your pocket. Brand X for brand Y.

I swung in between two buildings, a shortcut to Dundas, and stopped cold. Three lanky silhouettes were at the far end of the alley, turned in and booting wildly in a vicious game of kick-the-can. When my eyes adjusted I saw the man on the ground, curled up on his side.

“I’m walking out to you now. How do you like it?”

A savage blast made him twist and moan and I caught a glimpse of his face, streaked with blood. It was the gunfighter, the bold one. My nerve endings shrieked at me to go, but how could I leave him? There was an empty garbage can against the brick wall and I seized it, one hand on each end, and charged down the alley.

One saw me coming and leapt back, then bolted away. I blew into the two others like a battering ram, knocking them to the ground. I started swinging before they got up, dull hits ringing metal in my bones. One got behind me and booted my thigh, a blow that sent me reeling. But I didn’t fall. I whipped around on a gust of fury and blasted him into the wall. I pinned him with the can, pushing until his breath was a ragged wheeze.

“Tell your friends,” I said.

I eased up enough to let him twist free and he loped away, holding his ribs. I dropped the can and it hit the ground with a hollow clank. The gunfighter was hunched over on his elbows, trying to get to his feet. I hesitated, then reached out and let him grab my hand in a slippery, trembling grip.

He staggered back heavily and leaned against the wall. His left eye had already squeezed shut, cheek and forehead swelling up like two baseballs. His nose had bled all over his T-shirt and another cut gaped above his right ear.

“Those fuckers. Waiting for me.” He spit a string of saliva and blood, then squinted at me with his good eye. “How bad?” he said, meaning his face.

“Not too bad,” I lied. “You might not need stitches.”

He nodded then began to pat his jacket. “Help me find my phone.”

We searched the litter along the alley and I found it twenty feet down, against the wall. He carried it to the sidewalk, standing in the circle of a streetlight. He dialed with a single button, and held up his other hand, signaling me to wait.

“Knowle, it’s me, Conlan. I need you to pick me up. They caught me pretty bad. Well, who do you think? The Militia. Yeah, I know I’m in shit, but what was I going to do? They went after us first.” He whipped up his clenched fist in a sudden flex. “We gave them the goddamn arm.”

That movement and the word together seemed to crystallize in my brain, an electric revelation. I realized I’d seen it before, seen it tonight, on the screen in Mattie’s apartment. ARM. The Anti-Racist Militia. I touched my pocket cautiously - the disc was still there, intact. The night was suddenly crackling again with luck and money.

Conlan was giving the address. “And move it, okay? Before the bastards come back. And bring some bandages. I’m bleeding here.”

Actually he was looking better, standing straighter, the wound on the side of his head starting to coagulate. He tucked the phone away and glanced back into the alley at the garbage can, laying on its side where I’d left it, dented with a deep V.

He grinned at me with the side of his mouth that still had movement.

“You fucking madman. I owe you big.”

“Well,” I grinned back, “I’ve been looking for a beer all night.”

The bar Conlan took me to wasn’t on the nightclub strip. Sandwiched between a faded warehouse and a small apartment block, the stuccoed two-story made me think of an old grocery store, the kind with rooms to rent upstairs. The front door was no longer in use and the display windows were boarded up. Cinder blocks had been laid unevenly over the scrap of lawn, discouraging grass and sightseers. From the curb the building looked abandoned except for the pulsing throb of heavy metal bass and a glowing stripe of blue neon. Die Maschinerie.

We went in through the back. Inside, the walls had been cleared to create one large room, studded with bearing posts. It reminded me of a final outpost, a field canteen that had been hammered together overnight. Army camouflage rubbed shoulders with denim and leather, brushed against bare skin and tattoos. There was a small flock of young men in tidy haircuts and cotton button-down shirts, looking all the world like Mormons who’d lost their way.

The icons were everywhere. The swastika taped to one wall seemed to leap across the room and strike me between the eyes. Beside it was a large flag, a red rectangle marked with a blue X and lined with stars. Another poster consisted of the initials, AS, cut up the middle by a flaming sword. Aryan Sons. Nailed around the room were hand-drawn placards of grim soldiers and smiling white families, as jarring and explicit as old war posters. White Pride. Rise and Resist. Protect the Canadian family. These weren’t images from ClipArt, I thought.

I knew the repulsion I was supposed to have, but instead I felt the same curiosity I had in a museum, staring at ancient banners, my fingers on the glass.

Conlan noticed me looking. “You’ll see the whole dog and pony show here,” he said. “You’re in-country now.”

He’d bandaged himself up decently in the john and the two of us had settled in at a table to drink. His friend had only dropped us off and left again. We were alone, and Conlan was telling me about his boss, Jim Rusk, who was upstairs in a meeting.

“The guy with the bullhorn?” I said.

“Christ, no! Don’t make that mistake,” Conlan said. The night’s march into the Sea of Love had been hastily thrown together by Stuart Pope, head of the Aryan Sons. News of the ARM’s involvement in the rally had come almost too late, and Pope had simply gathered volunteers from whoever was in the club. Conlan had gone with them on impulse.

“That’s why I don’t know if I’m in shit,” he said wryly. “Jim Rusk hates Stuart Pope, but the ARM is fucking criminal. The True North would have organized its own march, if we’d known about it in time.”

The True North was Jim’s group, and Conlan wanted to make sure I knew they weren’t like the Aryan Sons or the Northern Hammerskins.

“We’re patriots, you know? We’ve got the newsletter, the web site, everything. I’m in this because I love my country. I’m not afraid to say that. I’m not afraid to tell anybody I won’t let my country be the toilet for the rest of the world. And it’s not going to be the launching pad for every nutcase who wants to blow

up the US, either. It just will not fucking happen.”

I liked Conlan. He was simple machinery, but sincere. I nodded as I listened, the disk safely zipped in my jacket. I was sure it was worth a bundle, if I could get it to the right person.

Conlan and two others were the True North’s executive staff. They lived and worked in Jim Rusk’s big house, for room and board and minimum wage. It was a great deal, he said, except that their boss was really...straight. No booze, no parties, no scuffles with police.

“You work for Dudley Do-right,” I blurted.

The image of the cartoon Mountie made Conlan laugh, then wince. He touched his face, as if making sure it held together.

“Yeah, okay. He’s Dudley Do-right.” His voice lowered. “But you watch. This guy’s going to be somebody. He’s brilliant.”

“Anyone who signs your checks is brilliant,” I said.

“No. He used to be a lawyer, but you’d never know it. I mean, he’s not an asshole or anything. And it’s not like he had to go into law -- he was already rich.”

“He sounds like quite a guy,” I said, edging forward in my chair. “I’d like to meet him. You said he’s here tonight?”

No chance, Conlan told me. Whatever was going on upstairs, he wouldn’t interrupt it for anything. I wheedled and cajoled through one more beer before I realized that a brick wall, even pleasantly plastered, was still brick.

I stood up. “I’ll be right back,” I said. I went into the john and did a little self-medicating, but instead of returning I ducked into a stairwell I’d noticed earlier. I went up lightly, a meteor caught between the old wooden walls, my eyes fixed on the square of light above me. In the dark passage at the top I hung back, not daring to look in, but listening intently.

I recognized Stuart Pope’s voice, even without the megaphone. “They heard it,” he was saying. “No one rushed up to shake my hand.”

“Not on top of a soap box. As I said before, we have to take the story to the media and let them fan it out. That’s where the pressure will come from -- for an inquiry, a criminal investigation. At the very least, the ARM’s funding will be suspended.” It was a professional voice, smooth and low, but not slick. “And if we collaborate our information, the allegations will have more clout...”

“Clout.” The third man was pissed. “Listen, we could solve this in a week if we just got pro-active on these dickheads, follow them around and break up their parties for a change.”

“Break a few heads?” the professional snapped.

“I find it odd,” Pope broke in, “that a man who’s been so vocal about not being a racist, who was so quick to denounce several of my members in that rag he calls a newsletter, would be willing to collaborate, just for a little media exposure. Rusk, I thought you bought all your publicity, like you bought those boys. The ones who live at your house.”

“Those men,” Rusk pressed coldly on the word, “are my full-time staff. If they could find somewhere to live in this city on minimum wage, they’d go there. And I think you, of all people, understand what it means to be without sufficient funds, Stuart.”

“I don’t have to pay for loyalty!”

“Now if only you didn’t have to pay for bail,” Rusk shot back. “How many do you have in remand tonight? Ten? A dozen?”

Pope’s voice was oily with glee. “Then you’d better count all your puppies when you get home, because I could have sworn some of them were standing behind me.”

There was a short, stiff silence.

“I’m sorry I wasted your time, gentlemen. But I’m sorrier I wasted my own. Good luck with your legal troubles. You’re sure to have them.”

I heard his determined footsteps heading out, and I stumbled back into the darkness, heart pounding. He brushed past me in a blur of grey, yet I felt a start of recognition. Was it...? I waited before I slipped into the stairwell, following down the faint trail of cologne. At the bottom step I paused, looking around, then pushed out through the fire-exit door that led to the main street. I saw a glimmer down the road, streetlight catching on his pale hair. He was already at his car.

“Mr. Rusk!” I leapt into a jog. He turned and straightened, shoulders squared against me, handsome face pulled into a warning.

“Yes?” he demanded as I strode up.

I was panting lightly, but I grinned, surprised by the pleasure of seeing him again, the young king in the doorway. “Mr. Rusk...how do you do.”

He didn’t smile. “Who are you? What do you want?”

“I’m a friend of Conlan’s.”

“Is he all right?” Rusk was looking at the side of my face and I remembered my own cut, still fresh.

“He’s fine. He’s...in the club.”

Rusk shifted impatiently. “What can I do for you, Mr....?”

“I understand you have an interest in a certain radical group, the Anti Racist Militia,” I said. The words ran an electric current through him, although he tried to hide it. He glanced over his shoulder at Die Maschinerie, then back to me.

“A lot of people are interested in the ARM. Why?”

I drifted closer to his car, a dark green Infiniti. “Is there somewhere we could go to talk?”

He stepped abruptly into my path. “We are somewhere. Talk.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the disk. “Do you have a laptop?”

He did, and sitting sideways in the passenger seat of his car, his feet on the curb, he brought it to life and slipped in the disk. I stood beside him, hanging onto the open door, so close I was inhaling him now, the masculine blend of soap and sweat, even the cotton of his expensive shirt. He smelled like money, or better.

Rusk had the ARM logo up now, and took several runs at opening the file. Just then I felt a dangerous tickle in my nose and sniffed. Damn! This happened sometimes, waterworks at the end of a dose, my body telling me that the clock had run down. I sniffled again, irritated, and reached down to release the disk into my hand.

He looked up. “What is this? Where did you get it? Who are you?”

“Two hundred dollars,” I said.

A flicker crossed his face and my heart quickened. I knew what lust looked like in a man. But then he closed the computer screen and stood up, placing it on the seat behind him.

“It’s a logo,” he said. “So what? You can download it from their web site.”

“It’s a file, but it’s password coded. I’m sure you know someone who could remedy that tomorrow, if not tonight.”

“To find what?”

“Something that’s worth locking up.” I sniffled again -- God, this was the worst ever. I noticed Jim Rusk watching me closely, scouring my face, my every movement. It made me uneasy. I ran my hand across my nose, knowing I had to hurry this along. “A hundred dollars. Even a grocery list from the ARM is worth that much.”

“I don’t know you, and you obviously don’t know me.” He shut the passenger door. “I don’t buy information, and frankly, I don’t believe it’s yours to sell. That makes you a traitor or a thief. I don’t deal with men like that.”

I almost laughed out loud. The pompous asshole. “Is that why you left the bar? You were too honorable for law?”

His face opened in a flash of surprise, then tightened. “A quality that obviously doesn’t hinder you in your profession.” He brushed past me on his way to the driver’s side, and I stared in disbelief. I knew he wanted it. How could he walk away? When he opened the door, I panicked.

“Lee,” I blurted across the green roof. “My name is Lee Dahl.” He finally looked at me. “And I didn’t steal it, I found it. In a mall.”

“Radical terrorists don’t leave sensitive information laying around malls.”

“You mean they never forget anything, lose anything? They’re never unlucky?”

He was silent for a moment as the thought worked through him, and I let myself stare. I liked his grave,

square face and the broad silhouette of his shoulders against the glow of the street. I liked it very much.

“There are other people in that club who would pay for this, Mr. Rusk. But what Conlan said about you impressed me.”

The bald flattery turned up one corner of his mouth. “What -- that I wouldn’t have you beaten to get it?”

I had a great comeback, but my nose was out of control now. I sniffled, then again, then wiped at it with my hand. Damn, would this never turn off? Suddenly Rusk reached into his pocket and handed me a hankie across the car roof. It was the real thing, cotton as fine as tissue paper, and I was grateful to get it. I walked around to his side of the car, wiping up my troubles, amazed that anyone carried these things any more. But what did you do with someone’s hankie after you’d used it? I tucked it into my own pocket.

He’d shut the door -- a positive sign. It was time to sew this up.

“Tonight only, for men of impeccable character, I can offer this quality piece of plastic for the rock-bottom price of 60 dollars.”

There was the pause of a heartbeat. “Do you have a problem with drugs, Mr. Dahl?”

It caught me off guard. “Define ‘problem.’”

His face softened before my eyes, relaxed into a weariness that was both sad and strangely...gentle. “It’s time for you to go home. Come on, I’ll get you a cab.”

He turned and started determinedly for the nearest cross street, still busy with traffic at one a.m. I loped after him. I didn’t believe this man!

He didn’t turn when I trotted up, but lifted his hand in an expert wave to flag a taxi. One swung in promptly.

I was still holding the disk. “Last chance -- fifty bucks?”

He leaned past me and handed the driver a crisp twenty. Then he opened the back of the cab for me.

I hung onto the door, almost laughing with frustration and bewilderment. This had become absurd! “You’re doing yourself a disservice, Mr. Rusk.”

The words made him smile. “Better me than you. Go home, Mr. Dahl. Please.”

He was sincere and an odd sensation rippled through me -- was it admiration? I knew I might hunt up another customer at Die Maschinerie, but I remembered how he’d looked in the doorway, so imperial and handsome.

“Would you trade me for it?” I said.

I’d surprised him again. “Trade? For what?”

“Your charming tie.”

He hovered for a moment -- I could almost see his rationale racing. What could I do with his tie? But his brown eyes were alight with sudden possibility, and he did want it. He tugged the knot loose and pulled it free from his collar like a burgundy snake. When he undid the top button of his shirt, his throat looked so ruddy and naked I felt a surge against my zipper.

He handed me the tie and I wound it around my knuckles in a thick bandage. I passed him the disk and he slipped it into his pocket without taking his eyes from me. Then he offered me a business card.

It was a printed invitation to the True North Patriot Nights, held the first Monday of every month. I smiled and gave it back to him.

"I'm afraid I'm not a joiner, although you make it very tempting," I said boldly. I brought my hand to my nose and inhaled the layers of silk. "Pierre Cardin," I said, lifting an eyebrow.

I saw him flush -- was he shocked? I swung into the cab and we pulled away. In the rearview mirror I caught sight of him still on the sidewalk, staring after me.

But I had another trade to make, an important one.

"Dundas," I told the driver. "You're looking for a grey van."

I sat back and unwound the tie from my hand, looking at it, running it through my fingers. I liked it, heavy and soft at the same time, the color of dark wine. I'd never had a tie. Within an hour I was wearing it on my arm, holding one end taut in my teeth, a mouthful of silk, the rich, confident scent of the man filling my nostrils as my own veins rose up before my eyes, erect and beautiful, the last sweet milliseconds before penetration.



# CHAPTER FOUR

I loved Chelsey from the moment my father put her into my arms, on the day he left. I'll never forget the warm, squirming, round-bellied shape of her, short legs flailing, muzzle flipping back and forth as she tried to lick me. I struggled not to drop her, tried to keep my head back because her wild tongue was a shock against my face. It was all a shock. I hadn't asked for a pet.

"We'll share her," Reine said, fidgeting at my elbow, trying to get a grip on her. "She'll be both our dog."

"Sorry, sport," my father said. "You're big enough to understand. You don't need her. And she'll be easier to train if she only listens to one person."

Reine was big. He was seven years older than me and nobody's sport. He drew himself up, chin jutting out, body straightening into a dare. But my mother's voice cut through the room.

"He's right. A dog can only have one master," she said, looking at dad. Then, softer, "Let Lee have it, Reine."

Chelsey was mine alone. I was the one who fed her, before my own breakfast, when the sharp, meaty smell of kibble made my empty stomach sway. I was the one who put papers down in the kitchen and cleaned them up again, and who scooped the back yard, eyes watering, holding my breath. But I was also the one who got to run with her in the field by our house, tumbling into the grass, laughing at her wet nose in my ear. I was the one who had her on my bed at night, fingers resting on her warm, silky side, watching her quick puppy breaths move my hand like a miracle.

My brother got something else. After my father left Thunder Bay, Reine never sat with the kids again. At picnics and barbecues with our cousins, he sat beside our mother at the adult table, saying nothing, but leaning forward on his big arms. He wore a lot of T-shirts, showing off the hair that had sprung up on his forearms like a dark forest.

Not everyone was pleased he was there; teenagers weren't welcome in adult conversation.

"He knows everything," I heard my mother say once, simply and with finality.

Lying in bed at night, listening to the rise and fall of their voices in the kitchen, I came to realize that 'everything' included Brenda, and that my father had not been completely reluctant to work in the mouth.

My brother had begun shaving in grade nine and in the years following dad's departure he grew a mile, up and across, a solid, dark brick of a young man. He walked around our little split level house, studying the paint, gutters and eaves. He plowed the lawnmower across the yard with grim determination, as if he wanted to scrape the grass right off. He'd tell mom, "I don't like the sound of that furnace. It's squealing. A belt is going to go."

"Well, maybe we should call someone..."

"I already did."

The relief in her face made her beautiful. “Good boy.”

My father sent money every month, a check folded in a blank piece of paper. My mother went to work anyway at Canadian Paper, one of the mills, in food services. She had a navy uniform with Helen embroidered on the pocket, and came home wilted, smelling of the deep fryer. I remember her stretched out in the living room chair like a rag doll, Reine at her feet, his thick fingers massaging slow circles on her white ankles.

“Helen’s going for the sympathy vote,” one of my aunts sniffed. “The injured party. She’s got her accounting, you know.”

There was something about my mother they didn’t trust now, how her sudden laughter made my uncles turn to look. She let her dark hair grow, then pinned it up, her bare neck long and pale. It made me think of a goose, or a tall porcelain vase.

I don’t know what it made Reine think of. I saw him staring more than once, standing in the shadows beyond the kitchen, watching the back of her as she swayed between the counter and sink, cleaning up. By sixteen he was a full head taller than her, and he’d grown a moustache. And somehow as my brother grew larger, my mother grew smaller.

“Reine, could you carry this box to the basement?” “Could you open this jar?” “Could you get that bowl down for me?”

He’d stride in languidly and reach up to the top shelf, an easy stretch for his big body, but he took his time.

“My hero,” she’d say, running her hand over his shoulder or down his arm. It made him glow under the dark stubble on his cheeks.

I believed in heroes, the real ones. While the two of them talked over the same sad story every night in the kitchen, I read in my bedroom, socks stuffed along the bottom of the door to hide the light. I read about Jason and the Argonauts, the Seven Labors of Heracles, the Battle of Troy. I loved the names of the champions.

“Achilles, Ajax, Diomedes,” I whispered out loud, as if they were incantations. Chelsey would sigh in her sleep, warm and heavy against my side, but she wouldn’t stir. I think my voice was already part of her dreams.

I could dream awake. I spent the evenings flying on my bike, the little mill city fading to ancient Greece in the dusk. The huge steel barges in port became the Argive ships landing at Troy, and the flat-topped hump of Mount McKay was Olympus. And when the fog rolled in off Lake Superior and shrouded the buildings, it could only be the impenetrable mist Hera had sent to shield Jason.

Bold and belligerent, shamelessly proud of themselves, heroes were more alive than other people. They undertook dangerous quests for glory, roared into battle for vengeance and gain, and sometimes just for the fun of it. But they were also men who laughed and got drunk, and they were devoted to each other. When young Hylas was swept into a well by a nymph, Heracles let the Argo sail away without him because he was ‘yearning’ for the boy. I hovered over that word for a long time.

Achilles was my favorite, maybe because history had treated him so badly. People remember him only

for his weakness, the one heel that remained human and vulnerable because his mother held him by it when she dipped him in the flame of the immortals. They forget that Achilles had another heel, and that one belonged to a hero. He used both of them to charge boldly into the Trojans, changing the tide of an entire war, even though he knew he was destined to die because of it.

My destiny was not in Thunder Bay. It was a city built by sheer will and greed, a work camp scraped together because there were trees to harvest and a way to transport the plunder. The town had been hacked into the Canadian shield and was linked to the world by a highway dynamited through solid hills of granite. Thunder Bay hummed during the day and roared at night, motorboats burning circles on Lake Superior, trucks tearing up and down the highway, going fast and nowhere. Monday morning a hush hung over the city, the silence of men creeping back to their lives, careful of their pounding heads.

Thunder Bay was the city where Terry Fox had stopped. It was as far as he could get on his one-legged cross-Canada run for cancer research, and when he died they erected a bronze life-size statue of him next to the highway. It was defiled so regularly they eventually cordoned it off, but one night before that happened I snuck up on it in the dark. I climbed the pedestal, put my arms around him and kissed his cold bronze lips, my stomach fluttering. I'd heard it was good luck to kiss statues. I leapt back to the ground and clambered onto my bike, heart running with fear and exhilaration. I looked back at Terry's face in the moonlight, mouth open with pain and effort, his eyes fixed on some glowing, unseeable distance.

Reine was waiting on the back step as always, huge shoulders silhouetted against the yellow glow of the bug bulb. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Wherever the hell I wanted to go," I called back boldly, dropping my bike against the fence.

I still had to get past him. Sometimes I made it, but this night I slipped into the kitchen and suddenly hit the wall in a dull thud of pain, pinned by one big hand that twisted my shirtfront, knuckles digging into the base of my throat. My brother was good at this, an iron squeeze, a well-placed elbow, nothing that would leave marks.

"Say, 'I'm sorry, Reine.' Say, 'I'm real sorry I'm late.'"

There was nowhere to look but into his face, his dark bull's eyes, cheeks like two slabs of bristled meat. Down the hallway, closed in my bedroom, Chelsey was whining in alarm. She knew I was out there.

My heart throbbed under the sharp press of his knuckles. Do it, I told myself. Knee him. Once in the balls, just once!

I moved, the slightest twitch to pull away, and he yanked me forward and thumped me into the wall again. "Say it."

Gravel in my throat, my stomach. "I'm sorry."

He let me go and I stumbled to my room. Chelsey was all over me, wagging, licking, trying to fix it. I sat on my bed and stroked her, but I wouldn't let her lick my face. I didn't deserve her adoration.

"I'm such a fucking fool," I whispered, because I couldn't say that other word. Coward.

# CHAPTER FIVE

“You kept my room the way I left it,” I said. “You must have missed me.”

I don’t know if Louise smiled. She’d been ready to leave, an olive green coat over her uniform, yet she waited with me, her arm across my back, her female touch cool and strong against my flaming skin. The clock on the ward said 6:23. I knew it was January and that I’d turned nineteen last month, but I couldn’t have said the date to save my life.

An aide was making up my bed. He snapped the sheet and the billow of white made my stomach leap, an involuntary retch I had to clench my jaws against, even though I was sure there was nothing in my stomach. The tremors were starting up my legs again in a terrifying earthquake, and my fingers clutched the top of Louise’s sleeve, afraid to let go.

“I need Valium,” I croaked. “They gave me Narcan in Emergency -- I’m in full block. I need Valium tonight, before you go.”

“Look, your bed’s ready,” Louise said, steering me gently toward it. “You need to lie down.”

I was too weak to resist. I crawled carefully onto the bed, curled up on my side on top of the covers. I was sweating and freezing, afraid to put any weight on my skin, even the blankets.

Louise sat down beside me. Her hand moved to touch my forehead and my arm went with her -- I realized I was clinging to her wrist. I looked up into her face, luminous and smooth except for the feathery lines around her eyes, and the tug of worry at the corners of her mouth.

“You give Valium for D.T.s. This is worse, you know it is. I just need it tonight, that’s all. Otherwise I have to check out.” I grinned, even though it hurt. “And there goes your tip.”

“Janet, can you bring me another pillow?” Louise asked. “One from my office.”

I felt a pang at her kindness. There were no feather pillows on the ward, but Louise had a secret cache, smuggled in at her own expense, each one wrapped in plastic beneath its cotton casing. You had to be very sick to get one. When it came I hugged it to my stomach gratefully, wincing at the sudden stabs that had begun in my intestines. The advance troops. I had minutes, maybe, before the whole army marched into my bowels.

“You can’t keep me,” I said into the pillow. “If I don’t get Valium or Demerol I have to sign out right now.”

“Lee, you hit an orderly downstairs, in Emergency,” Louise said quietly, but firmly. “I talked to him. If you leave this hospital before the five-day detoxification, he’ll press charges.”

I had a dim memory of it, flashes of white and his dark, frightened face. There was no clock to run down, no time to brace yourself with Narcan. It blocked the neuroreceptors and you went directly from unconscious bliss into full, furious, screaming withdrawal.

“And you have no clothes,” Louise continued. “They went to the laundry. You messed them pretty badly.

Even your shoes. And it's snowing out."

Over her shoulder I could see the window on the far wall, white hurtling out of the black sky, ice crystals chittering as they struck the glass.

"We don't know who left you outside Emergency, but you were going into respiratory failure, starting to asphyxiate on vomit. It ravages your system, a shock like that. You're dehydrated and malnourished. If you shoot up tonight, you will overdose. I've seen it happen, Lee. Do you understand? You will die."

Pain twisted deep in my guts, wrenched me more tightly around the pillow. I moaned into the soft darkness, rage and anguish and fear.

She stroked the back of my head.

"You can make it..."

"No, I can't!"

"Yes, you can. You've done it before. You're the one who always tells me, 'I'll do it myself.'"

My mind was sprinting ahead in panic. Had they phoned my father from Emergency? Was he coming? Would he bring me some clothes? I'd check back in tomorrow first thing, if I could just have some money tonight. I was ready to get straight, I really was, but I needed a send off. I couldn't do this without a send off.

"...and I'll be in at eight o'clock." I felt the mattress shift as she stood up, and lifted my head in alarm.

"Louise, wait."

A spike seemed to drive into the back of my skull, from the effort or the sight of her walking away. She was leaving with purpose, a determined rustle of military green past the row of beds. Lying, sitting or eating dinner, all the patients looked up, as if the sun was passing by. But none of them could have loved her more fiercely than me.

"I'm getting Methadone this time!" I called hoarsely after her. "You're going to write me fucking Meth!"

Savage pummels in my bowels, a dozen rabbit punches. I pushed myself up on shaky arms, hobbled to the closest bathroom, unable to straighten up. My rectum was burning. By the time I got the door closed and pulled down my hospital pants, I'd already begun to shit down my leg. I sat down anyway, sliding against my own filth, and picked up one of the white buckets that was in each bathroom. I leaned my face into it and began to retch immediately, foul, bitter strings I tried to spit into the bucket.

In a terrible moment I realized I wasn't even revolted. Someone was going to have to come in here and clean me up, wash me down like a baby, and I wasn't even concerned. This had become normal. And that's when I was afraid.

And none of it, not the pain or filth or cold fear in my chest hushed for a second the song my True Love was screaming in my ear. GetoutGetmoneyGetjunk! GetoutGetmoneyGetjunk!

I was still alive at eight in the morning. I'd slept a few hours and managed a shower around dawn, or what passed for it in the unreal, subdued lighting of the ward. The rest of the time I'd been curled up on

my bed, shivering, or in the john, losing it. Somehow I still had enough fluid in me for my nose to run continuously.

At 8:03 I was in Louise's office, trembling in the chair, my hands clasped contritely in my lap. Hunger had honed my thoughts into a single razor sharp point, and I regretted last night. You don't get drugs from medical staff by swearing at them.

There was a window behind Louise's desk, a depressing slate of grey and white, concrete buildings whipped by snow. Against that palette she glowed, pink and alive. It was a shock, sometimes, to see the color that normal people were.

"Hi, did you sleep?" she asked.

"A little."

"Have you been able to eat anything?"

"No, look -"

"Then I want to start a saline IV, if we can get a vein, and move onto saline and glucose as soon as possible."

"You did call my dad last night," I broke in. "Somebody called from Emergency? I tried until midnight and all I could get was his machine."

Louise folded her hands carefully on the manila folder in front of her, my file.

"You know, Lee, it's time to take stock of what's really going on here."

"I'm sick! That's what's going on."

"It's the third time and you just turned nineteen."

"Do I get Frequent Flyer points?"

She didn't crack a smile. "Do the math. What does that mean by the time you're twenty one? Six more times? Ten?"

I couldn't stop the image, the string of days spent coiled up in misery. I'd been on this ride fourteen hours and it was an eternity. "I'll never make ten," I blurted.

"You're right, you won't. Lee, this is your second overdose. There's part of me that can't even believe I'm looking at you, that you're not downstairs in a drawer. There are people who use heroin for years and years, but you won't be one of them."

That word, just the sound of it went through me in a shriek of lust and pain. Shut up. Shut up.

I leaned into my hand. "My head hurts. I need Tylenol."

"This is not about character, Lee. We've talked about it, you know that. It's about chemistry and biology, about the unstoppable reaction when -"

"I said my head hurts! I need Tylenol!"

"I'll get you a cold cloth," Louise said.

"It's just aspirin, for Christ's sake. You're a hospital, aren't you? Why can't I have a fucking aspirin?"

She stood up. "If you're not ready to be here, we can do this another time. Maybe tomorrow."

Panic reined me up short. I needed relief today, right now. I slumped into my hand again.

"I'm sorry. I'm just sick," I said quietly. Then, "Yes, I'd like a cloth. Please."

To be honest, it did feel better, a cool, damp swath to lean my burning skin against. I asked Louise to close the blinds and the stabbing pain behind my eyes settled into a steady throb. It wasn't tolerable, but nothing was tolerable. Louise moved to shut the office door and on her way past she touched me, a small, kind stroke on my shoulder that smoothed the space between us again. She had an unfair advantage, being a mother.

But she wasn't mine. Louise opened my folder. "All right, you were released into your father's care on August 30th," she started.

"I was clean for twenty-six days."

"And then what happened?"

"Nothing. I just went out for a beer."

"But why that day?" Louise pressed. "What happened?"

"Nothing! I know you want trauma, but there wasn't any. I'd just been stuck in the house with my father breathing down my neck twenty-four hours a day, making sure I didn't nip away at Brenda's hairspray. I can't imagine why I needed a break."

"What did you do about school? Or a job?"

"I...was thinking about the army," I said. "I even had the application."

If she was surprised it didn't show. "But instead you went out for a beer and met some friends and they had dope."

"No, it doesn't happen like that. Money finds me, dope finds me."

"Oh, Lee..."

"Really! I'm the luckiest guy you'll ever meet."

"Yes, you're so damned lucky you're going through severe chemical withdrawal for the third time!"

She caught herself, seemed to regret the rise in her voice. She placed both hands firmly over my file, palms down.

“You have to acknowledge the pattern, and the fact that it’s not just repeating, it’s accelerating. Your clean time is getting shorter and you’re getting to a break point -- an overdose, an accident -- faster and faster.”

I straightened in my chair, heart quickening with excitement I tried to swallow back. “I know, I can see it. I walk out of here with the best intentions and then one thing slides to another, and suddenly I’ve blown it. Last time you said, ‘If nothing changes, nothing changes.’ And you’re right, it didn’t.” Too fast, too slick! Slow down. “I don’t want to do this anymore. I want to wake up and know what day it is, I want more than one reason to get out of bed.” Soft pause, clasp the hands. “I think I’m ready for an intervention program.”

“I absolutely will not prescribe Methadone.”

“And why not, for Christ’s sake!”

She leaned forward, bristling. “Because it’s not a cure, it’s a drug and it’s a life. It means going downtown to the clinic every single day so someone can stand there and watch you take it. Your life is just starting. I won’t doom you to a future that revolves around medication.”

I tried to cut in, but she hurried on, a little vein rising on her pale forehead.

“And you know what else? I believe you can do this. I’ve seen you kick this twice, stay on the ward and sweat it out the whole five days, nasty and belligerent, but you make it through. I agree you need support, especially after you get out, but Methadone is a last resort. You haven’t tried anything else, not AA or NA or residential treatment. You’ve made no attempt to change your life patterns, and until you do, nothing in the world will keep you clean.”

I pushed myself to my feet, swaying and burning, sick but defiant. “I want my clothes. I’m signing out right now.”

“I told you, if you leave, charges will be laid.”

“I don’t care. They’ll never stick. Give me my clothes.”

“They’re not ready. The laundry doesn’t come up until five o’clock.”

“Then I’ll phone my dad to bring me some. But I am signing out right now!”

A flicker crossed her face, a twinge. “He’s not coming.”

“Bullshit.”

“When we phoned from Emergency, he said he couldn’t watch you do this anymore. He won’t see you, he won’t even talk to you.” Her voice softened. “I spoke to him myself. That bridge is burned, Lee.”

It hit me in a dropkick of pain and disbelief; I didn’t have the breath to speak. I sat down carefully, still gripping the cloth in one hand, so warm now it didn’t feel wet. Dimly I was aware that fluid from my nose had run down my face and was dripping onto my shirt. Louise stood, alarmed by my silence.

“Let’s get you back to bed. I’ll go see about that IV right now. Please, just...hold still.”



I was staring at the closed blinds, still able to see the snow that swirled and battered hopelessly against the concrete and glass.

In an hour I was no longer sick, I was lost in a howling wasteland of wretchedness, a tundra in which junk was the whole sky, boundless and untouchable, pinning me to the earth. If someone had shown up with my clothes, I couldn't have put them on. I was battered by storm after storm, rages of heat and ice, my True Love screeching like an incessant wind. And in that endless barrenness a single flame burned, white hot. It got me out of bed every few hours and as far as the ward phone, dragging the IV pole behind me.

"You coward," I said after the beep. "You weak, spineless coward. Does Brenda know you don't have the guts to be a father? You were running away before you even left mom - to the university, to a conference, to the lab to make teeth. If that's what you were doing. Does Brenda know you were balling other technicians before you ever met her? What makes her think you're not doing it now? She wants your kid, but she should take a close look at how you treat the ones you already have, Dad."

I said a lot of other things, too, not as polite. Louise had me in her office twice a day, trying to get me to talk my anger out. I wasn't interested in counseling. I was completely absorbed by one subject.

"...pounding. It's like someone hammering glass against my brain, grinding it into my eyes. And then there are sudden rushes, blasts of pain so bad I'm actually dizzy. Tylenol 3's wouldn't do much, but they'd take the edge off. Even if I could have one, just so I could catch my breath, think for a minute..."

"I know it hurts," she broke in gently. "But put that aside for a moment and concentrate on the future. Lee, you don't have anywhere to go once you leave this hospital. Where are you going to live? How are you going to eat? If you commit to closed residential treatment you'll have a bed for six weeks, meals, counseling."

"It's perfect except you can't walk out the door," I snapped. "I can get the same vacation in jail."

"And you just might if you leave here without a plan. I know you don't have a record, but no one is lucky forever."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I'm a fabulous thief."

"We get a lot of fabulous thieves through here. Sooner or later they all have to be treated for a prolapsed rectum."

"I have never fucked for money!"

She met my eyes. "And you've always had a place to go, too."

But I was having a very hard time considering my future, imagining anything beyond the ward doors. I'd been down this road twice and I knew what was coming, could feel my whole being steeling against it, trying to screech to a halt.

I've heard people -- doctors -- compare heroin withdrawal to a very bad case of the flu. Well, the flu never made me want to kill myself. Withdrawal is a week-long holocaust that crests at the midpoint and then plummets into unspeakable despair. The second the physical reaction eases up, depression rushes in to grip every molecule once occupied by agony. It isn't pain, it's a roar, the haunting sound of a hollow

universe. Like a tiny meteor that blasts a canyon into the earth, the hole junk leaves behind is infinitely more vast than the space it took up.

"I want my books," I told my father's answering machine. "The Illiad, The Odyssey, Gods and Heroes, all of them. I paid for every single one and they're mine. Put them in a bag and leave them at the desk. You don't have to look at me. But those are my books and I need them."

It was the truth. Those stories had saved my life growing up, and I'd discovered that even in the desolation of detox they still had the power to sling a familiar arm around my shoulders and take me away, out of the horror that was my body, even if only for a few minutes at a time. I needed to see Jason stride into the city of Lemnos in his crimson mantle, 'as radiant as a star.' I needed to see Achilles thunder into the Trojans who'd killed his beloved Patrocles, 'raging like a forest fire whipped on by swift winds.' I needed, I needed, and they did not come.

"That asshole," I told Louise. "You know why he's doing this, don't you? It's not enough to abandon me, he's going to make me pay. My books are the only thing I want so he's going to hold onto them, make me suffer."

"Maybe he'd consider it if you put out some effort that showed you were serious about change." Louise paused. "AA, Lee. Tonight at eight. You know the room."

I did. It was impossible to miss the nightly event, the only time when the TV room was locked up tight. At quarter to eight the Captain swung in, reminding, cajoling, badgering until half the ward was shuffling down the hall in their plastic-covered shoes. I even knew most of Program, memorized from the back of a pamphlet, right from Step One, "Admitted we were powerless over alcohol and drugs -- that our lives had become unmanageable," down to Step Eight, "Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all." I couldn't get farther than that, even in my imagination.

"I'll never join the loser's club," I told Louise.

That night I dreamed I was starving in the desert. I dreamed I had to eat my dog. I woke up choking, dry sobs that ripped my torso open from my balls to my heart. I struggled to sit up, clutching my pillow, gasping into it, letting the sound trickle out in soft, helpless moans. It's all right. It's all right. She's gone. It's finished.

But I was afraid to lie down and fall into the horror again. Chelsey had died a year ago in the summer, but I knew she'd been sick long before that. I'd already started flying through the clubs and I was busy, busy, busy.

"You know, she's not eating," Brenda told me. "I put her food out in the morning and she's hardly touched it when we come home after work."

She began vomiting up what little she did eat. I would wake in the morning to the sharp, rancid meat smell and she'd be sitting beside my bed, head down, brown eyes dark with remorse.

"It's all right, Chels," I'd sigh. I'd stumble out to the living room to clean it up, hung over and in my underwear. Again and again. Finally I took her to the vet.

"Kidney disease," he said.

I was stunned. I'd always been so careful of her diet and exercise. All he could suggest was an expensive

regimen of drugs and a rudimentary form of dialysis, where the toxins were temporarily flushed out through an IV system. “But it’s not a cure, and it’s not much of a life,” he said gently. “Don’t let her go too long.”

I couldn’t let her go at all. I ransacked the pet stores for herbal miracles, I pureed steak in the blender. As the toxins built up in her system, she would have violent convulsions. Her entire body would shake, eyes wide in terror as she breathed in spasmodic twitches, bowels and bladder out of control. I would kneel beside her, stroking her desperately.

“It’s all right, Chelsey, it’s all right.”

Once I saw Brenda standing in the doorway, watching us, looking white.

“Don’t say anything,” I started.

“Lee, if you love her...”

“Not a fucking word! I’ll clean it up.”

The second to last time it happened was at the park. She’d always loved the small playground a few blocks from my father’s house, and one Sunday in August I drove her over, hoping against hope that a change of scenery would help. Out on the crowded grass I tossed her favorite hockey ball and my heart soared as she began to trot after it. But on the way back she collapsed and began to convulse. I rushed over, feeling the alarm spread out around us. People stopped their games and drew in.

“Stay back,” I ordered. “It’s all right. I know what this is.”

When it was over, she couldn’t get up. I carried her to the car, her body as limp and light as a toddler’s. I put her gently in the passenger seat and shut the door.

The park was still motionless, adults and kids transfixed.

“Get a life!” I shouted at them. I stormed around to the driver’s side and peeled away, burning rubber. I made it three blocks before I had to pull over, my eyes swimming.

“I’m so sorry, Chels,” I whispered into my hands. And still I couldn’t take her where she needed to go.

She died that night in another seizure, frightened and in pain, in the arms of the man who was her hero.

I finally eased my face away from the pillow, taking shallow, careful breaths. The ward was dark except for the desk lamp at the nursing station, where Eleanor was reading a book. The night sounds were soft and regular, low snoring and the rasping breath of long-time smokers, the occasional muffled moan.

Day five was coming and I was scared, maybe for the first time. When I left this ward I only had two places to go, the wasteland or the process. The wasteland was residential treatment, the six weeks in lock-up Louise was pitching for. I knew people who’d been through it, court-ordered and otherwise. It would make the twenty-six days at my father’s house seem like a holiday.

If I didn’t go into the wasteland, I’d go into the process. Maybe I’d start out slowly, just a little here, a little there. It was a stroll that turned into a jog, the pace picking up so insidiously I wouldn’t even notice the breeze. I’d start stealing every day, then twice a day until I was running, legs moving without thought

or sensation, eyes closed, a blind trance of a run into the brick wall that was this place.

Louise didn't understand my kind of luck - one serious accident, two overdoses, three lucky sevens in the Almighty's game of HIV craps. No, I wasn't afraid of dying, but I was haunted by the alternative, the picture she'd painted that first morning in her office. How many times would I hit this wall? And I would keep hitting it, I knew that. The days stretched ahead of me like a single note striking to infinity, to madness. It was something I'd thought about more than once, while I held hands with my True Love in the subway, watching the trains come in.

I didn't know how to pray. I'd begged, all right, and I'd demanded things, but that wasn't like the raw pulse that beamed from my center now, simple and desperate.

I need another option. Give me another option and I'll take it.

For a single moment the ward was hushed, between breaths, dreams suspended, starched sheets resting more quietly than snow. Then at the end of the hall, I heard Eleanor turn a page.

# CHAPTER SIX

I had toast and canned peaches the next morning, the first time in four months I'd been able to force down something before noon. I found myself staring at the bright golden slices in the bowl, faintly surprised to remember that some things really were that color, all on their own.

I did something else I hadn't done in a long time. In the bathroom I locked the door, took a breath and turned to face the mirror.

I looked like a shipwrecked man. Ferociously thin, my collarbone was a shelf cut into a glacier. There were hollows under my eyes, valleys beneath frozen ponds, the only color in a dry pallor that was my True Love's calling card. I hadn't had a haircut since the fall, simply combing it back into a smooth blonde helmet, too dull to be metal. The beard might have helped, but it had grown in its usual way - red, sparse, patchy. I didn't look pathetic, only...dishonest. I wouldn't have given that man a dollar in the parking lot. Thief was written all over him, or something worse. It shook me. It's a terrible thing to look like what you are.

I needed to leave myself, very badly. I walked the length of the ward, past the beds and nursing station and the TV room, which was crowded even at this hour. It was the only place in the whole hospital where you could still smoke. On this ward, Louise explained, carcinogens were the least of our problems.

I walked past her office, too. The door was closed and I could hear someone sobbing inside. I knew we'd gotten two admissions early in the morning, people in the full force of the raw, needy hurricane of the first hours. Louise would be busy today.

I went into the empty reading room. I'd accepted that Achilles and Ajax weren't coming, and I was willing to take whatever was on hand. By sheer luck, the first National Geographic I pulled from the shelf was about the evolution of dogs. The familiar image on the cover caught me in a gust of longing. What if I really got myself straight this time? What if I had a job? No animal would ever take Chelsey's place, but maybe there was a dog somewhere, even at the pound...

Janet, the day nurse, leaned into the room.

"Lee, phone."

The nursing station was at the other end of the ward but I seemed to make it in three strides.

Don't blow it, Lee. Say you're sorry. Say you were sick. Apologize even if you choke on it.

I picked up the phone. "Well, it's about time," I blurted.

There was a moment's silence and I winced, kicking myself.

"No, actually it's a miracle. You have no fixed address, your family hasn't seen you in months, and every dirty transient in Eaton Centre thought I was a detective."

I felt lightheaded in the swoop of surprise, my mind searching to put a face to the voice, deep but not baritone, polished and...sincere.

“And no one would turn me in?” I said.

“Only for money.”

The peg dropped into the slot. “And you don’t pay for information, Mr. Rusk,” I said, pleased that I’d nailed him.

“No, I don’t, Mr. Dahl.” There was a shift of tone, not quite a softening. “I’m sorry about your troubles.”

I felt heat in my face, an unexpected sensation for me, the man who begged in Louise’s office daily.

“Everyone has their problems,” I said crisply. “I take it this isn’t a social call.”

“Ah...no. I was wondering if I could talk to you again, about the disk you gave me. You remember that night? I don’t know what your situation is, but would you come see me when you get out?”

The process or the wasteland. I hadn’t decided yet on out.

“No. But you can come see me now.”

Silence.

“It’s perfectly safe,” I said. “I’m in a straight jacket, strapped to a gurney. They’ll wheel me out for you.”

He laughed, a single, delighted note that I felt down to my toes.

“All right.”

I hung up, amazed. The memory of that September night flooded me and I remembered him, standing like a king and smelling better than money. I was suddenly sorry I’d lost the silk tie. I would have given anything to be wearing it when he walked into the ward.

“Is everything all right?” Janet rose to her feet behind the high counter.

“Can I have a razor, please?”

Her mouth tightened. Sharp instruments were doled out carefully in detox, guarded as scrupulously as medication.

I grinned at her. “Please, mom? I have a date.”

As she rifled through one of the supply drawers, I glanced down the hall at Louise’s office, the door still tightly shut.

“And I want my clothes,” I said calmly, but I felt a dizzying leap, the rush of the never-ending whisper rising to a train-whistle cry.

GetoutGetmoneyGetjunk! GetoutGetmoneyGetjunk!

I clenched my fists to steady myself and realized I was still holding the magazine in my left hand, rolled

into a tube. It gave me such a swell of hope that I took it with me to the showers, placing it carefully on top of the paper towel dispenser so it wouldn't get wet.

An hour later I was pleased with what I'd accomplished, showered, shaved and wearing the jeans and white sweatshirt I'd come in with. Actually, it was a shirt that remembered being white; the hospital laundry had done its best. I sat in one of the armchairs in the small reception area outside the ward, trying not to fidget. Yet the minutes dragged on and I twitched every time the elevator dinged, hope fluttering and then falling, wondering if he'd chickened out.

He finally strode into the ward, solid and dark in a black leather car coat, lightened only by a grey scarf at his neck and his blonde hair, rich layers of gold and brown. Lion colors. His cheeks were flushed, not from the cold, but maybe from heat. He'd come up five floors without unzipping his jacket. He didn't take off his gloves to sign in at Reception.

I was rooted in my chair for a moment. I was unprepared for his healthy, handsome presence, the vitality and confidence he beamed, just walking down the hall. I girded my non-existent loins and pushed myself up.

There was an awkward pause when he saw me, the shipwrecked man, even in clean clothes. I could see him grapple for what to say.

"Am I late?"

"They told me that I should just get on with my life, but I never gave up hope," I said with an oblique smile.

His color deepened and he looked sheepish. "I'm sorry. Traffic was horrendous. You'd think this city had never seen snow." His voice dipped charitably. "How are you?"

"Just ducky, thanks. How are you? How's the family?"

My pride was a splash in his face. "Is there somewhere we can talk?" he said.

"I have my own office."

Inside the ward we were stopped by Janet. "I'll take your coat, please," she said with an apologetic smile. Alarm flashed across his face, a naked sprint of fear before he cloaked it. Jim Rusk didn't want to be exposed to the air in here.

"They don't want anyone bringing me treats," I explained as he withdrew the cell phone from his pocket and shrugged off the coat. The HIV terror amused me. He and his fresh germs were the most dangerous thing on this floor.

He wasn't wearing a suit today, only cotton twill pants and a pullover sweater, charcoal grey interwoven with flecks of burgundy and cobalt. I led the way down the hall and noticed him staring at the glass cubicles, which happened to be empty.

"I don't rate a private room in this hotel," I started. "They're -"

"For D.T.'s," he finished, looking away.

As I turned into the reading room I could feel myself fading, my rush of energy ebbing away into the bone-tired, dull-edged misery that had become my regular day. I was still sick and I felt it. I motioned at him not to turn on the light, there was enough through the window, anyway. I lowered myself into a chair with surreptitious care, a man hiding an injury.

He missed nothing, but he was more careful with his pity now.

“How long have you been here?” he asked quietly.

“This time?”

A beat. “How old are you?”

“I turned 19 on December 19th. Sexy Sagittarius.” I grinned. “What can I do for you, Mr. Rusk?”

He said he needed to know exactly how I’d come to acquire the disk, anything and everything I could tell him about it.

“Why?”

“The information recovered from it is extremely sensitive and before we proceed...”

“Define ‘sensitive.’”

“An indictable offence, a charge that carries a sentence of at least five years, and possibly fourteen to life.”

“For?”

He fell silent. I let go a short breath. “You know, Mr. Rusk, I’ve had a real shitty week. The clinical depression is right on schedule and I expect to be suicidal by four o’clock. If you want my help, you’ll have to pick up the pace.”

He was leaning against a waist-high bookshelf, hands in his pockets. I could hear the faint jingle as he played nervously with his keys.

“It’s an explosives ladder,” he said finally. “A list of people who each hold a chemical or product that isn’t specifically illegal in itself, such as paraffin. When the technician or ‘cook’ receives the word, he simply picks up all the ingredients from the people on the list. They may not even know why they’re holding a particular product. It’s a low-risk method for stockpiling the materials to build bombs.”

I straightened in my chair. “No shit?”

He nodded solemnly. “But it’s still almost impossible to get an indictment, or even a search warrant, without proof of intent. The master list on the disk isn’t proof - unless it can be absolutely linked to a member of the Militia. Until then it’s only a lead. Who’s to say it wasn’t fabricated to incriminate someone? Once the Militia noticed the disk was gone, I’m certain they restructured their whole ladder. If you searched the addresses today you probably wouldn’t come up with a thing.”

I was listening intently, fascinated in spite of my misery.



“But with some kind of hard corroboration --”

“You could prove that the plan and materials had once been in place,” I cut in.

“And that’s an indictable offence.”

“And you would get the glory.”

“This isn’t about credit,” Rusk said. “It’s about public safety, people’s lives. I don’t care if anyone knows I’m involved -- I’d prefer they didn’t.”

I couldn’t stop the smirk. “How noble. But that’s the sort of thing I’d expect from you. A lesser man would just be happy that his adversaries were locked away for five or fourteen years.”

He pushed off the bookcase and began a slow pace away from me. He was looking down thoughtfully and even in the hushed light I could see the strong muscles in the back of his neck. I found myself liking him in that sweater, could imagine him walking a dog through the park on a crisp autumn day, or reading beside a fireplace on a winter afternoon.

“You know, I’m glad this is a diversion for you. Or rather, I’m relieved that it is. That night in September I honestly believed someone had sent you to...mislead me. It took a lot of careful investigation to prove to myself that wasn’t the case, that you were just...”

“An audacious little prick looking to make a buck?”

“Yes.” He smiled faintly. “But Conlan believes you saved his life, and after hearing the details, I don’t think I can argue with him. The ARM would have left him for dead if you hadn’t jumped in. You could almost say that was noble.”

I felt caught. “I guess even an audacious little prick can screw up, and do something nice. I promise, it won’t happen again.”

“Well, how about once more?” There was a desperate edge to his voice. “I need the truth. Where did you get the disk?”

I took a breath. “I found a key,” I began. He listened to my story attentively, but I know he had trouble believing it -- it was too simple, too full of coincidences. And why would someone leave a laptop in a mall locker?

“Everyone shops,” I said with a shrug, “and you said it was sensitive information. Maybe it’s too risky to store anywhere else. Maybe they’re paranoid their homes are being searched.”

“But why not just take the disk?” he mused. “Why drag the whole computer along?”

We looked at each other in the same instant.

“Because the most recent back-up is on the main drive,” I blurted.

“Date-coded, along with God knows how many more files.”

“Along with the serial number, which would have been filed for authorization with the warranty center.”

“Directly linking that computer to someone in the Militia,” Jim said excitedly. “Who did you sell it to!”

“I know where it is. I can get it back.”

He scooped his cell phone from the top of the bookcase and handed it to me. I took it but didn’t dial. My heart was running, the air sizzling with the lightning strike of luck. I got abruptly to my feet and went to the window, staring out at the snowy rooftop, my tight knuckles pressed against the sill. I was trembling, swearing softly under my breath, anything to drown out the sound of my True Love howling.

I could see him in the corner of my eye. He’d taken a step toward the door, alarmed. I was swaying at the edge of a canyon, mesmerized by the inexorable thrall of vertigo, body pulling apart, rushing over the edge one electron at a time, into the process.

“Lee?”

The sound of my own name shook me, like a hand on my arm. I turned and pulled up a shaky smile.

“Have you noticed I haven’t asked you for money?” I said.

He nodded, relieved that I was at least talking. But he didn’t give up his position by the door. “Are you all right? Do you want me to get someone?”

“No, just...listen.” I took a breath. “I’m no patriot, Mr. Rusk. I don’t care if the ARM blows up the whole city tomorrow, as long as it’s not the bit I’m standing on. I’ve got my own problems that I’m really trying to straighten out.”

“I can see that. I admire that,” he said.

“One of those problems is that I don’t have anywhere to go once I leave this hospital.”

“You should be in residential treatment. Six to eight weeks at ATS, or White Oak.”

It was my turn to be surprised. Addiction Treatment Services was a government facility, but White Oak was so private and discreet it wasn’t even listed in the phone book. The price quote had turned my father the color of his lab coat.

“Who in your family is the addict?” I said.

He looked offended, or he tried to. But I had the scent of him now, as he must have had mine four months ago. I stared brazenly into his lion’s eyes and wouldn’t let go. I wouldn’t hand back the phone, either. Finally he shut the door to the room with a barely audible sigh.

“My brother is an alcoholic. So was my father, until he died.”

“And you won’t even let your staff drink beer in the basement,” I said.

“No, I won’t.” He’d settled against the bookcase again, arms crossed over his chest. There was less light with the door closed, drawing shadows at the edges of his mouth, hollows under his eyes.

I started in his direction, a slow meander.

“Residential treatment won’t work for me, either. I don’t need to go to drug camp so I can sit around listening to addicts whine about their rotten childhoods and getting poetic about the greatest hit of all time. I need something to do.”

His eyes flashed, but I hurried on anyway. “Conlan said you run them ragged, they’re working by eight in the morning -”

“Absolutely not. The answer is no.”

“All I need is a few weeks, a month!”

“I’m not running a rehab center, Mr. Dahl. The True North is a political watchdog. Every person on my staff is committed to what we do. They are patriots.”

“When you’re in the room.”

It was a shot in the dark, but it must have drawn blood. He pushed himself to full height.

“I don’t know you, not really. Who you are, where you’re from. And what I do know depresses me beyond words.” It was a trained solicitor’s voice, his best cold dish. “I’m glad you recognize you have a problem, and I sincerely hope you turn your life around. But I can’t think of a single thing you’d bring to my organization, except your weakness.”

I felt the flare in my guts.

“How long did he make it?” I shot back. “Your brother? How many days was he in here before he signed himself out? Three? Two? Did he even make it twenty-four hours?”

His face was taut. “I don’t think that’s -”

“You bet your ass it’s relevant. Because I’ve done all five days, three times. Without Methadone or Valium or Codeine or aspirin. And if that’s weak to you, I suggest you try it once, just for the thrill.”

“But it doesn’t make you a hero.”

If I flinched, he didn’t see it. “You’re right, it doesn’t. But at least I’m not a fool.” I tossed his phone back to him so abruptly he had to scramble to catch it. “You should have lied to me, at least until after you’d gotten the laptop. You could have dropped me off downtown with a hundred dollars, told me to buy boots or something. I’m a heroin addict. You’d never see me again.”

I don’t know what made the hardest strike, the idea of betrayal or the label, worse than thief, the word for that man I’d seen in the bathroom mirror.

“That’s...appalling.”

“Yes, it is. And so is a peace rally with tire irons, and the Militia and their ‘ladder.’ Your problem, Mr. Rusk, is that you don’t realize you’re in an appalling business. You might be a political watchdog, a patriot, but the people around you aren’t. And you’ll lose every time,” I gestured at the phone, “by being an honorable man.”

I didn't know how the room had become so warm. I needed to sit down, but I clung to my ground, a ghost with a hammering heart. Jim Rusk was standing very still. No cologne today, he smelled only of soap, and the faintest trace of sweat. Or maybe that was me.

"You're telling me to lie to you," he said at last.

"I'm telling you my price. What you do about it is up to you."

"Are you HIV positive?" he asked abruptly.

"What if I said no?"

"I'd say put the test results in my hand."

"Now," I said softly, "we have a deal."

# CHAPTER SEVEN

It was 3:15 by the time I'd jumped through all the hoops of signing myself out. When I dialed Mattie's number the answering machine picked up, but I didn't leave a message. It occurred to me it might be better this way.

"Somebody's there," I said. "They're just not answering. Let's go over."

Jim looked cautious, but didn't argue. I think he was eager to complete this part of the transaction, get the laptop in his hands before I self-destructed or disappeared. I was eager to get to the apartment before Mattie got home. I remembered I hadn't departed in a gentlemanly fashion the last time; some people take being called a bad father in the wrong way. If I had any chance at all, it might be with the other family member.

I pulled on my black and white windbreaker in the elevator going down.

"Is that your only coat?" Jim asked.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Well, this and the mink."

He'd parked underground. There was a moment when I stepped out into the dim, vast cavern that I felt a frightening surge. There were open paths everywhere, broad corridors between the cars, each calling me to run. I could lose him fast, if he even chased me. I could be well within the hour.

A sudden, soft click made me look. As if by itself the trunk of one of the cars in the long row opened. I saw the tiny remote in Jim's hand, attached to a set of keys, but it didn't pull a single thread out of the magic. I followed him up to the two-door Mercedes in silent awe. Not silver, not bronze, even under the gloomy parking lot lights this vehicle glowed, the color of champagne.

"New car?" I said.

"You noticed."

In the Mercedes' trunk was a set of golf clubs, cleated shoes, and a forest green leather jacket. Jim handed it to me.

"Put this on for now. It's minus twenty out there."

The jacket was too big in the shoulders, sleeves lapping over my knuckles. But the smooth collar was a caress against my bare neck and the faint, luxurious scent whispered to me as I slid into the passenger seat.

"I've made a career decision," I said, pulling the door shut. "I think I was born to be your chauffeur."

"And I think," Jim fired up the engine, "you're out of your mind."

I had him stop at a bank machine and withdraw four hundred dollars, what I felt would be the going rate, give or take. I didn't actually see the money, but I sensed it, the thick, seductive presence of it when he

settled behind the wheel again, a bulging erection of a wallet. I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans.

At Mattie's apartment block, Jim insisted on coming into the building. I would have fought him, but it was already 3:50, and I was too anxious to argue. Each step I took up the three flights was lighter than the last, my body vibrating with subatomic memory. Retail. Mattie was in retail.

I convinced Jim to wait in the hallway, by the stairs. When my hand reached out for the money in an involuntary twitch, he caught me by the wrist.

"I want you to know that if I found you once, I'd find you again," he said quietly. "And I wouldn't be alone."

The heat of his skin was startling, or maybe it was his grip, not exactly menacing but ...sincere. I didn't want him to know I was impressed.

"Yes, my lord," I said.

He let my hand go with a thrust. My wrist tingled as I walked toward Mattie's door, heart skipping as I expertly divided the money by touch, slipping half into each of my front pockets. This was the give or take part.

I knocked softly.

"Who is it?" Angelista asked from the other side.

"Angie, it's Lee. Let me in."

"My dad's not home," she said.

"I know. I'm here to see you."

There was a moment's deadfall, then the door opened on the chain. Angie was taller than I remembered and she wasn't wearing her school uniform. The sliver of fabric I could see was an icy pastel blue, and her glossy dark hair was swept back by rhinestone barrettes, lips shining with color, enormous eyes fringed by black lashes. She glared at me.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Angie said. "Do you think I'm going to believe you? I know what you do. I know everything."

"I never thought you were stupid," I said, truthfully.

"You never talked to me. You never once walked in and said, 'Hi, how are you.'"

"Angie, I like my teeth."

It caught her off guard, she almost smiled. I leaned in closer, hand on the wall.

"I need to talk to you, just for five minutes," I said. She hesitated again and I could feel a set of lion's eyes boring into my back, sense the perspiration gathering under my clothes. I'd said this wouldn't be a problem.

She lifted a cell phone into the gap between us, so I could see it.

“I’ve got 911 on speed-dial,” she said. “I’ve got my finger on the button. They already know how to get here.”

I nodded. Where had she come from, this woman?

I pushed into the apartment, relieved. My hair had fallen over my eyes and I smoothed it back, glancing around from force of habit. The apartment looked truly empty now, no electronics or cigarettes piled up, even the big screen TV was gone. Mattie’s bedroom door was open this time. I couldn’t stop myself from glancing in that direction, again and again.

“Sit there.” Angie pointed at the couch, then settled onto the arm of a chair across from me, the phone still in her hand.

“You look awful,” she said. “You should be in AA. That’s where my dad is right now. He’s going every day again.”

“Well, that’s...good. Good for him.” Shit! Shit! Shit!

“And he doesn’t buy things any more, and he doesn’t sell, either. So you’re wasting your time,” she finished triumphantly.

I didn’t believe it, I refused to, but I let it go for a second. “Angie, do you remember the last time I was here?”

“The night you called my dad a fucking bastard?”

Is that how it had drifted up the stairs? I felt chilled in my jacket.

“He went after you, you know,” she continued, eyes twinkling. “He said he was going to nail your hide to the wall.”

“Um...what time did you say he gets home? From AA?”

“Soon.” She was swinging one cool blue leg, head tilted to the side. “Do you know why he went back to it? Because I told him to. I told him if he didn’t, I’d go live with mom. If you tell the court why you want to live with your mother, they’ll always let you.”

Blackmail. The little minx had blackmailed him into sobriety. My heart plummeted. It was entirely possible the apartment was stripped clean, of retail and everything else.

“Angie, do you remember the computer I brought that night?”

“Yes, I got it. It’s mine now.”

I edged forward on the couch, hands clasped. “Well, a friend of mine really, really needs it. It would mean a lot to me if I could get it back for him.”

“How much?”

“Two hundred dollars.”

Her eyes narrowed as she studied me. “No. Five hundred.”

“Are you crazy? It’s not worth five hundred bucks!”

“So go to Office Depot,” she said easily. I stared at her. This wasn’t the Angelista I knew, but she was certainly Mattie’s daughter. The thought of him sent a pulse of panic to my fingertips.

“Look,” I said, getting to my feet.

“Sit down!” The first edge of fear was in her voice. She pointed the phone at me like a weapon, a laser. “Don’t think I won’t do it.”

But I was only emptying my pockets, one wad of twenties, then the other, which I thrust onto the coffee table. Crumpled bills against glass. The stab of longing took my breath away. “That’s four hundred dollars. It’s every cent I have.”

“What’s in your jacket?”

The little minx! In a bolt of frustration I reached into the green leather pockets and yanked out the silky lining. Two objects went flying -- a golf tee and a chain. She bent down and plucked the necklace out of the carpet, cheap silver-tone with a medallion swinging from it. It was worth about two dollars but she gazed at it, brown eyes suddenly soft.

“St. Francis of Assisi,” she said quietly. “I used to pray to him all the time. For a horse.”

I stared at the medallion, thinking of the champagne-colored Mercedes and wondering what Jim Rusk could possibly have to pray for.

Her hand closed around the chain. “All right. I’ll take this, and the money.”

She moved fast then, returning from her bedroom in seconds with the grey machine in her arms. She said she couldn’t find the case and I wasn’t willing to wait for it. I slipped the laptop under my jacket, an exciting weight against my ribs. But I paused at the door.

“What do you need the money for, Angie?”

“Oh.” The cool blue lady dissolved into a nervous giggle. “My grade nine grad is in June. I want a dress, a nice dress,” she finished wistfully. I imagined her for an instant in rustling taffeta, dark hair swept up, a thin trail of gold glittering around her delicate fawn’s neck.

“It should be red,” I said.

“It’s June 27th,” she said, blushing. “I don’t have a date yet.”

I blinked in disbelief. “Would we take the phone?”

Angie smiled, shaking her head. “You think I don’t like you. But I just know what you are.”

Worse than a thief. A man you wouldn’t give a dollar to in the parking lot. The despair of it pierced me.



“You let your dad decide who you should go with, Angie,” I said gently. “He’s a good father.”

I almost bowled Jim over on the way out the door.

“I was just about to knock.”

I didn’t break stride, but kept moving swiftly down the hall, leaving him to catch up. I could feel his alarm when he fell into step, so I pulled open the front of the green jacket, giving him a peek of grey inside.

“Merry Christmas,” I said.

He lit up for an instant, then, “Please tell me you didn’t steal it.”

“Oh, no. I paid.”

We glided wordlessly down the stairs and across the street to the car. The trunk was open by the time we got there and I unzipped my jacket, one eye watching the sidewalk in front of the apartment. Jim nestled the laptop inside and closed the trunk, then turned and caught my right hand in a solid clasp.

“Thank you.”

It surprised me how that felt, a warm surge all the way up my arm, into my chest. I couldn’t remember the last time someone had shaken my hand. But my grip tightened into a sudden, urgent squeeze.

“Get in the car and drive,” I said.

“What?”

“Just drive!” I pulled away, whipped around to the passenger side.

“You little shit!” The voice rang across the snowy street. Jim caught sight of Mattie’s solid, dark form barreling toward us and it galvanized him. He wrenched open the driver’s door and fired up the engine, just in time. Mattie was pounding on the car’s trunk as we surged away, spraying snow. He ran after us a few steps, swearing blue and violent murder, until we slid around the corner, catching a rare opening on the main drag.

“You said you didn’t steal it!”

“I didn’t! That...was about something else.”

He glared at me.

“Never insult a sober Italian.”

There was a brief silence, and then he grinned.

We were in the slow, creeping death of rush hour yet it wasn’t terrible, wrapped up in the gleaming wood and leather interior, snow beginning to fall softly against the windshield. I was feeling lightheaded with triumph, watching the familiar bustling sidewalks, reveling in the realization: I was outside.

“Before we go to the house, is there anything you need?” Jim asked.

I smiled. I needed junk, and my clothes, and junk, and my books, and junk and a haircut, and junk.

“I’d really like a pair of those boots,” I said, “the kind Conlan has.” The question stretched between us, a single strand of a spider’s silk. This was the easy hundred-dollar out, if he’d take it.

“Well, let’s go find a store,” he said.

We slid onto Yonge, a gypsy of a street, crowded with narrow, gaudy shops.

“You should think about what story you’re going to tell,” Jim said.

“Story?”

“Where you’ve been, why you came back, why you look like hell.”

I didn’t answer. I hadn’t thought about it, actually living in this man’s house. I’d avoided living with people for a long time, even when I slept under the same roof, or in the same bed.

“Maybe it looked like one happy family at Die Maschinerie, but it’s not,” Jim continued. “It’s a dozen little kingdoms and someone is always checking the borders, looking for loose bricks. Your background makes you a pretty big target. You don’t want to be somebody’s entertainment. And I can’t afford you to be.”

Weakness. The word snaked in my memory.

“What am I going to do for you, Mr. Rusk?”

“What can you do?”

“I’m a pretty fair riot man.”

He let go a short breath of disgust. “Let’s clear this up right now. I’m grateful you got Conlan out of a tight spot -- that he shouldn’t have been in, in the first place. But if you’re thinking you’ll get the chance to bash heads, I’ll let you off at the corner. If you’ve got some racial issues, you can walk them over to the Aryan Sons. I won’t deny that some people come to the True North with strong opinions, including my staff, and they’re entitled to them, providing they park them at the door. Our mandate is to monitor government policy to make sure special interest groups don’t sway the whole machinery. I don’t have the time or tolerance for brainless thugs, Mr. Dahl. Do you have any skills of value?”

“I am computer functional,” I snapped. “I can drive like a bat out of hell. I am literate. I can shoot a bow with a sixty pound draw weight. I can keep my mouth shut. And,” I took a breath, “I’m exceptionally lucky.”

He snorted softly. “Lucky.”

“I found the disk and then I found the man who could use it,” I said boldly.

“But then I found you again. That was my luck.”

“But which of us woke up this morning thinking that he’d be driving in a ninety thousand dollar car by five o’clock?”

He glanced at me, puzzled.

“You expected it. For me, it’s luck.” I was having a good time. I felt awake with this man. “What kind of lawyer did you used to be?”

“Oh.” The light had changed and he turned his attention again to the slow convoy we were in. “I was with Wilder, Wilder and Langtree, here in the city. There were nine of us, two Q.C.’s, and we handled just about everything. Personal injury, insurance claims, real estate, immigration. I was low man on the totem pole so I usually got the Legal Aid cases.”

“And you discovered the truth -- the poor are boring,” I said.

His voice was cool and clear. “I don’t know that I discovered the poor at all.”

The problem, Jim said, was not the case, but the tangle it came wrapped in. Was the man in front of you a legitimate refugee or the newest member of an Asian Triad? Was the woman suing her landlord for water-damage part of a fund-raising ring for the Iranian Hezbollah, who might have sabotaged the property themselves? Even the genuine cases never seemed to arrive at Legal Aid untouched, claimants coached by special interest groups, who often had roots that twisted into less savory soil.

“In third year law, each of us had to spend a certain amount of time working for the Legal Aid office on campus, mostly devoted to student cases. I liked it, because no matter what happened, you’d go home at the end of the day feeling you’d done something. Then you enter the larger world and lie in bed at night wondering, What have I done? When you start to break promises you’ve made to yourself, it’s time to get out.”

Darkness had lowered itself onto the city, stolen into the car with us. His strong profile was lit by passing headlights and the glow from the dash. I hadn’t expected him to keep impressing me.

“Who is the patron saint of golf?” I said.

His eyebrows gathered, bemused, then he smiled to himself. “Oh, mine would have to be Saint Anthony, the saint of lost objects.”

On the sidewalk it was different. Jim fell away from me, quickening his pace. I caught our reflection in one of the display windows, the big-shouldered, black-leather stride of him, and the scarecrow in a borrowed coat, struggling to keep up. An alley between the shops pulled at me like a wind tunnel, but I really did want those boots.

From the moment we entered the shop we had the clerk’s undivided attention. The plastic name tag said he was Terry, and he was young, fair-skinned and slight, dark hair razored short except for a tuft at the front, like a patch of wild grass. A dark band of ink curled around his milky bicep, a mockery of a tribal tattoo, and when he stood, his body settled into a natural S curve.

When I told him what I wanted his face brightened.

“Classic, urban, street, terrain, or steel-toed? Three, ten, fourteen or twenty eyelet? Greasy, scuff or satin

finish?”

“Something up to here,” I gestured two inches above my ankle, “in black. Size ten.”

“Oh, no, you’re an eleven. I knew it as soon as you walked in. I thought, now there’s a perfect eleven double B, I could fit him with my eyes closed. Believe me,” he twinkled, “I’ve measured a lot of men.”

I thought he was funny. Against the wall Jim was growing pale, barely breathing in his discomfort, and it gave the scarecrow a surge of vindictive delight.

“Go ahead and fit me, Terry,” I said. He swung away, if not Prancer then certainly Donner or Blitzen. I hung around, fingering the displays, trying not to smile.

Terry was back fast, a box cradled in each arm. I chose a chair and he dropped into a crouch in front of me. He let me pull on the boots myself then leaned forward and seized the laces.

“Here, let me. I want you to experience the grip, the ankle support,” he gushed. “Once you’ve been gripped by the Doctor, you’ll never go back.”

I settled back into the seat, hands on my thighs, and let him tighten me, row by methodical row, enjoying the top of his head between my knees, savoring Rusk’s stricken, train-wreck gaze. I’m sure he didn’t know he was staring.

When I stood, I did feel the grasp of the leather, the strange heaviness of the sole, the slight heel that thrust my hips forward, just enough to push my center of gravity against my zipper. It was impossible not to swagger, buoyed by memory and the hope it gave me. I’d thought I was a dead man.

I turned my most charming blue ice on the clerk.

“Well, what do you know. I’m a perfect eleven double B.”

He flushed. “I’ll ring them up.”

Now came Jim’s part, at the till. He hadn’t spoken a word and he still didn’t, just passed forward a platinum credit card between two fingers. The total, with taxes, didn’t make him flinch, but I raised my eyebrows. I hadn’t even looked at the price.

“Say, ‘Thank you, Daddy,’” Terry murmured sympathetically.

I couldn’t resist. “Thanks, Dad,” I grinned, touching his sleeve.

His head snapped, a glare of savannah heat I felt in my guts. My arm dropped and he snatched up his card and the receipt, and strode out of the store.

“Whoops,” the clerk said softly.

I followed, clutching the new box with my old runners in it, not moving quickly. I don’t apologize well, and I wasn’t sure it would do any good, anyway. Maybe this was the way out, for both of us. Rusk and I had both gotten something, and that was more advanced than most of my relationships. Yet on the sidewalk the sight of his back tugged at me strangely.

I quickened my pace until I caught up. “It was a joke,” I started.

He seized me with startling deftness, swung me into the alley and pinned me against the brick, my box tumbling to the ground. I didn’t have the strength to react.

“Who do you think I am?” he said. “Where do you think you’re going? Well, I’ll tell you -- you’re going somewhere they take little queers like that apart. It’s sport.”

Queer. The word was a slap in the face, and not because I’d never heard it.

“Lighten up! It was a joke. I thought he was funny.”

He let me go with a thrust, a shove into the wall my back was already against.

“You’d better decide right now what you can live without, even for a month,” he said.

My skin was hot, blood moving suddenly under the surface, but I tossed the words out coolly.

“I think I made that decision in detox, don’t you?”

He paused. “When I was looking for you, three different people asked if I was your boyfriend.”

He knew. I felt the revelation like something dropping inside me, but it sparked when it hit. He’d known the facts when he came to the hospital, and when he’d agreed to my plan.

“Then it’s a little late in the day to pretend it’s one of your issues.”

“There is only one issue -- my reputation. I already put up with a lot of snide remarks and other garbage, because I feel compassion for people with nowhere to go, and let my staff live under my roof. But I will be damned before anyone has a reason to think it’s true.”

I was caught by a gust of memory, the sound of Pope’s smooth voice. The boys you bought. Damn, damn. No wonder he was upset.

“You don’t have to keep your word. I told you that. I’ll just go away,” I said.

It seemed to shock him, wake him. He drew himself up and stepped back. “You asked me for work, a place to stay, and I admit, I felt sorry enough to say yes. I’ll honor that. But here’s some advice: If you want to survive for a month, or a day, tuck...it...in,” he enunciated distinctly. “I’m not your father or your friend. If you get yourself into a tight spot, I won’t help you.” Beat. “I’ll take my jacket now.”

I let it slide off my shoulders and handed it over. I was wondering if I should leave anyway, but I was exhausted and hungry, and cold now, too. My windbreaker was still in his car. I bent down to pick up my runners and followed him reluctantly, my new boots strange and unwieldy on the pavement.

“One more thing,” he said. “My name is Jim, or Mr. Rusk. See that you remember that.”

Yes, my lord, was burning on my tongue, but I didn’t say it.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

When I was fifteen and Reine was twenty-two, a miracle happened. My brother went to work at Canadian Paper and became the happiest man in Thunder Bay. He started on the loading dock, for nearly three times the wage my mother made in the cafeteria. He drove her to work in the morning and home again, their matching navy uniforms striding up the walk.

Money made a difference to Reine. Now there was a swing to his walk, shoulders back, stomach settling comfortably on top of his belt. He made friends at the mill and went to the bar Fridays after work; those nights I stayed out as late as I wanted. And he wasn't stingy. He'd hardly been working a week when I saw him pull a wad of bills from his wallet, and hold them out to mom. I'd never heard her complain about money, that dad didn't send enough or that she wished she had another job. But for a moment she was transfixed, as clean and smooth as a statue, looking at Reine's outstretched hand. And she took the money.

My miracles began the first day of grade ten. I wanted to take weightlifting, but I was late to sign up and the option was full. And so was wrestling and anything else I thought would do me any good. Only archery and badminton were left and I was stuck to decide which of them was less feeble and depressing.

There were ten of us in the archery class, and we started with traditional recurve bows. They looked so simple they were almost laughable, but when I picked one up, three thousand years fell away. Holding that ancient weapon I felt as if I was standing in the sun-baked dust of Greece, under a burning blue sky. When I stepped into the stance and faced the target, all the points of my body pulled into some silent and natural line. I was awake, humming with new tension in my shoulders and arms, warmth that stroked down my back like a strong hand. The whole gymnasium breathed with one rhythm to me. Draw, release. Draw, release.

I didn't think I'd had a good day -- no bull's-eyes even though I hit the target every time -- but after class Mr. Avery hustled me into his small, crowded office. The archery coach reminded me of Popeye, short, bald, powerful. One side of his face seemed squeezed, maybe from always squinting at a target.

The room was piled with books and dusty trophies, but my eyes caught on a small sign tacked to the wall, brittle with age. A nocked arrow is a loaded gun.

"All right," Mr. Avery said. "This is a beginning. Only a beginning. I want you to start with these areas." He traced deftly across my back, above my shoulder blades, over my shoulders. "Lats, traps, delts. And here," he seized my chest, nearly in the armpit, "this is where you're going to feel it tomorrow. We need to strengthen the whole pectoral area. Bent arm laterals are good. And pullovers."

It dawned on me what he was talking about and I blurted that weight training was full. Mr. Avery scowled, but not at me. He rummaged in a corner of his office and pulled out an odd piece of equipment -- the Bull Worker. It was one silver tube set inside another, with a spring for resistance, and cords along the sides. He demonstrated the moves, many of them like drawing a bow, and said I could use the Bull Worker to strengthen every part of my body.

"I started with this," he said wistfully, "in the 70s. But it still works. It'll do the job for you, too."

I took it from him, not hesitant, but a bit confused. I didn't know why I was getting it. Mr. Avery looked

at me solemnly, if Popeye could look solemn.

“You will be good,” he said. “I have no doubt about that. But with training, with devotion, you could be great.” He squeezed his fingers together as if grasping an imaginary pearl. “Great,” he whispered again.

I stumbled home clutching the Bull Worker, drunk on the words and the warm strain that lingered in my muscles. I believed I was devoted. I wanted to be great. All my heroes who’d faded away over the years were suddenly fresh and close again -- Jason, Ajax, Achilles.

I worked out in my bedroom, stripped to the waist. There was a faint squeak from the spring inside, and my labored breath.

“That’s you all right, puffing and squeaking,” Reine smirked. “Use your other hand. It feels like somebody else.”

I was waiting for him to grab me in the hallway. All through that winter I squeezed and pulled, forcing the silver tubes deeper into each other, millimeter by millimeter, my body gathering, growing.

Reine was patient, too. The happiest man in Thunder Bay could sit quietly at her feet while she read the newspaper, his ruddy, sun-browned hands moving in slow circles over her white ankles. That spring he took me for a drive, saying he had something to tell me. I was cautious but brave. I sat in the passenger seat with my arms folded over my chest, new muscles bulging.

“Don’t tell mom, but I’m going to pay off the house,” Reine said. “It’ll take until the new year, but I’ll do it. I’m a foreman now,” he finished proudly.

I was stunned. He’d only been at the mill a few months.

“And I don’t want you to bother mom for allowance anymore. You come to me if you need money. Like for a date.” The word swung out at me, a pendulum. “It’s about time you did that, went out with girls.”

My face was burning, but I stared straight ahead. “You, too,” I said coolly.

In the corner of my eye I saw his head turn, a twitch to look at me. I was coiled like a spring, waiting for the faintest tremor of his arm. But it didn’t happen and I was elated. I was big enough to worry him. My life was starting to work.

The weather that spring was so warm our archery class moved outside at the beginning of April, to the south field next to the running track. One afternoon I’d just finished my shoot and laid down my bow, pleased with my strikes, when I heard a voice.

“You should try a real sport.”

I turned. The young man walking up was taller than me and soaked with sweat, hands on his hips, panting lightly. His hair was nearly black, plastered against his skull except for a few loose strands that fell over his forehead. He had brown eyes and dark eyebrows, a chin with a cleft and the most beautiful lips I’d ever seen on a man.

He was as radiant as a star.

“This is real,” I said.

“But it doesn’t take effort.”

“It takes skill,” I bristled. “Pigs can sweat.”

The barb sailed past him. He was looking at my legs. “You could run.”

“I did,” I said, “and I won. But I was impeached.”

He grinned at me, but then turned away, running his hand across his nose dismissively.

“I could beat you,” I blurted.

“You think so?” The change was subtle and breathtaking, the way he straightened and tilted his chin up at me, body poised in a dare.

I was in over my head and scrambled for time. “Sure. How much do you want to bet?”

He shook his head. “This is for honor.”

I felt as though he’d touched my bare skin with his sweaty hand.

“Honor?” I tried to sneer the word.

“If you win, I’ll tell everyone I meet for a week that you’re faster than me.”

I laughed out loud. “Who the hell are you?”

He was holding up his hand to silence me, so he could finish. “And if I win, for a week you’ll say, ‘Barry Tanner is faster than me.’”

I was hooked. It was absurd, outrageous, and I wanted it more than anything.

“I’ll beat you to that wall,” I said, pointing to the bare, sand-colored brick side of the school, “for honor.”

We crouched side by side in the grass, as if in starting blocks. His head was up, eyes focused on the goal. I was aware of the taut muscles of his legs, the silhouette of his open mouth, the tangerine shadow on his stomach where his T-shirt fell away.

Go.

He shot forward and so did I -- for two strides. Barry sprinted like an antelope, but I circled back and scooped up my bow. I nocked an arrow, heart thumping. This had to be exactly right. I shifted, positioning my aim eight feet down the wall from him, and let fly. The blade struck brick a full two seconds before he did.

He hit the wall, arms out to cushion the blow, but pushed himself off and whirled around. Even at a distance the shock blazed in his face.

“I said I would beat you. I didn’t say I would run!” I called.



For a second I held my breath -- and then he laughed.

“Who the hell are you?” he shouted across the field.

I was in deep trouble. Mr. Avery suspended me for three days for misuse of dangerous equipment. He warned me, as pale as the ghost of Popeye, that I’d be charged with criminal negligence if I pulled a stunt like that again. I nodded somberly, but the day was utterly golden. I spent that afternoon and evening playing pool with the most interesting person I’d ever met, and walked home under a night sky lit up by every available constellation.

“Barry Tanner is faster than me,” I whispered out loud.

The house was dark when I walked up. I wasn’t surprised Reine was out -- it was Friday night -- but I couldn’t imagine where my mother was. She never stayed at her sister’s this late. I didn’t wonder long, though. I was thrilled to be alone for awhile, just to hold the day inside me. I could still feel Barry watching me as I leaned over the green felt table, his gaze warming my skin, making me flush. I shot terrible games and brilliant ones, and it felt all the same to me.

Velvet.

Chelsey had begun to bark in the back yard, excited little hiccoughs as she jumped against the gate.

“Shh, shh, right away,” I promised her through the fence. I pushed into the darkness of the living room, fumbling for the light switch.

“The school called.”

Reine’s voice struck my back like a spear. I whipped around, heart pounding, a desperate shove to make the first strike. He staggered back into a wall, a solid thump that rattled the lamp. On a wave of adrenaline and triumph I grabbed for him again. I wasn’t that skinny little kid anymore and he was going to know it.

But he still had sixty pounds and seven years on me, and this time he was ready. He broke my grip with a quick thrust of his arms, caught the back of my neck and brought my face down into his huge knee, and again. It was over so fast. As soon as he let go, I crumpled, sliding against the wall to the floor. I was reeling with pain and fury, but I couldn’t look up at him. A trickle itched over my face, onto my lips, the metallic taste of blood.

“They said they’d call the police next time, but there isn’t going to be a next time.” He paused. “You will never shame this family.”

Reine walked into the kitchen. I saw the light on the carpet, heard the snap as he opened a can. I pulled myself up and went to the bathroom, trembling. I pressed a cold washcloth gingerly against my face, fighting the urge to weep. I would have left that night, taken Chelsey and gone anywhere the highway would take me, but for the first time in my life, I had a reason to stay. A sudden thought flashed through me with a savage pulse that was almost joy.

My brother was sitting at the table, drinking a beer. I saw him stiffen ever so slightly when I appeared in the doorway, but I stood quietly, almost respectfully, my face already starting to swell.

“I want that money,” I said. “What you said I could have.”

He was suspicious but pleased; I hadn't asked before. "For what?"

"I met somebody who I'm going to date," I said.

# CHAPTER NINE

Double pneumonia, I said. The whole package -- intensive care, endo-tracheal ventilation, IV antibiotics.

“No kidding?” Conlan said.

“No kidding.”

He was arched over the pool table, poised to shoot, but he lifted his head and grinned. “Well, you look like shit.”

“Thanks.”

We were in the basement of Jim Rusk’s grand but functional home in Rosemont. When Rusk and I first arrived, he’d called his three staff into an elegant dining room that served as a boardroom. Delicate china and silver twinkled behind glass in a dark wood cabinet, papers were piled on top of the ornate matching hutch. There were eight straight-backed chairs around a table that stretched out like a mahogany pond, T-shirts and tattoos reflecting on its gleaming surface.

Conlan had healed nicely, and he looked pleased to see me. The gash on the side of his head from that September night was now only a ghost line under the shadow of hair.

Knowle sat beside him and from the neck up he was a blank. He had a beak-like nose and hardly a trace of facial hair; the buzz over his skull was a nondescript brown. He was a man desperately in need of color, and he must have known it. His arms were tattooed in a solid tapestry of designs, right down to the wrists, as if it was a shirt he’d pulled on.

Alone on the other side of the table, a young man slouched in his chair like a professional student. He had dark hair and gold-rimmed glasses, and a scruffy little goatee that pulled his face into a point. Dave looked like a bookish rodent. His eyes followed me with such alert distrust that I wondered if I’d ever stolen anything from him.

Rusk had worked out the story in the car. He told them we’d met at the club last September and that I’d contacted him, looking to join up. I’d been pre-warned not to mention the disk or the laptop.

“Well, shit,” Conlan said. “I wondered what happened to you that night! I got you another beer and then I had to drink it.”

Rodent-boy was tapping a pen on the table. “Today,” he said. “You got this overwhelming urge to sign up today, not four months ago? You couldn’t make a single meeting in all that time?”

“I’ve been busy,” I said. “And then I got sick.”

Dave snorted, but didn’t reply. I was handed over to Conlan to get settled in.

The Rosemont address had probably been built in the 1930s as a grand family home. From the outside it still blended gracefully with its neighbors, an expansive brick facade with long windows, hidden behind a vast yard of elm and fir. I’d left my wet boots at the door, but I imagined the sound of my heavy soles

on the oak hardwood; four of us would thunder like a herd. Furniture had been pushed against the walls to create large open spaces, highways for traffic, but there was a sitting area with a stately couch and loveseat in black leather, each trimmed with brass rivets. I was surprised by the expensive and delicate articles left on display, graceful old lamps, porcelain and art.

One statue caught my eye. It was a bronze monk, perhaps twelve inches tall, his hands clasped in contemplation or prayer. A tiny bird perched on his shoulder, but the monk was oblivious, his calm face shaded by a cowl hood. He looked so smooth and thoughtful my hand reached to touch the metal. Conlan caught my wrist.

“Uh, no.” He shrugged to soften it. “The old lady will have a fit.”

“Jim is married?” The possibility hadn’t even occurred to me.

Conlan laughed out loud. “If he is, he’s got the worst fucking taste in the world.”

Mrs. Kruger, Conlan explained, really was an old lady, sixty-five if she wasn’t a hundred, who came two days a week to clean and do laundry. She brought group meals from home -- stews, casseroles -- and left them in the freezer, for grazing during the week. But the old girl’s true mission in life was to keep the house fingerprint-free.

“She knows when stuff’s been handled and she knows by who -- I’m not shitting you. Believe me, you don’t want the acid-in-your-skin lecture. You’d think she was running a museum.”

It made me smile. I’d forgotten I liked Conlan.

The rest of the main floor was functional, a work space. There were two offices, one for staff with a couple of desks, filing cabinets, computer and photocopier. There was no door on the room and when we leaned in, I saw Dave hunched in front of a screen, his back to us.

The other office was Jim’s. The French door was closed, but through the panes of glass I saw an old-fashioned gentleman’s study. The desk faced long rectory windows that were dark now, but I was sure they looked out onto the lawn. Jim was turned sideways at the desk, head bent as he read from a book on his lap. The lamp on the desk cast a warm circle over him, and above the grey sweater his thoughtful profile looked golden.

It was the walls that captured me, floor-to-ceiling panels of books, shelf after shelf of thick leather spines. The pang was real -- I wanted my own books back -- but I was intrigued, too. I wanted to study this wall, curious about what he read.

We’d only stopped for a glance. I followed thoughtfully as Conlan led me across the shiny kitchen floor toward the basement stairs. I’d known Jim was rich, but there was something else here, deeper and wider than wealth, and it filled me with a sense of longing I couldn’t name. I didn’t want to steal anything, I just wanted it all.

“Does he mind if you borrow the books?” I asked.

Conlan looked surprised. “I don’t know.”

The basement was called the Pit, he told me as we descended the stairs. “And it’s ours,” he added with a touch of pride. “Kruger won’t even come down here.”

After the ten-foot ceilings on the main floor, the Pit struck me as a male cave, dim and close, smelling of smoke and men's skin. A pool table was loaded for eight ball, with a rack for snooker hanging on the wall. A set of free weights and bench dominated one corner, army-green plates and silver bars, old-fashioned and indestructible. There was a dartboard with a poster tacked to the wall beside it: an East Indian in a Mountie uniform, wearing a turban. The slogan read, It Could Happen. The man's face was mostly gone, mottled to shreds by the dart points. His crotch hadn't fared much better. They were pretty good shots.

Knowle was sunk into a sagging couch in front of the TV -- it was January, it was hockey -- feet propped up on a basketball like a footstool. The floor was strewn with chip bags, pop cans, magazines and CDs. I had the feeling Jim Rusk didn't come down here, either.

Conlan racked the balls. "Want a game?"

I shook my head, not without a tug of regret. I'd been a savage pool player in Thunder Bay, but that was another life. Tonight I'd tremble if I picked up a cue, embarrass myself. In the Pit the exhaustion caught up with me again, the day weighing like cinder blocks on my shoulders. I melted into a chair, clinging to the sound of Conlan's voice like a fishline.

He was laying out the rules while he played.

"Door's locked, alarm's on at midnight. If you miss it, you miss it. Don't even bother trying to sneak in. Or out."

I already knew about the in-house ban on alcohol, and Conlan said if I'd been out drinking, I shouldn't come home, either. "I mean, even if you're not pissed. He can smell it across the house. You got a girl?"

"Not...really."

"Well, don't bring her here. Guests aren't allowed and anyway, there's nowhere to fuck." He drove the six into the pocket and looked up, pleased. "Unless everybody's out."

He wanted to know what I was going to do for the True North, what job I'd take on. When I shrugged he said I could do rounds with him tomorrow.

"Rounds," I repeated.

He straightened and pretended to thrust something toward me, a card or a pamphlet. "Hi there. Did you know the Canadian government spends on average fifty thousand dollars of taxpayers' money to process every immigrant who shows up at our borders, regardless of whether they're accepted? And did you know that it's your government's policy not to prosecute anyone trying to enter the country with a forged Canadian passport, which can be bought on the streets of Bangkok for -"

"So we're like Jehovah's Witnesses, minus Armageddon," I said.

He smiled. "Yeah, kinda. We save Armageddon for Patriot Nights."

There were still balls on the table, but he'd stopped playing. He balanced the cue on the carpet between his feet, tossing the fine end back and forth between his hands.

"I've got a regular route for Tuesdays," he continued. "We'll go out right after breakfast, once we get you through Conlan's chop shop."

"Don't let him touch you, the guy's a butcher." Knowle's voice rose up from the couch, behind me. "He drew blood, I swear to God."

"Don't be a baby, it was only once," Conlan said. "Look." He turned and ran his hand proudly over the dark fuzz on the back of his head. "And that's without a mirror."

He wanted to buzz me. I'd been in the market for a haircut for about four months but Conlan's plan struck me as very...committed. A mosquito of a thought had been humming around since I'd walked through the door: My stay might be shorter than anticipated.

Conlan was still tossing the cue, eying me. "How do you get double pneumonia, anyway?"

"Oh. Just sleep outside, a lot."

He nodded. "I thought you were kinda short on luggage. Dave was kicked out, too, last year." He hoisted the cue and lined up a shot. "Don't worry, we'll get you up and running, bud." Then he nailed in the seven, and the eight.

I barely made it to midnight, in fact, I think I dozed off at least once. On the second floor in a large Spartan room they set up a cot for me, across from the door. It must have been built as a bedroom and parlor, divided by French doors, which were long gone. There was still elegant wainscoting on the walls, an odd backdrop to the three single beds, each with a metal footlocker. A lady's boudoir had become a barracks.

I was ready to sleep in my clothes, but Conlan tossed me a T-shirt and sweatpants. In the bathroom across the hall, I closed the door and watched myself go into a silent seizure, a controlled convulsion of movement, pawing through the medicine chest, the drawers, the cabinet under the sink. A prescription for 292s or Zantac...was nobody even trying to quit smoking for Christ's sake? I finally sat down on the toilet seat lid, trembling with disappointment and disgust. Wash, Lee, I told myself. Can't you just wash?

I'd hoped that the lights would be out when I got back, but they weren't. In fact, only Conlan was in bed, the one next to mine, and he lay on top of the covers in boxers and a T-shirt reading Soldier of Fortune. He had great thighs and the sight of him would have cheered me in my other life. But I hardly remembered that ravenous man. I pulled down my blankets.

"I'd sue that hospital."

Conlan was up on one elbow, looking at me, his face flat. My needle tracks were scabbed over and healing, but still visible. Both arms. I'm ambidextrous in that particular skill. I knew it was a shock if you'd never seen it.

"Interns," I said. I crawled onto the cot and pulled the covers to my neck, little waves of heat prickling my face.

I was utterly exhausted and completely awake. In the darkness I listened to the house fall asleep, the rhythm of the men breathing beside me, the creaks and sighs of the old wood. I listened to the last person finish up in a distant bathroom, the intimate routine of running water and flushing. Finally there was only me and the mosquito.

You don't want this, you're going to hate it. If you had the energy you'd hate it already. Get out now, while you still have hair. Who cares if you set off the alarm? You'll be out of here in three minutes.

And into the process. If I set one foot on the floor I knew I'd go right into the process. Oh, God, I couldn't hit that wall again.

They don't want you. You saw Dave's face. You're a very loose brick, and Rusk made it clear how much help he'll be.

The memory of my back hitting the alley wall scalded me. I didn't know what bothered me more, Rusk's venom or his pity. Part of me desperately wanted to prove him wrong, defy and amaze him, show skills of exceptional value.

Why would you possibly care what he thinks?

And so it went, the same argument buzzing around as the clock radio glowed past one, and two. Every thirty seconds the urge to leave swept over me in a tidal wave, and I sputtered my way to the surface, treading water.

Then I heard an unexpected squeak in the hall, and the door across from my bed opened with a gentle click. I closed my eyes and peeked out from under my lashes. The lights weren't on but I saw his silhouette against the pale grey of the far wall -- Jim Rusk had come to look at me.

In seconds the door closed again, and I was left bewildered. What did he want? Why wasn't he asleep? Did he think I'd ducked out? I had no answers, but the questions broke the relentless cycle of my other thoughts. The mosquito was silent, swatted, and I must have drifted off to sleep.

The next thing I knew Conlan was shaking my foot in the dead of night.

"Go away," I muttered, rolling over.

He yanked my foot right over the edge. "Come on, New Boots. Honeymoon's over. It's 6:30 and I've got the clippers all ready. It's a new day!" he sang.

"Shut up or it'll be your last fucking day," Knowle grumbled in the dark.

It wasn't so bad once I was under the shower. I found a disposable razor in the drawer and shaved, then rinsed the creeping plague out of my mouth. Never mind my books, I didn't have a toothbrush or a change of underwear. The straight life, I remembered with a pang, required accessories.

The kitchen was too bright, but filled with a warm, rich scent that seemed to tingle through my memory - caffeine, only a mild stimulant, but I'd take it. I poured myself a cup and sat at the table, laid out as promised with scissors and an ominous-looking antique beard trimmer. Through the window, past the twilight shades of snow, the sun struggled in a brilliant orange crust against the blackness. I hadn't seen dawn for a long time, and then only from the other side.

Conlan was making toast. "You'll be the six o'clock shift. You get up, first thing you do is set the alarm for the next guy. Then he'll set it for the next. That way everybody gets a shower with hot water."

I did a quick calculation -- somebody got to sleep until 7:30.

“Whose ass do you have to kiss to be last?” I said.

The toast popped, four slices. He stacked it on a plate and began to butter, a bricklayer slathering on mortar.

“Kiss away, but you won’t get it. We’re talking seniority. Dave’s been here the longest, then Knowle, then me. You’re New Boots, monkey boy. You’ll be making the coffee until there’s somebody else.”

No wonder he’d been glad to see me. I’d bought him an extra half hour of sleep.

“What time does the big guy show up?”

Conlan’s mouth was full, but he jerked his head toward the back door. “Athk im.”

Sure enough I heard a faint thumping outside, someone stamping snow off his shoes. The door opened to let in a gust of frigid air and Jim Rusk.

He was wearing shorts over sweatpants, a sweatshirt over another with the hood pulled up, the edges white with frost. January before dawn and this man had been out running?

He kicked off his wet shoes and pulled back the hood. His hair was damp with perspiration, his unshaven face flushed with exertion. His whole strong, sweaty body seemed to beam fresh air and vigor. I watched him pour a glass of orange juice and drink it down in three thirsty gulps. I felt like a ghost in the room.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Morning requires light.”

He smiled and glanced at the table. “Looks like you’re getting a haircut.”

“Do I have to tip the barber?”

“God, no! Don’t encourage him.”

“Hey, I do a good job.” Conlan was miffed. “Who says I don’t do a good job?”

Jim tugged the hooded shirt over his head, pulling up the one underneath, a flash of bare stomach traced by fine brown hair. He took a grapefruit out of the fridge, cut it in half and began to section it with a crooked little knife. Then he sat down at the table to eat it -- without sugar. I shook my head. This wasn’t breakfast, it was penance.

“Conlan,” Jim said, “if you go into the office, the new handouts are on the desk. We’re going to start a street blitz for Johnson Phillips. You might have to dig around, but they’re there.”

Conlan left, carrying his last piece of toast, and we were alone. I had the feeling that was the purpose of the errand. I pressed my fingertips against my coffee cup, still hot enough to burn.

“Listen.” Jim’s voice lowered as he leaned forward. “I was rough on you yesterday, and I apologize. You didn’t deserve that treatment.”



His earnest face surprised me. “Well, I know was out of line.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know what came over me, but there’s no excuse. No one deserves to be...bullied. I apologize,” he said again.

He was sincere, and more than that, he seemed to need something from me. I was at a loss, but I stuck out my hand. “We’re square.”

When he clasped me the heat hummed up my arm and into my chest. Damn, this man was electric.

“I like your house,” I said, “especially the walls in your study.”

His face brightened. The others obviously hadn’t noticed his books. “What do you read?”

“Oh, non-fiction. Mythology, history.”

“You’re in luck -- except one man’s history is always another man’s fiction,” he said, smiling.

Conlan came back then and plunked a stack of hand-outs on the table. The close air in the kitchen evaporated, but two thoughts stayed with me, tucked away like lucky coins. Now I knew what had kept Jim awake last night, why he’d come to look at me. I also wondered if he ran at the same time every day, if he’d be walking in the door when New Boots was making the coffee.

# CHAPTER TEN

Johnson Phillips, the man of two last names, was making a third for himself as a freedom of speech champion, by challenging the definition of hate literature in the US. A Connecticut professor, he wasn't fond of Canada, which he'd accused of complacency and lax immigration laws -- not to mention that his books had been seized at the border, twice. It was a real coup that Jim had persuaded him to come to Toronto for a lecture, Conlan said. I imagined the fifteen hundred dollar fee had helped.

"I mean, the guy's famous," Conlan continued. "He's been on talk shows and everything."

"Wow," I said wryly, "almost like a wrestler."

We were riding the bus into downtown. It was nudging nine o'clock and the sun, actually risen now, was warm on the back of my head. The old clippers had left me with a quarter-inch over my skull. I felt strangely naked but...unencumbered. This short, my blonde hair had a reddish tint to it, copper. I was a new penny. Still I felt myself twitch at every landmark and familiar street corner as we passed through my True Love's territory. I wondered if I'd see someone I knew, then realized I didn't know a soul who was awake at nine in the morning.

The bus wasn't packed, but it was full. Conlan had let me have the one open seat and stood over me, hanging onto the bar. He'd taken pains to look respectable, with a button-down shirt tucked into his jeans, but he hadn't relinquished his boots. His knapsack rested on the floor, filled with pamphlets and two clipboards, our equipment for the day. In the seat ahead, a young man in headphones bled a thumping rap beat, and the woman sitting beside me radiated discomfort. She'd looked up from her book when I sat down, a single, uneasy glance.

Our task was to pass out pamphlets and raise awareness of the lecture, hopefully registering people for free tickets, which would be mailed out later.

"If the tickets are free, why don't we just hand them out now?" I asked.

"Well, it's commitment. Somebody says, 'Yeah, yeah, give me one' and then they don't show up, and we're standing there like fucking idiots in an empty hall. If somebody gives you their address and phone number, they're committed." Conlan switched arms on the bar. "And besides, you want to know exactly who's in the room, right? In case something happens."

"Such as?"

"Well, the guy's an American. He always expects to get shot."

The woman beside me shifted restlessly, clutched her purse more tightly.

The process still struck me as slow and laborious. Why not put an ad in the newspaper?

"Because you can't tell anything from a name. When you're out there, signing up people, you know what you're getting."

"As in Caucasian."

“Well, no shit. I mean, you put that in an ad and the whole fucking human rights board comes down on your head, after the ARM torches the place. This way it’s just you and me out there, having private conversations. That’s still legal. Section 319 of the Criminal Code.”

“Excuse me.” I stood to let the woman out and she edged past us, hurrying to the front of the bus. Conlan dropped in beside me.

“All we’re doing is...pre-qualifying,” he continued.

I asked how many ‘pre-qualified’ registrations we had to date.

“Almost a hundred.”

“That’s not even half! You said this thing was in ten days. What about everybody who gets the newsletter? What about all the guys at the rally, and the club?”

“Listen,” Conlan spoke slowly, perhaps so I would understand. “This is quality we’re looking for. Mainstream. You fill the place up with Aryan Sons and it’s going to look like some Nazi camp. Phillips was real clear on that. He’s coming for us because we can deliver mainstream.”

Before I could respond, Conlan reached over and yanked the headset off the young man in front of us. He twisted around, startled and angry.

“Turn it the fuck down, willya? If I wanted to listen to that shit, I’d buy it.”

His hard eyes flashed, but Conlan’s face was brick. The headset was repositioned, the volume set so low it was inaudible.

“Thanks, prick.” Conlan grinned at me.

Mainstream, I thought. We’re screwed.

We got off near Bloor. The sidewalks were almost barren, office workers tucked inside, firing up their screens for the day. The pale January sun was melting the night’s snow wherever it could sneak through the towers. Conlan handed me a card with notes Jim had written, methods of introduction.

Good morning. Do you believe that the Charter of Rights guarantees you true freedom of expression? Do you believe your government knows your mind better than you do, and is qualified to decide what you can and cannot read? Did you know that there are classics of literature in your public library that would not be published today because of hate literature legislation?

I looked at Conlan. “Please tell me we can improvise.”

“Why? This works. I use it.”

I tried, I really did, but Jim Rusk’s fine words were as wooden as toothpicks in my mouth. I felt like a bad telephone solicitor. After an hour I’d managed to pass out twelve pamphlets. I hadn’t registered anyone for a ticket.

“Well, this has been as productive as I expected.”

Conlan waved my grumbling away. He'd had two registrations. "It's Tuesday. It's normal. Everybody's miserable on Tuesday."

"I thought that was Monday."

"Nah, Monday you're just...hung over."

We were standing outside Tim Horton's with steaming cups of coffee. It would have been nice to warm up inside, but the coffee shop was non-smoking, like 99% of downtown Toronto, and Conlan wanted a cigarette. We leaned against a large concrete planter full of dead earth, and he pulled a battered package out of his pocket, lighting up with hungry pleasure.

"I've pretty much quit." He blew smoke into the clear air.

"Ever try Zantac?" I asked hopefully.

"Oh, Christ. Zantac, Prozac, it's all dope. Nobody can do anything anymore without being fucking medicated. You want to cut the balls off a whole country? Turn them into legal junkies."

There was loathing in that word, a wet-rag snap of disgust. I sipped my coffee silently, watching the suits gather in the doorways of the office buildings across the street for their morning cigarette, puffing away cold and needy. Two registrations, I was thinking. He had two and I had none.

"I used to do that," Conlan continued quietly. "Me and a bunch of guys from school. Roll out of bed at noon, nothing to do all day but get high. I mean, a year goes by and nothing changes. You're still living at home, sponging off mom and dad. You see somebody you used to know and he's working, doing things, and you almost hate him for it. All your friends call him a sap and so do you, but now you're thinking, What would they call me?" He took a thoughtful drag. "I don't see those guys anymore. They're limp dicks, every one of them."

I turned to him. "Give me a cigarette."

Conlan looked wary. I knew he was down to the last few in his package.

"You sure? You just got out of the hospital."

"I've got an idea." I took the cigarette, but didn't light up. I crossed the street and meandered down the sidewalk, letting my eyes find the right group -- a cold cluster of Caucasians smoking in front of their building. In my most polite, son-of-a-dental-legend manner I walked up and asked a woman for a light. She was in her late 40s, with a careworn face and smart plum-colored suit, shivering in a blazer and high heels.

Don't cough, don't cough, I told myself as I cupped my hands around the flame. When I handed back the lighter, the woman dropped her butt and lit another with an embarrassed smile that somehow included me. She knew I would understand.

"Have to top up -- it's a long time until lunch."

I smiled back. "My dad says you used to be able to smoke in airports."

“Hell, you could smoke on the plane!” she said. “And in theaters, and at your desk, for Pete’s sake.” She tugged her blazer more tightly around her. “I worked twenty years to get my own office and I can’t even light up in it.”

“Laws are pushed through by whoever is loudest,” I said. “They don’t necessarily represent the population.”

She looked at me, her lined face surprised but interested. “You’re not kidding. The world has gone crazy.”

I felt a flutter. “You know, there are books by Kipling and Twain that couldn’t get published today,” I started.

It was that easy, hardly a stretch, barely a turn. I registered two people on the spot -- she demanded her assistant sign up, too -- and left pamphlets with the others. I soared back to Conlan riding a rush of nicotine and triumph.

We had to buy more cigarettes. Conlan liked my idea so much he used it, too. We worked the office buildings along two streets, one on each side. Older smokers, I discovered, were the best bet, sheepish on the surface, but angry underneath, bitter and almost bewildered by their exile. They remembered a time when they had a voice, when who they were mattered more than this tiny vice.

By eleven-thirty we had fifteen registrations, six for Conlan and nine for me. Nine! It felt like the whole hundred and twenty. I strode along in the sunshine, boots thudding the pavement, feeling solid and strong even though my throat was raw.

I realized I was ravenous. I wanted a hotdog, not just any frankfurter, but a smokie on a bun, a thick spiced sausage piled with sauerkraut. Yesterday morning I’d barely been interested in toast, but I kept seeing it in my mind’s eye. I could almost smell it.

“You want to grab some lunch?”

“Let me guess, I’m buying,” Conlan said with a rueful smile. He’d financed the morning - bus fare, coffee and cigarettes for two.

“Please and thank you.”

“Man, I’ll be happy when you get paid.”

The prospect shot up inside me, a rush of roaring, needy hope. My True Love had only been a murmur all morning, but she wasn’t gone, and she wanted me to know it. I silently twisted the possibility around, wringing it, reluctant to let go. I needed money, but I knew if Jim Rusk paid me, it would only be the once.

Downtown Toronto is crowded with food vendors and their little carts -- hotdogs, pitas, pizza-by-the-slice, but I led Conlan past them all. I wanted a sauerkraut smokie and nothing else.

“Where is this place -- fucking Germany?” he grumbled.

At last we turned a corner and the smell caught me, a blend of succulent and sour that swept me down the street, mouth watering. Inside of a minute I had one in my hand, piled so high it threatened to topple,

and bit into it as if I hadn't eaten in months. It was pure pleasure -- indulgent, unapologetic grease -- and I swam in it, savored it, juice running down my chin. To be hungry again, I thought in wonder.

We ate a few steps from the vendor's car, leaning against a light standard. I was just finishing when I realized we were standing in front of the Toronto Sun building.

"What kind of publicity did you get for Phillips?" I said, wiping my mouth.

Conlan had chosen the plain Bratwurst and was still eating, even though his version was smaller than mine. "We sent out a press release to everybody. TV, radio, the papers," he said, nodding at the Sun building.

"Did anybody call back?"

"There's still ten days." He sounded defensive.

"Well, let's get in there and talk to somebody."

I hit the strangest wall. This man who'd walked out alone in front of an angry, threatening mob, who'd yanked a headset off a guy on a bus and solicited strangers all morning, wouldn't try to see a single reporter without an appointment. He wouldn't even walk into the building. I was mystified.

"You just don't barge in on people like that," he said.

"Like what?"

He actually blushed, ears and cheeks brightening to pink. "Well, their pictures are all over the place." He motioned at a nearby bus bench, a line-up of mug shots of Sun columnists, two of which had been defaced.

"You're saying you can't talk to someone because you think they're famous?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, no! Listen, people are bothering them all the time..."

I almost laughed out loud. "Con, get therapy. And give me the bag. I'm going in to bother somebody."

Before he could hand it to me, I noticed a man at the vendor's cart buying a sauerkraut smokie. Bearded, burly, the seams of his tweed sports jacket straining -- it was Charles Turcott, middle man on the bus bench.

I had three seconds to think of something.

"Mr. Turcott," I blurted.

He'd just received his change and was struggling to put it away while he juggled his lunch and a drink. He scowled at me.

"What?"

My heart was running as I strode up the sidewalk. "Mr. Turcott...did you know that someone who calls himself a Canadian patriot is paying an American fifteen hundred dollars to come here and lecture us on

freedom of speech?”

“Why would I know this and why would I care?” He bit into his smokie, veiled eyes wishing me away.

“It made me think of one of your columns last week.” I hadn’t opened a newspaper in four months.

“The one about the dogs?”

Shit! “No...before that. About the legal system...” It was the blindest of shots. Hadn’t all columnists written about the law, broken or otherwise? I saw a flicker in his round face.

“And how does it pertain?”

“That fifteen hundred dollar speaker has a criminal record, and his books aren’t allowed in Canada.”

It was my only card, but it was an ace. This was the Sun, a publication of short articles and large headlines. Turcott wanted to know who I was, and I told him. I also told him who I worked for -- the patriot who was hosting the expensive American.

“Then why don’t you ask him about it yourself?”

“Because I thought you would get a better answer,” I said.

That tickled him. I don’t know whether he was flattered or amused by my gall, but he smiled, a wry gnome in a sports coat. In the corner of my eye I saw that Conlan had edged within earshot, curious but still cautious, almost shy. I asked him for the knapsack, pulled out the cell phone and hit memory-one, another long shot.

“Jim speaking.”

“Mr. Rusk, a gentleman of the press would like to have a word with you,” I said.

Turcott looked surprised, but he took the phone, setting down his drink to have a free hand. Conlan sidled up beside me.

“What did you do? I don’t fucking believe you did this.”

I was listening to one side of the conversation, questions so pointed they would have stuck, quivering in the wall. Turcott wanted Rusk to explain exactly the nature of Phillips’ criminal record, the contents of his illegal books, and why this man was worthy of an audience.

There is no bad publicity, I chanted to myself.

Jim must have been light on his feet, or dealt with cross-examination a few times. Turcott stayed on the line right through his lunch, nodding occasionally, laughing once. Finally he said the magic words.

“You know, I’m not at my desk right now. Let me call you back this afternoon and confirm the details.”

When he handed the phone to me the line was dead, but it rang half a block later, inside Conlan’s pocket. He passed it to me.

“Yes?”

“I don’t know whether to thank you or strangle you.” The smooth voice was a deep caress against my ear, almost a growl, a lion’s purr. I shivered.

“You’re welcome,” I said.

He paused. “You are amazing, Mr. Dahl.”

“Yes, I am, Mr. Rusk.”

That was all, we didn’t even say goodbye. But I held the sensation inside me carefully, as weightless as a soap bubble, as real as money.

Conlan was watching me expectantly, as if I’d performed a sleight of hand and was about to reveal how it was done.

“Want to go get hammered?” I said.

He grinned. “Today’s Tuesday, not Friday, New Boots. We’re working for a living.”

But I was feeling better than I had in a week. “I should pick up my stuff.”

We took the Go Train into Scarborough.

“Will anybody let you in?” Conlan asked.

“They’re both at work.”

“You got a key?”

I didn’t answer, my eyes watching the passing landmarks, familiar and strange at the same time.

My father’s house was silent, solid and grave in the afternoon sunshine. From the street you couldn’t tell it was only shaved brick, and that the shingles were fake cedar.

“Nice place,” Conlan said.

“This could take a few minutes.”

I used the fence as a ladder, the gate handle as a step. That got me to the garage roof, and drew Conlan into the shrubs below me.

“What the hell are you doing?” He glanced anxiously at the street. “Somebody’s going to call the cops, Lee. They don’t know it’s your house. I am not in on this!”

I knew the dangers better than he did. I moved as quickly as I dared across the sloped garage roof, slipping once in the melting snow, a cold, wet shock up my sleeve. At the window of my bedroom I clawed at the frozen ledge, finally coaxing it open. I pushed on the screen that I’d only left standing in place and it flipped inwards, landing with a soft sound on the carpet.



After the dazzling day I was blind for a moment and waited, panting lightly as my eyes adjusted to the dim cavern of my room. It was strange to see it from this angle, familiar but backwards, like Alice stepping through the looking glass. They'd simply closed the door and left everything exactly the way it was, down to the unmade bed and my clothes on the floor. The air smelled of furnace dust and things...untouched

A magazine was still open on the bed, a photo spread of a man in the woods, gleaming muscles and bulging leather thong, studded gauntlets and glittering eyes full of campy danger and lust. It was a poor joke now, a mockery. My True Love had taken care of that department for months, held my balls in her icy little hand, useless baubles to Her. I flipped the magazine closed and saw the dust rise into a sunbeam. I felt as though I'd stumbled into my own crypt.

Get going, get out of here.

My old knapsack leaned against the wall and I shoveled books into it, not just my favorites, but all of them, anything I could possibly want again. I began rooting through the closet for my duffle bags, chucking old shoes and schoolbooks out behind me.

Then I heard a cough. I froze, listening. At last I noticed the faint rambling of the TV, then more coughing, the ragged, wet hacking of a sick man. My father was home from work, in bed. In nearly three years I'd never known him to be that ill. A sudden surge got me to my feet and I actually touched the doorknob. I thought of this morning at the table, how easy and simple Jim had made it seem, how it felt like a gift just to hear it. I'm sorry. I apologize. You didn't deserve that.

Instead I turned away and began jamming clothes into my bags, heat blazing off my face and neck.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I need money," I told Jim Rusk. "I want to pay my own way -- bus fare, coffee, whatever -- but I don't really want to get paid. Do you understand?"

It wasn't quite dawn. We were alone in the warm kitchen, the sleeping house dark and silent around us. Jim had finished his run and sat across from me in his sweaty gear, fresh and alive, eating the same appalling breakfast as yesterday.

I was upright. The night had been awful again, more hours spent treading water, but the prospect of the morning had glimmered in front of me like a distant shoreline. Now I watched Jim eat his grapefruit one careful section at a time, my body light with anxiety and hope. If he offered me too much I knew I'd take it.

"I'll get you a transit pass," he said at last, "and every morning when you get up, there'll be five dollars on the table. That's your cash for the day."

I couldn't stop the whiplash of disappointment. "Gee, can you spare it?"

His spoon hovered for a second in mid-air. "You're the one who just said you couldn't handle money."

"Well, I can handle some." There was heat in my cheeks, that he understood me so well. "It's just a shock. I thought I'd be worth more."

"How much?"

"Well, I figure yesterday was a five-hundred dollar day."

He threw his head back and laughed, a flash of white teeth and citrus. Finally he was able to swallow and leaned on the table toward me, eyes twinkling. "If you ever do anything worth five hundred dollars, I'll be the first to tell you."

"What did you do with the laptop?" I asked.

He sobered and seemed to draw into himself. We hadn't spoken of it until now.

"I turned it in to the proper authorities, along with the disk."

"The police?"

"There's...another agency doing the investigation." He looked up. "You know, you may be called on to testify in court. I've kept your name out of it so far, but if these items are used as evidence, they'll have to know how they were acquired, and by who. It could be critical to the case."

The subtle, urgent pressure in his voice made me feel strange. This had never been part of the bargain. Besides, a court case took months, even a year, to arrive. It had been all I could do to hold myself still these past two days. I'd thought he would know that.

“What’s your brother’s name?” I said.

He hesitated so long I realized it couldn’t be common knowledge. Maybe no one even knew he existed. Jim Rusk was cautious about loose bricks.

“Jack,” he answered at last.

“Is he older or younger?”

“He’s...both,” Jim said, his breath running out in a sigh.

Jack Rusk wasn’t yet forty and he’d just finished the paperwork on his second divorce. He ran G&R Trucking, the family’s business out of Mississauga, along with their mother.

“The drivers all call her Mrs. Mack, because she’s as tough as that little bulldog,” he said, smiling faintly. “Before Dad died, I don’t think she’d ever been in the yard. Now profits are up 30%. If you go to the National Wheel and Rim conference, there are 300 men and two women - the Firestone girl in red leather and a 60-year-old lady in navy and lace.”

I smiled, too. “She was a natural. Trucks in her blood.”

“Maybe. But I know she went into it to watch over my brother.”

Jack Rusk bore watching. He was a smart guy when sober, but as soon as he took a drink his common sense went out the window. He’d played poker for hundred-thousand dollar tractors, and worse.

“He lost his left foot when he was sixteen, riding the rails with some of his friends. Jack doesn’t even remember if he was trying to get on or off. Of course they were blind drunk. Our father was so angry he didn’t speak to him for a month.” Jim was gazing down at his bowl with the empty rind in it, turning it slowly around. “And then three years before he died, the old man had to have his left foot amputated. Diabetes, kidney disease, liver damage; there were a lot of factors. He went into the surgery swearing. I don’t know that we ever convinced him he couldn’t buy his way out of it.”

I stared shamelessly at Jim, whole and healthy and casually regal even in track clothes, trying to relate him to the lame men I could see in my mind’s eye.

“Is your family sorry you didn’t take up the trucking torch?” I said.

“I think my family was so worried I was going into the Brotherhood they would have been glad to see me dig ditches.”

“The Brotherhood?” It sounded ominous.

“Franciscans aren’t priests. The monks are all ‘brothers.’”

I almost laughed -- I thought he was joking. But despite his calm, good-natured expression I got the feeling he never flipped the cards around, not from this deck. I turned the strange idea over and over, trying to get a feel for it.

“It’s a big leap from the church to law,” I said.

“Is it? They’re both designed to serve people, or they’re supposed to.”

“And they both have a lot of rules.”

His smile was crumpled, as if he’d been caught. At that moment the alarm began to ring upstairs, Conlan’s 6:30 call, a soft, distant beep that might as well have been a siren. Jim straightened abruptly and stood.

“Time to get to work.” He threw the rind away and tucked the bowl into the dishwasher as if, I thought, it was a loose end. But he paused in the doorway and looked back, apprehension tugging the corners of his handsome face. I gave my head a little shake -- of course I wouldn’t tell.

My coffee had gone cold, but I sipped at it anyway. I wanted to sit still for a minute and just process what I’d heard. Instead I found myself remembering the sandpaper stubble of his unshaven chin and neck, the ring of his laughter. And I reveled in a curious, shimmering sensation: he trusted me with a secret.

\* \* \*

Dave knew everything. He’d been with the True North the longest, since the beginning last spring.

“I built this room,” he said in the staff office. “The work unit, publishing station, filing system.”

I slid open a grey metal drawer. “Wow. Alphabetical.”

He pushed it shut, hard. “If you want to know where something is, ask. Don’t go pawing through stuff.”

Pawing? I thought.

According to Dave, he’d single-handedly created the True North website, and developed the monthly newsletter, Strong and Free.

“I have my own column,” he said, goatee tilted up at me. “Jim and I both do. A regular feature. I took Media at U of T, but that was my major. I’m a writer.”

“Well, I’m not,” I cut him off. “What do you want me to do here?”

My job for the day, Dave said, was to cull through various internet news sources, looking for pertinent items that could be used in Strong and Free. My difficulty was with ‘pertinent.’

“Well, whatever reflects our perspective, supports our position! We have two hundred subscribers. What do they need to know?”

He plunked a pile of back-issues on the desk beside me.

“Learn something,” he said.

I leafed through the past editions and found myself reading Jim Rusk’s column in each issue. I’d never been to a Patriot Night, never heard him make a speech. Now I poured over the print, curious about his opinions, his voice.

## ***How Long Must I Pay?***

*If I wrong another human being, I expect to make restitution: an apology, a fine, even a jail term. Every punishment, no matter how severe, is at least finite - or it should be. Then why, as a nation, do we sentence ourselves to continued damnation over certain events? I'm think particularly of Native issues, such as land appropriation and the residential school system, or the treatment of Chinese nationals during WWII...*

I read on, my eyes skimming his points, the first words of the article still tolling inside me. I'd been looking for his voice and now I felt transfixed by it.

But how can we make restitution to people who are gone, and yet not create generations of 'victims' of their children? I answer, Name the price and let it be done. Name the price and I will pay it, as long as it is finite. Guilt is painful, but unending guilt is paralysis, a living death that is more inhumane...

The paper suddenly rattled and I jumped. Dave had tossed an eraser at me.

"Are you actually going to work today? You could check the sites we have book-marked, for Christ's sake."

Of course he was right. I turned on the computer and hit the memory bar, and suddenly smiled.

"Boobs and Buns?" I called pleasantly. "Hot Juicy Teens?"

"Shit!" Dave whipped over to my desk. "Those jerks. They know they're not supposed to do this! This station is to be used only for work. No sex sites!"

"Oh, come on, a little porno perks up the day."

"Well, it perks up somebody's day, I'll tell you that." He leaned against a cabinet. "Because every morning somebody goes into an office and calls up a list of every single site we've been to in the last twenty-four hours. Where we went, how long we stayed, if we downloaded."

"Who?"

"An agency of your government. CSIS -- the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. And maybe the R.C.M.P. and God knows who else. We're being tracked, in case you didn't know. We're subversive. They've been tracking us since day one."

I felt a tingle of revelation. Someone else had mentioned an 'agency' this morning. "Why would they care about this? Sex sites aren't illegal."

"No, but what if somebody here begins calling up kiddie porn sites, even by accident? How much do they need before they get a search warrant? I mean, that's what they'll use as their cover investigation. Who knows what they're really looking for, or what little goodies they'll leave behind?" His dark eyes flashed with excitement "I know for a fact that CSIS connects with our recorded line twice a day, checking. Maybe they're already building a case!"

"Have you considered Prozac?" I said.

He straightened. "Lee Dahl," he said. "Last known address 1542 East Bay in Scarborough -- nice

neighborhood. You dropped out of grade twelve and you don't have a criminal record as an adult, just a six month suspension for Driving While Impaired. Your dad's a big man at U of T -- head of the department. Orthodontics, is it? Or some stupid thing with teeth. He must be real proud of you."

I was riveted, my skin smarting with surprise and the sudden threat.

It pleased him. "Illuminating, isn't it?" he said softly. "I can get that much and more, and I'm just a private citizen. Now what do you think your government can get? Or your enemies?"

"You missed my shoe size," I said. "I'm an eleven double B."

He sauntered back to the other desk, settled comfortably into the chair again. "Be careful where you go, because somebody's always watching," he said.

The screen was a blur. I knew that if Dave ever got off the computer and actually talked to people he'd be more illuminated than was safe for me. I'd never marched in any parades, but I hadn't been demure, either. Jim Rusk had uncovered my sexuality without even trying.

Go! my True Love was shrieking, but instinct held me still, like the desperate camouflage freeze of a rabbit who knows the fox is already upon it.

\* \* \*

As night settled I felt the chafe of the walls, irritated by the noise and presence of people I'd already spent two days with. I wasn't ready to lift weights or throw darts, and I was too restless to read. I could hear Jim in his study over our heads, the creak of the old floor when he got up or shifted in his chair. That room called to me, but I wasn't sure I'd be welcome. During the day he was business-like with everyone, not exactly brusque, but utterly focused: What's the task? What's the time-line? When he turned to me, I felt one more veil drop. I wondered if he regretted what he'd told me.

At nine-thirty three of us were in the Pit. Knowle was out -- with his wife.

"Well, ex-wife, sort of," Conlan had explained. "They're separated, but she still dates him, lays him," he finished with a grin.

Conlan and Dave were watching basketball, arguing about whether Dennis Rodman was queer. Never mind that he'd left the Chicago Bulls in the late 90s, or that he'd retired from basketball completely, and dropped from sight. Some things were never forgiven. I was leaning on the pool table, impatiently rolling the white ball across the empty green, banking it off three sides and back into my hand, going mad. Junk, junk, junk...

"It was all a show. It was all for publicity," Dave argued.

"No way. You don't dress up like a fucking Barbie doll, even for press. I mean, if you want publicity, wreck cars, date porn stars."

"You couldn't be queer and rebound like that. You just couldn't."

"Don't you believe it. They crawl in everywhere. But you know who's really to blame? The fucking NBA. They're so greedy they don't even care that kids look up to these guys. Kids. You know, there were even Rodman Halloween costumes for Christ's sake. Now that's just sick..."

With one thrust I nailed the ball into the far corner pocket. I pushed off the table and scooped up the basketball that was on the floor. They both looked at me.

“Where’s a hoop?” I said.

“In fucking January?”

Dave was stretched in a chair, hands clasped behind his head, watching me intently. “There’s a court three blocks north, at the school.”

“Don’t forget the time, New Boots,” Conlan sang out cheerfully after me. “The windows are wired here.”

Upstairs I pulled on an extra sweatshirt, then my windbreaker over it, and set out into the night.

The stately old neighborhood was at rest, street lights reflecting evenly on the snow, naked branches arching over the road and sidewalk. My hood was up, but the cold air stung my face, turned my breath into puffs of vapor. It was eerily quiet to me, my boots a jarring announcement to the world. I slowed my pace so that it wouldn’t sound, even to my own ears, like I was running.

Oh, God, I missed my dog. I missed her quick steps that kept perfect pace with my long stride, the comfortable weight as she leaned against my leg when I was sitting. I missed the touch of her, the whorls in her golden fur that I traced with my fingertips, like an ancient mariner studying a map. But most of all I ached for her company, the silent, undemanding presence that was just happy to be with me. You don’t have to explain anything to a dog.

I’d reached the school. The empty court was lit, cleared of snow down to the asphalt, with near-regulation hoops standing guard at both ends. Beyond the dark silhouette of the roof I could see the glow of downtown reflecting up against the clouds, like a distant halo. It wasn’t far, as the crow flies.

Who are you fooling? You’ll come back, sooner or later. You can’t keep a promise to anyone, never mind yourself...

Bouncing the ball with a rubbery arm, I forced myself onto the court. I dribbled around listlessly, sinking balls and groping for the memory of pleasure. I knew this used to be fun.

Footsteps, suddenly close. The sound made me start and my shot clanged against the rim. I turned to see Jim strolling up in a Melton jacket with leather sleeves, his hands comfortably tucked into his pockets. “You’re not a bad shot.”

“Until I have an audience.” I wondered how long he’d been watching me, and why he’d come. “You’re not much of a dictator if you have to check up on me yourself. I thought that was Dave’s job.”

“That is definitely not his job.” He held up his hands for the ball.

I passed it to him, with some spin on it. “He did a search on me.”

“I know. He showed me.” Jim’s smile was dry. “I decided that since he had so much time on his hands, I had a big project for him. Too bad it’s compiling statistics.”

I grinned, feeling suddenly light. It was a surprising turn from someone who’d said he wasn’t my father

or my friend. We drifted into an easy back and forth, the ball ringing rhythmically on the asphalt.

Dave was the hard-line son of very liberal parents, Jim explained.

“He started doing work for me while he was in university. Once his parents knew, they threw him out -- so much for tolerance. He showed up at my door and told me he’d dropped his courses at U of T. I tried to talk him out of it -- I don’t believe in anyone leaving school. And I never planned on sharing my home with anyone, much less running Boys’ Town.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, you’ll hear that one sooner or later. I’m sure it was started by Stuart Pope, who runs Aryan Sons. You’ll meet him eventually. He claims an active membership of two thousand, but he sleeps on couches in people’s basements.”

“And snide innuendo is his hobby?” I said.

“It’s his passion,” Jim said, snapping the ball back.

The veil was gone. He was talking to me, looking at me again, not just in my general direction, and I liked it. I also liked the smooth movement of his arms, a natural ease that made me think he’d spent time in more than one court. This close I could see that his jacket was from Kingston University, and that the lettering on the crest was starting to unravel, the leather cracking in the creases on the arms. Still he wore it with the same aristocratic ease as a suit, shoulders back, the overhead lights catching gold threads in his hair. I wanted to stand like that one day.

“How old are you?” I asked.

He hesitated, a single throw. “Thirty-four.”

“That’s not old, really.”

Jim caught up the ball and held it, looking oddly amused.

“Really?” He swung around and darted away, dribbling toward the far net. I blinked and leapt after him.

We fell into it that effortlessly, a one-on-one I couldn’t possibly have the energy for, except a miracle happened -- I wanted the ball. I wanted it and I began to move. Jim Rusk took no pity on me. He was surprisingly agile and stronger than me; the solid force of his healthy body sent me tumbling to the pavement more than once. But desire picked me up and sent me off again, keen on revenge. I began making better shots than I had all night. By the time I threw my jacket onto the sidelines I was shooting from everywhere on the court, and sinking it. I hardly slammed, but sent the ball spinning in strong, profound arcs that went singing through the net. It made him laugh and moan.

“I don’t believe it!”

I could hardly believe it, but I reveled in it, hungry for some kind of prowess. We played until we were flushed and sweaty, almost steaming in the cold air. For all my spectacular shots, he was still more consistent, more effective at keeping the ball away from me. I knew he’d won even though we’d stopped calling the score midway through.



“You’re not bad,” I said finally, scooping up my windbreaker.

“Not bad! I whipped your ass.”

Wickedness was sitting on my tongue, but I remembered the shoe store. “Wait ‘til next time,” was all I said.

We sauntered down the sidewalk, heading back. I was lightheaded from the motion, my body humming with the electric memory of him jostling against me, clutching my torso as he grappled for the ball. I found myself dawdling, stalling. Alone with me, he was a different man.

We talked about basketball. He’d been part of a fun league in university.

“But I hardly play now,” he said with a trace of wistfulness.

“I don’t think you play at all.”

He looked at me.

“You get up in the dead of night, run a marathon in the snow, eat something that’s only technically considered food...”

“It’s healthy,” he started.

“Then you go directly to work. You already live at the office so it saves you the drive. You chase after us all day, then spend a relaxing evening researching the next day’s assignments. What fun!”

He was grinning ruefully. “I like an orderly life.”

“Even Ghandi put sugar on grapefruit, James.”

I heard the little intimacy come out of my mouth and wondered if I’d get my knuckles rapped. But he laughed and kept walking. The air was easy between us, the sleeping neighborhood as quiet as a quilt.

“I read your columns in Strong and Free today,” I said.

He seemed surprised. “Oh? Which ones?”

“All of them.”

“Really?” Self-consciousness came over him suddenly; he was both flattered and shy. “Should I be falsely modest or indignantly defensive?”

“No, no, they were good. I was impressed. You hardly ever ranted, unlike the other columnist, who shall go nameless.” I walked a few steps. “Catholics really seem to have the handle on guilt.”

He grinned. “Well, we have a formal system for it.”

“And I bet a few psychoanalysts are grateful for that windfall.”

“What most people don’t recognize, or completely ignore, is that Catholicism has a system for

forgiveness, too. Confession, contrition, absolution. It's a compassionate way to let people get on with their lives."

"And penance?" I couldn't stop the little needles in my voice.

"It's a way to focus the mind, to reinforce the idea of restitution. I mean, how can we possibly show we're sincere without trying to make amends of some kind? Since we're physical creatures that amendment has to be temporal, even if it's just saying a litany. That completes the process in your own mind."

"And does it work?"

"I think so. If you're sincere, if you really don't intend to do it again." His eyes were on the ground, watching his steps. "You picked up your things from home," he said after a minute. "How'd it go?"

"It...went. I didn't see anyone, and it's probably a good thing they didn't see me."

I'd meant to toss that out as if it were another easy pitch of the ball, but I think he knew it wasn't. I felt him touch my shoulder, not just contact but real pressure, a squeeze. Then his hand slid over my shoulder and down my back, a kindness that was almost...a caress. My spirits sat up in surprise.

He'd let go. "Well, thanks for the run. You play a pretty good game."

"Aren't you coming in?"

"I think I'll take a walk." He was already backing away, down a side street. "See you in the morning."

The words hung in the air like a promise.

"Don't forget what time they lock the doors, Mr. Rusk."

"They're my doors, Mr. Dahl," he answered pleasantly.

I was tired by the time I reached the house. I slipped into bed and let it wash over me, the unfamiliar pleasure of real fatigue, not just weariness. As I drifted off I basked in the luxury of two wonders: It was my third night and I was still here. And I liked someone. And against all reason and logic and even hope, I couldn't stop thinking that he liked me, too.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

Friday night the four of us packed ourselves into Knowle's wife's car, an abysmal little Neon the color of a sardine can, already running to rust. My knees touched the back of the driver's seat. In the front passenger side Conlan kept turning around, hanging in the gap between the seats to talk to Dave and I. We were on our way to Die Maschinerie, although I'd been trying to get them to let me off downtown.

"Why? Where do you have to go?" Dave asked.

"You've gotta come out," Conlan said. "There'll be lots of our guys there. If they hear about you, they've got to see you."

"Why?" I said.

Conlan shifted uneasily. "Well, you don't want it to look like you're too good, you know?"

"And drinking with you proves I'm no good at all?" The car laughed, even Dave.

"It's your first night. I'll buy you a beer," Knowle said.

"We'll all buy you a beer," Conlan said cheerfully. "You'll be shit-faced by ten o'clock."

"Great, can you get me laid, too?"

"Well, I don't work miracles," Conlan said, and the car laughed again. I grinned along with them. Two beers, I thought, and then I'm out the door.

I had eight dollars, carefully culled from my walking-around money. It had been painful to scrape together, but I needed the cover charge to get into one of my old clubs, to meet someone I knew or just meet someone. Getting out of that house had become important.

Heroin doesn't release your balls -- it sets them on fire and hurls them back at you. The past two days I'd woken up voracious, ravenous hunger lifting the sheet in a pup tent. I looked out over the sleeping shapes in the pre-dawn room, shoulders, backs, legs calling out the deep recesses of my nature, and only my heart sank. I was a starving man who'd camped outside a grocery store, locked and bolted.

I tried to take the edge off in the shower, quick, basic release I was so skilled at no fantasy was required. Yet as soon as I put my clothes on again I could feel myself moving with that wordless agenda, staring, posturing, glinting dangerously in mirrors I passed, my eyes daring even me. My desire swam among them like the ghost of a shark, and I knew where it was circling.

When Jim walked through the door Friday morning I was making coffee, my back to him. I'd been told I had a great back. And ass. But he didn't even say hello and I finally turned around. He was bent over, untying his runners, wearing a battered leather jacket and a small black tuque. On impulse, I snatched the cap and perched it on my own head.

I grinned. "Good morning."

His eyes flashed; I thought he'd make a grab for it. But he only smiled faintly, and walked past me to the fridge. "Good morning."

I wore the hat all through his breakfast, stretched out to my best advantage in the chair across, fingers locked behind my neck. I knew it was madness and still I couldn't stop myself from posing, hoping, tingling with the memory of his hand running down my back. We were all basic machinery, I thought.

And I was pulling levers of some kind. The cold had brought the usual color to his cheeks, but this time it didn't fade, only flushed deeper. I could feel him looking at me even when he wasn't.

"I thought I'd shoot some hoops tonight," I said.

"You're not going to the bar with the rest of them? It's Friday night."

"Don't you frown on that sort of thing?"

"I don't care what anyone does, outside my house."

His careless tone stung a little, but I didn't give up. "And what does Jim Rusk do on the weekends?" I tilted my chair back farther so that the two front legs lifted off the floor, and my clothes pulled tighter to my body. A tease.

"I sit and enjoy the silence." Then, "Please don't do that, it ruins the chairs."

I dropped forward with a disappointed thud. "I thought you said you didn't go into the monastery."

I regretted it instantly. His lips parted, brown eyes sheened in a flash of hurt. I wanted to apologize, but just then the infernal alarm began to ring upstairs, the unbreakable border of our mornings in the kitchen. Jim quickly picked up his bowl, even though he hadn't finished, and grabbed his jacket from the chair. I sat still, feeling stupid.

Suddenly a wallop of clammy leather landed on my head, startling me and knocking the cap into my lap. He'd thrown his jacket at me!

"You can hang that up, too," Rusk said from the doorway.

I held the coat that smelled of many long runs. It was time to go out.

Driving with the others, my illusions were far behind me, and all I wanted was to lose them completely. I was ready for fast sex, no-name sex, a parking lot or back seat event that had no pretense of anything as romantic as disrobing. I was ready for dangerous sex, bare, un plasticized skin sparking against more skin, the HIV roulette wheel spinning wildly. I was even ready for shameful sex, get-and-go with the person who would always take you, his eyes still full of the hurt of old lies, every rush of your pleasure tinged with gritty guilt. It was desperate, disgraceful behavior, and I was ready to stoop to it.

The only catch was that I had to develop a relationship, something that lasted for a whole weekend. Conlan had briefed me before we left the house in Rosemont.

"I know you know this, but I'm saying it again. You don't drink and come back here. He doesn't want to see any of us until Sunday night. So if you've got a friend, you'd better call him."

Die Maschinerie was as I remembered it, maybe dingier than through cocaine's crystallizing lens. It still reminded me of a make-shift canteen, untroubled by anything that even hinted decor. The only change was at the door. Last September we'd breezed right in, but now we were stopped at a table, manned by a mountain in a khaki shirt, sleeves rolled mid-way up his tattooed, ham-hock arms. His head was shaved, but he had enormous, bushy eyebrows which overshadowed the bits of dark glass that passed for eyes. He thrust a spiral-bound notebook forward without a word and I watched the others sign in ahead of me.

"Just write your name and the True North," Conlan whispered. "They want to know who's here."

But the roster wasn't common knowledge. A blank sheet of paper covered the previous signatures on the page. When I bent over to add mine, my eyes caught on one of his tattoos, a dagger with the words, Blut und ehre. The mountain grabbed my wrist.

"Hey."

"Yes?" Sir.

"I heard you guys are bringing somebody in, a big shot from the States. What's it take to meet him?"

Before I could answer, Conlan had slipped back in beside me. "Uh, sorry. All the tickets are gone."

"Come on," the big man growled in disbelief. "What's another chair?"

"Sorry," Conlan shrugged amiably. "We're already over the limit. Fucking fire regulations. But if somebody cancels, you'll be the first to know."

He hustled me away, whispering in my ear. "That's Rory Parke. You don't want to know Rory too well."

We waded into a sea. So many people were packed into the room it was hard to imagine lines of definition, clusters that were actual groups. But under the music and voices and men's laughter, an occasional flare lit up like a hairline crack of lightning. One man seized another by the shoulders -- I thought there'd be a fight -- but instantly the room swarmed over them, and it was over. The peace was kept at Die Maschinerie.

The crowd pushed the four of us more tightly together. Conlan threw his arm across my shoulder and tugged me to 'our' table, introducing me. There were six men and one young woman, who had delicate tattoos on her face, a Celtic design in blue-black on her forehead and under her bottom lip.

"This is Lee! He's crew!" Conlan cried over the noise. They seemed glad to see me. Most of the men stood up to shake my hand, or cuff me on the shoulder.

"Looks like First Night," someone called.

Chairs were pulled up and I was plunked into one, and to my utter astonishment money began to land on the table, bills and dollar coins in a growing pile. The tattooed girl smiled at me, as mysterious and beautiful as a statue of an Egyptian cat. I tried not to stare at the money, but my pulse was throbbing in my temples, sudden heat beaming in my face and armpits.

Conlan looked around. "This is it? Where's Kyle, and Derek? And Andy, that shit-for-brains." There were lame shrugs around the table, and I realized that in this whole sea of men, our little raft was all there was of the True North.

“Jesus,” Conlan said in disgust. “I need a beer.”

So did I. When the tray arrived I watched my hand reach out for it, a sudden seizure of movement that drained half the mug and made the table cheer. I wiped my mouth, grinning. There was something I disliked about booze, but I couldn’t remember what it was.

Conversation at our table ran to Hector, leader of the Northern Hammerskins. He’d left alone on a road trip to Alberta at the beginning of December, but no one had heard from or seen him for weeks and weeks, including his own people. Rumor had it that he was planning a takeover of the Edmonton Hammerskins.

“Bullshit. He’s under. There’s a warrant out for him and he’s in hiding.”

“Or dead.” The possibility paused the conversation for half a second.

“Well, if he’s still alive, someone should tell him he’s bleeding.”

Conlan noticed my quizzical look and he nodded across the room, at a huge throng next to the pool table. It was Aryan Sons territory, judging by the wall art.

“Some of Hector’s guys are joining up with Pope,” he explained.

“And why not? At least they can see him,” a man at the far end grumbled. He had a lean, sinewy look to him and mechanic’s hands, permanent grease in his knuckles and under his fingernails.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dave bristled.

“What do you think?” the mechanic shot back. “You bitch about who’s not here, but who’s the ultimate no-show?”

“You know he doesn’t drink...”

“So what? He’s still too fucking good to sit with us? He couldn’t come by and say, ‘How’s it going?’”

The air around the table had grown arid, everyone focused on Dave’s uncomfortable face. This wasn’t a new subject, I was sure of it.

“Where’s our place on the wall?” I said suddenly. “Why don’t we have posters up?”

Conlan thumped me, relieved by the distraction. “See? See! That’s what I said. You want to do something, Dave? Get us on the wall.”

“You’re already on the wall, Con,” Knowle said. “Check the bathroom.”

Conlan tossed his drink at him, a tiny stream from the nearly-empty glass that stained Knowle’s white T-shirt like piss in snow. The table roared with delight and the sound seemed to release it. Conversation settled in other directions, and when Dave glanced at me, it was not ungrateful.

I was drinking steadily, feeling the first clasp of alcohol’s warm embrace like a forgiven enemy. I’d passed my two-beer limit, but it was hard to leave. Their laughter included me and I felt defiantly

pleased, the thrill of my secret self licking me up the legs. Every now and then the tattooed girl let her gaze rest on me, grinning as she chewed on the end of a swizzle stick.

Conlan's knee pressed against mine under the table, and I looked up. Stuart Pope was heading toward us, two men on his heels like surly, well-trained hounds. He still wore his farmer's cap, pulled down until the brim touched his glasses, but he was squatter than I remembered, more of the man sitting on his belt. He might be sleeping in other people's basements, but he was eating well. He walked like the newly rich, shoulders back and weight on his heels, Reine's strut when he'd been promoted to foreman.

As the trio drew up conversation broke off and fell away, even breath seemed suspended. The hounds towered above us, dark eyes glancing over us like dinner.

"This is all of you?" Pope voice was heavy with contempt that bordered on glee. "Where's the lawyer? I never see him. Is he in hiding or is his time just too valuable?"

The whole table waited, sullen and silent, and even Conlan seemed to hunch down deeper in his chair. The discomfort crawled over my skin. Were they not allowed to talk to this man? Not even to speak up for Jim?

"Some of you must see him," Pope continued. "Which ones of you live in his house?" He looked down at the tattooed girl with a mild leer. "Oh, not you. You're not his type."

"You're too late," I blurted. "He was here and left already. He had an interview with Charles Turcott of the Sun."

I felt the surprise spread across the table, even those who knew I was only twisting the truth. But it was nothing compared to the raw disdain Pope turned on me.

"The Sun," he snorted, "at ten o'clock at night?"

"Mr. Rusk is a busy man. It was the only time he could spare."

"It's about the American?" Pope demanded.

"The article will be out in Thursday's paper. You can read it then." The tiny bit of evidence deepened Pope's consternation. I don't think he knew he was scowling.

"We'll tell him you came by," I said pleasantly.

This final insolence woke him. Pope pulled up to his best dumpy height. "You can tell him to send me twenty tickets at this address." He pulled a card out of his pocket and thrust it at me. It was a basic Aryan Sons promo, with a hotline number and logo of the flaming sword. Underneath he'd scribbled a P.O. box number. I took the card with a faint smile -- snowball's chance in hell.

The leader of the Aryan Sons was turning to leave when he noticed the money on the table in front of me. His doughy face twisted in a smirk.

"Looks like new boots in Boys' Town. The lawyer likes fresh meat in the stable."

Knowle gripped the armrests of his chair as if to vault himself forward. The hounds straightened, hackles up, warning crackling across the table. But Pope's knuckles went into the ribs of the closest Son,

halting him.

“Hope you last.” He tossed a dollar coin onto the pile.

Pope swaggered off, his men in reluctant tow. The noise from the other side of the room rose sharply, an exuberant greeting that seemed to take over the whole club.

“Dickhead!” Conlan spat beside me, then he twisted in his chair and whumped me happily on the arm. “‘Read it in the paper.’ Fucking brilliant! Somebody get this fucking guy another beer.”

They did and I sat, drinking with intent and basking in the glow as Conlan rolled out the whole story of my triumph in front of the Sun. Then we replayed the visit from Pope over a few times. Our group had drawn in, men leaning forward, elbows on the table. We weren’t a life raft any more, we were the Argo itself, a single ship blustering forward. And if I wasn’t exactly Achilles, I was still a member of the company, matching them mug for mug. I couldn’t stop the clutch of despair as the pile of money dwindled in front of me, but I knew it was really a triumph. I was going to make it clean tonight, just me and my buddy booze.

“So, are you going to keep us in suspense forever?”

The tattooed lady had moved into an empty chair beside me. She had an elfin air, with short hair that gleamed with a cranberry-colored wash, eyebrows tinted to match.

“Come on, let’s see the card,” she coaxed. “Where does the big man hang his hat?”

“Why, are you thinking of moving over to the enemy camp?”

She grinned wickedly. “No, I want to pee on his lawn.”

I laughed out loud. “It’s a pretty small lawn,” I said, showing her the card with the P.O. number.

I liked her. She said her name was Tessa.

“As in Contessa or Tess of the D’ubervilles?” I asked.

“Neither, but I’ll take the second one, the way you say it. When people say Tess-ah, I feel like my mother’s calling me.”

“And does she?”

Her eyes twinkled. “Not recently.”

A roaring guffaw from the other side of the room made us both look.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go over? That’s where the real men are,” I teased, lifting an eyebrow at her.

“No thanks. I used to date one, a long time ago. No one at our table asks me about breeding.”

“As in yours?”



“As in when. Like I was put on this earth to pump out little Aryan babies and I should take on every prick who volunteers. I’d also rather consider myself patriotic instead of a racist, and I’d rather belong to a group that doesn’t have a third of its membership in jail. And,” she said finally, “Stuart Pope is a cunning little toad, but Jim Rusk is entirely fuckable.”

I laughed, sort of. “Have you told him?”

“Oh, soon.” A bit of color came to her cheeks. “If I ever determine he has a social life. I mean, for all we know, the man spends his weekends in a closet.”

“You’re right,” I said, “the whole weekend, fasting and praying.” I felt a pang as soon as the words were out of my mouth. He’d trusted me with that secret.

“Please don’t tell me he’s religious -- you’ll break my heart.”

“No,” I said quickly, “he’s just a saint for putting up with us.”

She cocked her head at me, twinkling again. “And are you so terrible?”

Was I? I felt myself drifting, wondering, my mind rubbing the prickly memory of the morning. My coy little performance curdled inside me now. What the hell had I been thinking? That someone wanted me just because he’d been nice to me? Yet there seemed to be a subterranean tremor that vibrated between us. I heard it in his voice, felt it in the rare, long glance he gave me when he thought I wouldn’t notice. Or was I just hoping?

“You have the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen,” Tess said.

It caught me by surprise, but I decided it wasn’t a bad thing. Not bad at all.

“And I like your tattoos. Are -”

“Yes, they’re real. Yes, they hurt. Yes, they’re forever,” she rattled off, a woman who’d answered this question more than once.

“What does it mean?” I touched the emblem on her forehead gently with my fingertip.

“It means I sat still while someone drilled into my skin with an electric needle.”

My laughter delighted her.

“If something hurts for a minute, but lasts forever, it’s worthwhile,” she said.

“Sometimes it’s worthwhile if it lasts for a minute and hurts forever,” I said. In that instant I knew I was hammered, utterly pissed, emotion shimmering like a pond beneath my clothes. I was drunk and appallingly lonely, mesmerized by the blue-black ink above her Egyptian cat eyes. I was thinking that we were all basic machinery and this might not be impossible, might even be exciting, considering the lust we had in common.

“Can I drive you home?” I said.

“Do you have a car?”

I shook my head sheepishly.

“Well, that’s a blessing.” She pushed my glass away from me and stood up. “I think you’re pretty much finished here. Make sure somebody takes you home.”

I hadn’t solved that problem. Dimly I realized I still didn’t have a place to sleep and wasn’t really concerned about it -- or anything -- except the last six dollars on the table. When I slipped the money into my pocket, nudged it next to my own cache, the night dissolved into liquid. From that moment I was floating, bodies and voices swimming together and lapping against my body.

Then somehow, I was outside. Bitter January stung my cheeks, groped through my windbreaker and into my clothes. Only the right side of my body was still warm, pressed up tight against Conlan, whose arm was slung across my shoulders. One of us was holding the other up as we staggered down the sidewalk behind the mechanic and Knowle. Dave had vanished hours ago.

“You’re a good guy, a good fucking guy,” Conlan said earnestly.

I couldn’t speak. The sensation of his strong arm across my back, the nearness of these people who’d all thrown money on the table for me, closed my throat with unfamiliar emotion. I’d been on my own a long time.

“It’s more than what you did for me,” Conlan continued. “You came at the right time, you know? We used to get twenty guys at the table on a Friday night. Now we’re fucking bleeding.”

“Jesus!” Knowle stopped so abruptly we bumped into his back. Conlan let go and I stumbled a few steps to lean against the side of a shop, until I had a clear view over the mechanic’s shoulder.

The Neon was half a block away, in front of a coffee shop. Two squeegee kids were sitting on its hood, talking to friends as they cuddled -- the cinnamon gazelle with dreadlocks had his arm draped casually over his lover’s shoulder, playing with his hair. Then they kissed.

“Well, if it isn’t Dennis fucking Rodman,” Conlan said softly. He grinned back at me. “Come on. It’s a party.”

But I was pinned to the wall, my insides twisted in sudden revelation. I am not high enough for this, I am not high enough.

It wasn’t Dennis Rodman, it was Musaphir. I felt the first boot in my own guts.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Open the door. Open this goddamn door!”

I wasn't yelling, but I could hear the desperate anger hissing through the words as I stood on the step, pounding with the side of my fist, leaning on the bell. I'd taken a cab as far as fourteen dollars would go, then walked the rest of the way. Now I was out of money, out of everything, the dangerous cold seeping through the ragged blanket of alcohol. What would I do if he wasn't home? Or wouldn't answer the door?

At last I saw a tiny light reflect onto the snowy lawn from a side window, and heard a faint shuffle on the other side of the door. But he didn't touch the locks.

“This had better be an emergency,” Rusk growled. “It's three in the morning.”

“Let me in. I want my clothes, and then I'm gone.”

“I am not running a hotel!”

“You don't understand. I want my clothes, my books, everything! I'm finished here.”

There was a second's hesitation. My heart thudded in my throat, but I glared back defiantly at the peep hole. I wanted him to know I meant it.

Finally the metal bolts clicked and the door opened. I stumbled in, the warmth of the room almost painful against my frozen skin. I was swamped with relief, but didn't dare sit down, afraid I'd lose momentum, or my nerve.

I hadn't gotten Rusk away from his desk. He was bare-legged, sandy hair tousled, wearing a plush night robe knotted at his waist. It was a deep wine red, the same color as the tie I'd taken from him in September. He seemed even more cautious of me now than then, standing near the door after he'd shut it, an expanse of hardwood floor between us.

“Now what is your problem?”

I turned on him. “My problem is that I just saw those animals you call your staff beat the shit out of a guy -- three on one -- because he was sitting on their car.”

His face pulled flat with alarm. “Who? When?”

I told him the barest details, just that they were street kids.

“And what did you do? Did you try to stop it?”

My skin prickled. “No wonder you don't care what they do outside your house -- you know what they do, and you don't give a shit. You hide out here in your castle...”

“Did you call an ambulance, for God's sake? Where is this man now?”

“He had friends, all right! They were...kids, hanging around. They helped him away.”

Jim advanced on me, a solid block of scarlet. He scooped his cell phone from the coffee table, and held it out. “Call the police. Report it. The victim needs you to do that.”

I felt as though he’d grabbed me around the throat. I could hardly breathe, much less speak.

“If you won’t, I will.”

“And I’ll be a dead man! Don’t think they won’t know where it came from.”

He lowered his arm, new focus coming to his eyes. “Then what do you want from me? Why are you here?”

My skin had begun to flame, unstoppable flutters of anticipation. “I told you. I want out. I came for my things.”

“So get them.” He tightened his belt, face taut.

I took a step toward him, my voice lowering. “Listen, don’t think I’m ungrateful. I know you took a big risk to give me a chance. My father wouldn’t. Not anymore.”

The edges of his mouth softened, but still he watched carefully as I drifted closer. Any remnants of sleep had long since fallen away.

“And it was interesting. I liked working here. You made me think and I didn’t expect that. I don’t find many people that...interesting.” I clasped my hands. “I’m sorry this isn’t going to work, but I have to go. Tonight. So I’ll just get my things and we’ll settle up...”

“I’m not giving you a dime.”

I let go a short breath. “You can’t send me out with nothing.”

“I’m not sending you anywhere. You’re the one who’s leaving.”

“You owe me! I worked damn hard for five days -”

“No you didn’t,” he cut me off, “you worked smart, and that’s more amazing, more rare.”

It stopped me for a second. I didn’t know what to do with praise.

“What are you trying to get out of me -- a few hundred bucks? You’re worth more than that.” He set the phone on the coffee table. “How long would it take to inhale that, inject it? A night? And then you’re back where you started.” His voice softened. “I think more of you than that, even if you don’t.”

I was naked in that room. He could see me through my clothes, throbbing at my wrists, armpits and groin, in the hollow above my collarbone. He could see me blazing under my skin, and I hated it.

“It’s so good of you to tell me what I’m worth, Mr. Rusk. It’s so Christian. I can live and breathe again because Saint Jim thinks I’m worth something.”

It wasn't me talking, it wasn't. I wouldn't say those things, slashing out like knives.

"It's your hobby, isn't it? Redeeming all the strays who show up at your door. Knowle, Dave, me. Where did you find Conlan -- at the Sally Ann? You're a real humanitarian -- if only you could stand us." His eyes flashed, a muscle twitched in his cheek. "Oh, yes, they know what you really think. No one expects the lawyer to sit and have a beer with them."

He took a step, the color rising in his face. "Look, it's very late."

"Later than you think." I reached into my pocket. "If you're all alone at your next Patriot Night, wondering where everyone went, you might try this address." I brandished the card quickly, so he'd only see the emblem and that there was writing on it.

"Pope's recruiting my people?" The sudden demand in his voice rolled in a wave across the room. My heart jumped with opportunity.

"For a hundred dollars I'll tell you who else took his card."

He moved fast, or I was still drunk. He leapt at me before I could blink, caught me by the lapels and shoved me back into the wall with a hard thump. I was startled again by his strength, and his face suddenly so close to mine.

"If you're on your way to the Aryan Sons I'll help you out the door."

I wasn't the scarecrow I'd been in the alley. I thrust out, throwing him off balance although he didn't let go of my coat. We careened toward the center of the room and when I finally wrenched out of his grip, I stumbled and fell, whacking my head on a corner of the coffee table on the way down.

The pain was brief, a short, cruel blast, but it was the final blow in a very long night. The room began to whirl, all the teetering fragments of rage and despair and need raining down on me. I curled up on my side on the carpet, face in my hands, and dissolved.

"Let me see your head." He'd crouched down beside me, the words quiet and close.

"Please let me go," I said into my hands. "Give me the money and let me go. Please, please..."

His hand on my shoulder. "Sit up and let me see if you're bleeding." The anger had gone from his voice, but there was an authority in it I had no resistance against. For a moment I lay there, struggling to steady my breathing, then pushed myself up. I twisted away to wipe my tears, but he caught my chin and gently turned me back.

Even through the watery blur, I saw his features soften. I was profoundly aware of my trembling lips, and his fingers against my skin.

"No cut," he said, "but I think you're going to have a pretty decent bump. Let's get some ice on it."

"I think I need to pass out."

"No, no, sit down on the couch."

He took my forearm and helped me up, led me the few steps to the sofa, which I melted onto. My head had begun to throb and the room was pulsing with it, wavering in and out, the dizzying whoosh of taking a hill too fast. I laid my cheek against the smooth backrest, and I was flying. I was home in Thunder Bay, riding my bike, soaring faster and faster over the little hills, outrunning the burnt-paper stench of the mills, my body strong and light, humming with all the glory yet to come...

I blinked awake. Jim was leaning over me, one knee on the couch as he pressed something cold onto the left side of my forehead. My other cheek was warm, cradled by his hand that held me steady. I was unprepared for how gently he touched me, more carefully than the staff in Emergency, kinder than even Louise. My chest was already too full, heat that forced its way into my throat, threatening to spill out. I felt as if I'd really been home, old dreams lingering in my body. I'd been a better man at thirteen.

Jim saw that I was awake. "All right, you hold it now." He guided my hand to the mass against my face - ice in a bag, wrapped in a towel. Then he turned to leave me, shoulders bowed wearily.

"I lied," I said. "Pope doesn't want me, he wants tickets to Phillips." I struggled to pull the card from my pocket and held it out to him. "He wasn't recruiting anyone. There's only a P.O. box."

He took it from me, glanced at it without expression. "It doesn't really matter. Pope's men, my men. Me. It's all the same...ugly animal."

"Why?"

"I call the Aryan Sons brainless thugs, then hear that my own staff beat up a defenseless young man. I write columns about non-violent solutions, then put you against the wall twice in five days."

I forced up a grin, even though it hurt. "But I'm a special case. I'm exceptionally aggravating. I was sent to you as...a tribulation."

The specter of a smile that touched his grave, handsome face was so empty I felt a touch of alarm. I moved my knee that was up on the couch, an invitation. He hovered uncertainly for a moment then eased down beside me, breath rushing out in a long sigh.

"You were right the first day. I am that fool." He ran his hands over his face. "I really thought this could be something different, that I had another direction, an effective system. I thought we could get things done."

Men didn't want change, Jim said, not the way it really occurred -- the steady and calculated pressure that forced the slow wheels of government to turn. They wanted someone to rev them up every week, a devil with a face they knew, and someone to shout, There's the bastard! They wanted subterfuge, conspiracies to twist, ranks to achieve and lord over others, alliances to forge and shatter...

"They want a war," I interrupted.

He was gazing out thoughtfully across the room, still holding Stuart Pope's card, curling the edges. "Yes. And there are men out there willing to give them one. Nothing I can do will change that."

I was awash with regret, sick at the cheap shots I'd taken. It was humbling to be around someone who meant the things he said.

"But you do have an impact," I said. "I met people tonight who are part of the True North because you're

not Stuart Pope, who want to see Johnson Phillips, just...to hear something new. You're going to fill that hall and sure, some of them won't care. But some might. All you can do is try."

His anxious profile eased the smallest bit. He wanted to believe me.

"Then there's me." I took the ice away from my face and set it down. "You're sitting beside a man who was his way out the door. That's impact."

He smiled faintly. "No, the coffee table was impact."

"Well, it worked. I'm still here."

"We're both still here," Jim said quietly.

My heart flipped. "I think you could use a friend, James."

It was very late. There wasn't a single car or barking dog to prove that the world existed beyond the walls of this house. I even felt still inside, as if my True Love had finally lain down, exhausted. All that was left was the deep tremor vibrating between us.

I could smell him. The scent of his skin wafted up through the gaps in his robe, his luxurious fragrance spiked with something new, tart. Anxiety -- or excitement? He wasn't wearing shorts, I was sure of it. He was naked under this one layer and I was mesmerized by his muscled thighs, where the velvet had pulled up. I ached to touch him, lean my face into his neck and run my hand up his bare leg. Logic was barking in the distance, a baleful guard dog on a chain, but for one lucid moment I was utterly certain: he was waiting for me.

I reached out and laid my hand on the back of his neck. I must have been cool, his skin seemed to burn my palm, but he didn't flinch or pull away. His lips parted slightly -- did he catch his breath? The sparks leapt beneath my zipper, a crackling wildfire that raced through the rest of my body, igniting it.

I tightened my grip and he finally turned to look at me. His lion's eyes beamed heat, a shimmering savannah noon. I could hear my own breath and my heart drummed two beats over and over. Oh yes, oh yes.

"It's been a long night," Jim said. He put his hand on my leg and pushed himself up, out of my grip. I watched with stunned disappointment as he scooped the ice bag off the coffee table.

"Get some sleep, Lee."

You fool.

The bottom had fallen out of the night and drop-kicked me in the stomach. I slid down right where I was, rolled over so my face was against the backrest, boots on the leather, plummeting.

My dreams were terrible. Someone I loved needed help, and I was in another room, shooting up.

Lee! For God's sake, Lee!

His voice gouged me, twisted, wounded. But I was paralyzed, a wolf with my jaw locked on the kill. My eyes were swimming with tears and all I could do was blink them away, so I wouldn't miss the vein.

I woke up in my own sweat, smothered by heat and anguish, my jaw aching. I pushed away blindly, looking for air, and rolled off the couch. I landed on the floor with a thump and sat up, squinting in the glare.

The living room was silent, sunlight waxing gold on all the old furniture. It felt like noon. I was twisted in a quilt that Jim must have covered me with, and beside me I noticed my boots, paired up neatly beside the couch. He'd taken those off for me, too.

These kindnesses surprised me, helped clear away the last shuddering cobweb strands of the dream. I wanted to lie back down and just think, except I needed to pee. Damn. I pushed myself up dizzily, the movement igniting the throbbing in my head, blending it with the raw ache that reverberated through my joints. The inside of my mouth was a desert where something had died. Now I remembered -- this was what I hated about booze. I hobbled to the main floor bathroom, listening all around me, trying to determine where he was.

Afterward, I rinsed my mouth and wet my face carefully. The bruise had already begun, a blush of deep red that hinted purple as it crept toward my eye. I was going to have a shiner, all right. I leaned toward the mirror. The hungry last few months still lingered as shadows on my pale skin, the bluest eyes Tess had ever seen were rimmed in red. Not to mention all that poise brought on by six or eight mugs of beer, and charming Lady Junk running the show. I'd been Mr. Irresistible, all right. I sat down on the toilet seat lid in disgust.

Did it ever occur to you that the man is just straight?

Of course it hadn't, because nothing occurred to me when I wanted something. I was an arrow flying from point A to point B, cutting blindly through flesh until it hit bone. This time it was mine.

Why did it hurt so much? I'd been rejected before, dismissed with a glance or a hollow laugh under spinning blue and red lights. It was always a kick in the ego, but I couldn't remember being so...flattened, leaden with loss. Maybe it was because none of those men had said I was amazing and made me feel it was true. None of them made me feel remiss, either. In my mind's eye I saw Jim again, holding out the phone to me, his face clear and intent on doing the right thing. I was swept over by an unfamiliar sensation: I didn't just want him, I admired him.

And there wasn't a whole lot to admire about me. I'd watched them descend on Musaphir like a war party, and I hadn't even called out for them to stop, so afraid Mus would recognize my voice and finger me. There was a word for that and it wasn't queer.

I leaned my burning face into my hand. Confession, contrition, absolution. Those simple words floated in a ring out in front of me, a life preserver far out of my grasp.

There seemed to be only one thing to do. I crept up the stairs, listening for a footfall, the clink of a cup, but the old house was as quiet as dust. On the second storey landing I noticed the door to Jim's bedroom was closed; he was asleep or telling me he was. In the bathroom, I stripped off my clothes and got into the shower, scrubbing myself over and over. Even when I was as clean as I could get, I stood under the water, lingering in the warmth.

I dressed and packed up, dividing my books between the backpack and the duffle bag, stuffing my few garments on top. Passing Jim's door again I hesitated. I couldn't imagine he was still asleep, this man who ran in the snow at dawn. If I spoke, he'd hear me. But what the hell would I say?



On the main floor, I folded the quilt and laced on my boots. I knew I should eat something or take food with me -- it might be a long time before my next meal. Finally I wandered into the kitchen.

There was a bowl of fruit on the clean table, apples and oranges and peaches usually left in the fridge. Beside it was a stack of tickets and a key, resting on top of an envelope with my name on it. I dropped my bags and tore it open.

*I tried to wake you. I've had to go to the cabin this weekend -- family crisis. I still think you should file a report of the assault with the police, but only you can make that decision. I'm sick about it, but I wouldn't endanger you for anything. I have to find another way to deal with this, and I don't know the answer yet.*

*If you still believe you have to leave, I understand. But I wish you wouldn't. There is more to you than you realize. You had me thinking all night. I do need a friend, someone I can count on.*

*If you do stay, these last twenty tickets are for anyone except Stuart Pope. If not, please set the alarm on your way out. I'll be home Sunday night.*

*James*

I read it over and over, clutching the key, the Bitch chattering in frantic, screechy excitement. Clean him out, clean him out, you deserve this.

His signature mesmerized me; only I called him that name. On the page it seemed as intimate as a caress. He might be straight, he might be scared and running, but this man wanted me. I was almost sure.

Yet to leave me with this, a house full of expensive and entirely saleable objects...! I sat down on one of the chairs, reeling, trembling. He knew what he was dealing with and yet he'd set it all in my lap, given me the key to everything he owned. On impulse I glanced over my shoulder, but I was truly alone. This was real. He either trusted me, or he needed to know that he could.

Don't be a fool This is your chance -- you'll never worry again. You could set yourself up, you know a dozen connections. A dealer never does without. Build it up and you'll ride the golden ship for the rest of your life.

"Shut up," I whispered. I was frightened, swaying, walking a wire so fine it threatened to slice me in two. I read the note again. I wanted to be amazing, yearned for it the way I used to, dreaming on my bike, flying through Thunder Bay. It was as though an old door had cracked open and I was peering into a kingdom I'd thought was lost.

I just had to...contain myself somehow. Focus and keep moving so I would hold the Bitch silent and still. I picked up the stack of tickets with a shaky hand, the last twenty seats for Johnson Phillips. It wasn't enough to simply hand them out, I wanted more. Something spectacular that would humiliate Stuart Pope, burn in his guts like he'd burned in ours. But what? I thought of Hector's men he was trying to recruit. Who were they, and which ones were still sitting on the fence?

It occurred to me I'd met someone last night who did know, in fact, who had a whole notebook on the subject. If I promised Rory Parke a ringside seat, maybe we could make a deal.

I felt a queasy twist. This wasn't restitution to Musaphir, and I knew it. That invoice would sit with all

the others now, another debt on a pile so high it seemed to sway, threatening to topple. I pushed up from the table anyway, ignoring the sudden jab of pain behind my left eye.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The first time Barry Tanner kissed me he had me pinned on my back, my arms above my head, wrists nailed to the carpet, throbbing under his grip. He was straddling my waist, grinning open-mouthed gasps because he'd beat me, and he knew it was real. Over the last few months we'd determined that I was stronger and he was faster, but neither of us ever stopped trying. It was an unspoken promise. Running or wrestling or anything else, we only gave our best.

It was the middle of July. We were on the living room carpet of the trailer he shared with his father, the hot air inert and heavy, even at night. Barry was arched over me, sweat shining on his forehead, cheeks and lips flushed. I stopped struggling, transfixed by the exciting weight of him, my heart thudding with hope and terror. I'd been thinking of this since April, staring at his lithe antelope build from the stands during track meets, or riding my bike alongside his on the wooded trails that circled Thunder Bay. For three months all the heroes of my secret fantasies had dark hair and full lips. But how did you know if what you wanted was what you really wanted?

He was looking into my eyes, trembling with the strain of holding me or something else, and without a word the laughter slipped out of his beautiful face. He leaned forward with aching slowness, eyes closing to dreamy half-sleep, and opened his mouth over mine.

It was electric. The wet heat tore down through my torso, caught me by the balls, and echoed out into my body with a roar. It blew the doors of my doubt off their hinges. I kissed and kissed him, bit his lips, sucked them into my mouth. He met me with such force he pinned the back of my head to the floor. I was in exquisite pain, hands growing numb from his grip, the urgent pressure of him digging into my stomach, my own erection threatening to tear open the metal teeth of my zipper.

At last he pulled back, panting. "I'm going to lock the door."

"Bolt it," I said.

"Go to my room."

He slipped off me and I struggled to my feet like a drunk, the air on the wet skin around my mouth making it feel raw and new.

I didn't turn on the light in his bedroom. The curtain on the tiny porthole of a window was open and moonlight silvered the few shapes in his Spartan room -- a thick piece of foam covered with blankets that passed as a bed, the boxes of his clothes, his track trophies lined up neatly on the floor against the wall. He'd only let me in here once or twice; I think he was embarrassed by how little he had. I admired him. There was so much I wanted.

I heard a noise and turned. He was in the doorway, one hand on the jamb, looking at me. His eyes were dark liquid in the half-light, hair falling into his eyes. He seemed uncertain, maybe because there was space between us again, and he didn't know what to do next.

Every molecule of my body knew. I reached down and tugged my T-shirt out of my jeans, pulled it up and over the archer's torso I'd worked so hard on. I could hear his breath.

“When does your dad get back?” I said.

“Tomorrow.”

I threw my shirt on the floor. “Okay.” I took two steps and caught him behind the neck, pulled him hard toward me, onto my mouth, against my naked chest. The groan came up from his center and poured into me. Then we were madmen released, grabbing and groping and fumbling with our clothes, tripping over them on our way to the bed.

I’d stared at that body, fantasized about it, but nothing could have prepared me for what the hot, velvet length of it would feel like. I rubbed against him like a blind man, twined my legs through his, pressed my face into his chest and neck. When I gripped him in my hand, the deep sound of his pleasure reverberated through me in a gust of power and pride. I knew I loved this -- the shape and texture of it, familiar, but somehow more erotic, more thrilling than my own. I was worshiping a god who was worshiping a god who was me. It was a complete and perfect circle.

But thought was only a distant pulse in my body. I was utterly lost in sensation, his rough, hungry searching hands, every stroke goading me closer to the edge. I was already bucking shamelessly against his hip when he rolled to face me, and caught me between his sweaty runner’s thighs, gripped me in heat and strength so powerful it made me gasp, and pray. ohjesus ohjesus ohmygod.

I came forever, months of longing released in an exquisite seizure, jets sluicing deep into his embrace, the sensation cresting outward from my groin to my toes and fingers, the crown of my head. I was transfixed by pleasure, swamped by it. Bliss held me still while I drowned.

We lay there, still panting, limbs heavy and hot, and sticky now, too. Barry pulled away to reach beside the bed. He wiped himself off with a T-shirt and handed it to me. If it was mine, I didn’t care. I’d go home in nothing, if I ever went home. I stretched out and settled on my back, happy just to breathe and stare at the most beautiful ceiling in the world. It was smooth, not stippled like the ceilings in houses, yard lights through the window casting a faint blue glow across it. I was light with amazement and delicious ease, as untroubled as mist. Only one thread still held me to earth -- his regret would destroy me.

“I guess that was pretty queer,” he said quietly.

I tried to read his voice, but I got stuck on that word, the stupid little dart guys hurled at each other in the sandbox, or on the soccer field. It was so tiny now, a wood shaving not big enough for what had just happened, or what I felt.

“Oh, no. That was way beyond queer. We were through queer in the first five minutes.”

He laughed and my heart lifted. I rolled over to look at him. He was as pale as marble in the moonlight, a long-limbed trailer park god with a mesmerizing pattern of dark hair that swirled across his chest, whispered down his torso, and sprang up again in a lush forest. I was fascinated. All the hair on my body was red.

“Did you ever do this with anybody?” he said.

“Only you. A hundred times.”

I could hear the smile. “Wow, I’m not even tired.” Then, “Me, neither. Or me, too.”

“You know what that means?” I said.

“What?”

“We can do everything.” I leaned over and opened my mouth on his stomach. I heard him gasp with surprise and lust, but he gently eased my head up again.

“Wait, wait a minute. We have to think about this, seriously.”

I pulled back and leaned on my elbow. “Okay. What, seriously?”

“This isn’t a big place, Lee. It’s barely a city.”

“So I won’t jump you on Main Street.”

He gave my shoulder a little hit. “Just listen. I’m nobody, okay? I’ve been here for a few months. If the Americans finish off all the deer, maybe I’ll be gone by Christmas.”

It was incomprehensible and entirely possible. Barry’s father was a hunting and fishing guide, leading tourists out into the lush Canadian wilderness, staying as long as an area was popular. Barry had told me they’d moved five times in six years.

“Your whole family is here, Lee. Your mom, your cousins. Everyone knows you. And your brother already hates me.”

It pulled sound out of me, the start of a protest, but he hurried on. “And there’s school. I’m going to graduate in June, but you’ve got two more years. Don’t think they can’t make your life hell.”

It had already started, nothing serious but...there. Little quips, jabs from people who noticed us together all the time. Which one of you is real and which one’s the shadow?

My heart was plummeting. “So you’re telling me you don’t have the guts for this. We can stand around and look at each other, then go home and beat off.” I tried to push away, but he stopped me, his hand on the side of my face, a startling, intimate touch, even after all we’d done.

“I’m telling you,” his dark eyes were intense, “that you’re my best friend. And if people make your life so hard you come to hate me, I couldn’t fucking stand it.”

I caught my breath, holding the words I barely dared to believe. My chest felt hot and liquid. From the day the sun had risen and set on Barry Tanner. It was a miracle to me that he could feel the same way. I’d never been anyone’s best anything. The emotion rose up thick in my throat, ferocious and tender at the same time.

“And I’m telling you, bring the bastards on,” I whispered. I leaned my cheek against his stomach again, feeling the thunder of Achilles tearing into the Trojans, awed by the revelation that I, too, was capable of murder. I would destroy anyone who hurt this man.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

On Sunday, Conlan and Dave trooped in around six p.m., a few minutes apart. My black eye was in full bloom by then and it made Conlan hoot. "It looks like you had a weekend. What the hell happened?"

I shrugged without looking at him. "She said yes, her boyfriend said no."

"We were wondering what happened to you. You disappeared pretty -"

"You didn't seem to need any help," I cut him off.

Jim came home late Sunday night and I cornered him in his study. I wanted him to know the success I'd had in filling the last seats, but when I said who'd be in them, the news pinned him in his chair.

"I don't believe it. I don't believe you would do this. Hammerskins! You know how I feel about those people!"

"Anyone except Stuart Pope," I quoted.

His own words seemed to inflame him. He pushed up to his feet, the back of the chair clunking sharply against the edge of the desk.

"Where have you been for the last ten days? What have we all been working so hard for? We promised Phillips a mainstream audience. I gave him my word! Now you tell me you're dragging in twenty angry, confrontational -"

"I'm not dragging anyone," I interrupted. "They wanted those tickets. Hector's been gone almost two months and the men who haven't already left are looking for something -- or someone -- new. And if they don't find you, you know who will find them." I saw the point register and lowered my voice. "If you really want impact, this is your chance."

We were both standing. I knew my purple decoration brought Friday night into the room with us, a silent shout. It was hard for him to look anywhere else.

"Then those twenty men are your responsibility," he said. "If there's trouble, consider it yours."

He was dismissing me; I was crestfallen. But in the doorway I stopped, one hand on each side of the frame, my back to him.

"Did you notice I didn't steal anything, Mr. Rusk?" I said to the air.

"I notice everything you do, Mr. Dahl," he answered quietly. The words sailed me up to bed on a flush of hope. But he wasn't in the kitchen for breakfast the next morning, or the next.

Wednesday night Jim came downstairs to the Pit. Dave reached over abruptly to turn off the TV, and the others sat up attentively. Jim leaned against the wall at the bottom of the stairs, arms crossed over his chest. Not for an instant was there any pretense that this visit was social.

"I had an interesting phone call today," he said. "Do any of you know Shannon LaRiviere? She's on our subscribers' list."

They shook their heads blankly, but Dave blurted, "Really? I don't remember --."

"The subscription is in her brother's name," Jim continued. "She's taking out an ad in the next edition of the newsletter, offering a reward for information. It seems there was a terrible beating Friday night, in front of the coffee shop she owns, just down the road from Die Maschinerie. She phoned the police, but everyone disappeared, even the victim. The woman is distraught, and I don't blame her. It was brutal, senseless violence; she thinks it might even have been someone from the club." He paused. "I know you were all there Friday night."

"I left at midnight," Dave said. "I didn't see anything."

Conlan glanced at me, an anxious twitch, but Knowle was as smooth and cool as the standing weights.

"We left around two," he said. "We didn't see it."

"Well, I want to be very clear on this. If you hear anything it's your duty to come forward, even if it's someone you know. Because the men who attacked that boy are animals. They don't deserve your protection -- they certainly wouldn't get it from me. I'd do everything within my power," he leaned on the word, "to see them prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

Jim's hard eyes touched on every face, including mine. Then he turned in disgust. "This place is a pigsty."

There was beat of silence.

"Damn, I'm almost sorry I missed that," Dave said. "I think there's a story for the newsletter..."

"David, cram the newsletter up your ass," Knowle said, reaching down to pick up an empty can.

That night I lay in bed with the thought of Jim Rusk, not one of my usual erotic fantasies, just the memory of him, the sound of those unequivocal words: Everything within my power.

The regular location the True North used for Patriot Nights would have been too small, so Jim booked a Masonic hall for Johnson Phillips. Friday noon Conlan and I were sent out to prepare the room, a high-skill assignment.

"You know, two hundred chairs are a lot to set up," Conlan puffed cheerfully, trundling out another stack. "A shitload of a lot."

He'd been relentlessly good natured all week, extending an easy camaraderie that I ducked at every turn. With just the two of us in the hall, my silence seemed to ring louder than ever. I threw myself into the task, trying to match him chair for chair. But I was only ten days out of detox and by the second long row I could feel myself wearing down. He was, too, or he amiably tried to make me think so.

"I swear, I'm not putting these things back," Conlan grunted. "Let Knowle and Dave do it. Why should you and me always get the shit jobs?"

“You seem right up for the shit jobs,” I muttered under my breath.

“Yeah?” He snapped open a chair.

“Yeah.”

He slammed it down with a metal clang. “If you’re going to say something, just fucking say it.”

The change was swift, congeniality crumbled, hands open and ready at his sides. I caught my breath, but I meant this.

“All right. What I saw Friday night makes me sick.”

“The guy was on the car...”

“He was a skinny kid! He didn’t weigh a hundred and thirty pounds.”

“He was a fag.”

That word, that hate, smacked me in the face.

“The last time I saw three on one, they had the poor bastard in an alley,” I continued bitterly, “and I didn’t care if he was Adam.”

I saw the memory strike him. He still had that scar.

“You remember that night? You told me the True North wasn’t about that -- that was the Aryan Sons. And I believed it. I still believe it.”

“You looking to make a little reward money here?” There was a dangerous sway in his voice.

“No. But the next time I see that kind of sorry, cowardly bullshit, it’s going to be three on two.”

Not quite a threat, it was still a line in the dirt between us. For a moment Conlan just stared, blank and unreadable. At last a grin broke over him, as pale and unexpected as January sun.

“You fucking guy. Who are you -- Dudley Doright?” He shoved a stack of chairs toward me. “All right. I’m there. Let’s finish this.”

We set to work again, the silence between us easier now, men saving their breath while they worked. But underneath I glowed, relieved and glad, maybe even proud of myself.

By four o’clock we were on the bus heading back to Rosemont. We were both dead weight on the vinyl bench, arms and backs aching. Next to the window, I couldn’t help but stare at the familiar buildings of my old neighborhood, made gray and grainy by the sketching of dirty snow. The streets had the look of a black and white photograph, the kind in supermarket tabloids or the cheapest porno mags -- erotic, wicked and thrilling. Then I saw someone I knew, someone every addict knew, the only dealer on the planet who gave credit.

I sat up, a sudden erection on the seat, palms sweating.



“What?” Conlan said, opening one eye.

“Nothing,” I said softly.

Supper was already on the table by the time we arrived, so we ate quickly and went upstairs to shower. I got the last of the hot water and when I went into the room all three of them were getting dressed, blue jeans and T-shirts littered on the beds and floor. I watched Knowle’s tattoos disappear into his crisp white sleeves like a dark and earthy secret under the sheets, and the realization to hit me: This was a formal event.

He noticed me and grinned. “That’s right, New Boots. Church clothes.” He swung open a closet door where, to my astonishment, five more shirts were hanging, fresh from the cleaners, as orderly as white soldiers. “Pick one that fits. Ties are on the rack.”

I got dressed with my back to them, tingling under the fine fabric, inhaling the unfamiliar scent of starch. I tucked the tails into my jeans -- I had no other options -- and then dawdled around, waiting for the others to leave. As soon as they were gone I turned to stare at their abandoned clothes.

The silky dishonesty passed over me in alternating waves of excitement and disgust. I fell on their pants like a wolf and ravaged the pockets, but came up empty, hollow with disappointment. Rising to my feet again, I heard my True Love speaking through every cell of my body. A day’s grace. You saw the only man who’ll give you a day’s grace. You saw him! I turned quickly away, but the imprint stayed.

I chose a tie with icy blue stripes, the color of my eyes. I’d never done this before, but I’d seen it, watched men whip around the length of silk into a plump, self-assured knot. Over, over, and through. How tough could it be?

The first attempt bulged like a crooked fist, the second was worse. Downstairs I could hear the restless thudding of boots in the foyer.

“Lee, come on!” Conlan yelled up the stairs.

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered, yanking the sorry thing apart for the third time. Why the hell didn’t this work?

The maple floor creaked and I turned to see Jim in the doorway. He’d been striking in the charcoal suit, but he was devastating in navy. The broad-shouldered, double-breasted cut accented the inverted triangle of his torso, and a pastel blue shirt and gold-flecked tie heightened the dashing air of a nautical uniform. Captain Jim. Topped by his impeccable fawn and gold hair, his square, attractive face was glowing with the night’s excitement. The sight hit me in the stomach, and lower. Tess had said it all. Entirely, entirely fuckable.

He understood my predicament in a glance and strode over, smiling faintly, but not with disdain. He expertly readjusted the length and worked the silk while I stood obediently still, excited by the nearness of his strong, masculine shape, reveling in every brush of his hands. In seconds, it seemed, he was sliding the completed knot up to my collar, then smoothed the hanging ends down my chest in a lingering stroke.

“Aren’t you a handsome devil,” he said softly.

I blinked, stunned by the husky warmth in his voice. He swung around behind me so that I could see my image in the mirror. I admit, I startle myself sometimes, with my sharp features and iceberg eyes. But

with my fading shiner, and the recent naughty thoughts still lingering in my face, the white shirt and blue tie were a parody of convention. I looked faintly wicked, Puck himself impersonating a cadet. And the dashing navy officer behind me beamed raw heat I was certain could feel along the length of my back.

I was confused, even nettled. The weather had been cool.

“You haven’t been running in the morning, James,” I said to his reflection.

“I know. What a crazy week,” he said. “I missed it terribly.”

For a single instant he held my eyes, a gaze as bold and bare as any I’d gotten across a bar. Then abruptly he pulled away. “We’d better get moving. It’s showtime.” He ushered me out the bedroom ahead of him, his hand against the small of my back. I tromped down the stairs, reeling with arousal and wonder. He was either so straight he was utterly oblivious, or -

Or he’s so good, you don’t know how good he is, I thought.

The doors were to open in an hour. Jim left alone in the Mercedes to pick up Johnson Phillips from the hotel, and the four of us took Knowle’s wife’s car to open up the hall. Their chatter murmured around me like distant traffic. I was lost in my own thoughts, the memory of his hand running down my chest, the way he’d looked at me. I was still drifting in the thrilling dream when we pulled up to the hall.

“Well, shit,” Conlan cackled suddenly, “we’re the hot spot tonight!”

It broke my trance. I saw the cluster of six people already waiting on the sidewalk in the long shadow of the brick building, around the corner from the brightly lit door. They watched intently as Knowle maneuvered the car into a tight parallel space between a pickup and an SUV -- a squeeze, even for the Neon. The second Knowle turned off the engine, they leapt from the shadow like a single creature.

“Back up, get out!” I cried.

Too late -- we were firmly locked into our tiny space and the men descended on us like a wild hail storm, pounding on the car with their fists, shouting insults, faces twisting inches from the glass.

“You’re animals! Fucking Nazi animals!” a narrow, lank-haired man jeered at me. Then he spat, the slimy gob oozing down my window.

For seconds we were frozen, bewildered, and then a sudden, dull explosion made us all jump.

“God damn! They kicked off the mirror!”

That did it. Knowle fired the ignition, thrust the car into reverse, and we lurched with a solid jolt as our bumper connected with the pick up. Through the windows I saw the first alarm spread over their faces -- he wouldn’t hit somebody, would he? Knowle pulled hard on the wheel and hit the gas. Our tormentors scrambled to get out of the way and we swung out, missing the SUV by inches, and squealed onto the road. A hard thump nailed our rear end as we surged forward.

Dave turned on me. “You! You had to get it in the fucking Sun! Well this is what you bought us, Mr. Publicity. We could have done this quietly, peacefully, but no, you had to make sure the whole world knew where we’d be and -”

“Oh, bullshit.” Conlan twisted around so violently he almost went over the seat. “It wasn’t a secret, for Christ’s sake. It’s in the newsletter and on the site.”

“No, it’s not! I never put it on because I knew -”

“You were supposed to. I heard him say it! It was like ...a direct order or something.”

We pulled into a 7-Eleven parking lot. Somewhere in my body I registered a vibration, as distinct and unnerving as the cocking of a gun -- the trunk release. I was the second one out of the car, after Knowle.

He already had the bat in his hand and the sight seemed to burn into my brain: Knowle’s blank paper face, the white shirt and tie, and the gold and black Louisville Slugger. I twitched, the smallest movement toward him, and he turned, freezing me with his lead-weight eyes. Conlan had whipped out from his side and stopped, the two of us creating a flimsy barrier with our bodies.

“Put it away, Knowle,” I said.

“This is Rhonda’s car. They took a piece off my wife’s fucking car!”

“We’re calling the cops,” Conlan said. “Dave’s calling them right now, on his cell.” He glanced at the window hopefully.

“Don’t call anybody. There’s only six of them, and four of us. We can take them. We’ll end this shit right here and now.” He reached down behind without looking and pulled out a length of rusting pipe. He held it out to me.

My heart was banging in my chest, but I didn’t move.

“Chickenshit! I knew that. I fucking knew there was something wrong with you.” He turned to Conlan, thrust the pipe toward him, a dare or a threat. The air stretched. At the edge of my vision I could see people staring, kids hanging around the pay phone, the store clerk who’d come out to look.

“Well, then it’s wrong with me, too,” Conlan said finally. “It’s going to be six on one, because we’re not getting back in that car with you.” He twisted around to yell at the window. “David, get out here! Did you make that goddamned call?”

Knowle was swaying, rocking with momentum, hands still in a death grip on wood and metal. But as his eyes flitted between Conlan and me I could see the odds weighing on him. At last he twisted around and threw his weapons back in, a clatter and a clunk.

“Pussies,” he said, slamming the trunk. As he strode around to the driver’s side, I sagged with relief, noticing for the first time the wet trails that had soaked down the sides of my fine shirt. Conlan reached into his jacket and pulled out a fresh package of cigarettes, intently tore off the cellophane and pulled one out. He saw me watching and a flicker of guilt crossed his face, this man who had mostly quit.

“It’s just for tonight,” he said, firing up a match.

I clapped him on the shoulder, wishing with all my heart I had something more to give him.

When we got back to the hall the little band of men was gone, as I’d expected, but we’d hardly parked the Neon when four police cruisers pulled up. Four.

The police took our statements with a cordiality I hadn't expected. A tie went a long way, I thought. I only had a clear image of one man, the long face with lank hair that had yelled at my window, but I recounted every detail with a vengeance.

"And did you recognize this individual as a member of any distinct group you're familiar with?" the officer pressed.

"They sounded like the Anti Racist Militia," I said

When Jim arrived with Johnson Phillips, he strode into the situation with smooth assurance, drawing the officers to him for an instant conference. He was focused and concerned, yet he didn't seem overly alarmed by what had occurred. I got the feeling that was for our esteemed guest's benefit.

Phillips had the uncomfortable look of a man nervous about being out of doors, where someone might get a bead on him. Pale and slight, he carried two briefcases, one clutched under his arm. His reddish hair was fading and he sported a beard, but not a moustache, that bloomed out from his chin like an auburn mushroom. He reminded me of a Mormon I'd seen on the news once, in court for having eight wives.

We were instructed to take him inside, where he relaxed enough to begin setting up a display of cassette tapes and stacks of thin, soft-cover books, the treasure he'd been guarding in his briefcase. The Lie of Your Freedom the title read, plain red letters against a grey background. I picked one up to leaf through it.

"That's 9.95," he said brusquely. I put it back and went to stand with the others on the hall steps. At last Jim trotted up the stairs to us.

"All right, two units are going to stay," he said, "and the others in the area have been alerted. If we need it, they'll set up a protective barricade. I want to guarantee safe, unobstructed passage for everyone who has a ticket. We'll probably see more activity tonight, maybe the Militia or someone else -- who knows what will crawl out of the woodwork."

The four of us were put to work in the hall, moving tables, hustling with last minute jobs, while Jim did sound checks with Phillips. A full twenty-five minutes before the doors were scheduled to open people began to arrive, and then we were running.

The police, like a black eye, change everything. Their presence drew sightseers and also galvanized the invited crowd, pulled them in like rush seating. They walked through the door full of questions and a jaunty kind of pride: Something was happening here and they had tickets for it.

When our own people began to show up they were pressed into service, but the bulk of the ushering fell to me. Conlan was put on the tape-and-book sales table, and Dave was taking tickets, marking names against our master list. Knowle was at the door, watching faces like a grim sentinel. I hurried up and down the rows, finding people seats, amazed that they kept coming. And all the while, another excitement gathered inside me, as subtle as a heart murmur. A day's grace.

"Hey, sailor. Buy me a drink?"

I felt an arm slide around my waist, the press of a little hip. When I turned Tess and I were almost in an embrace.

She was taller than I expected, but then I had no memory of her standing up. Barely two inches shorter than me, she met my gaze with dancing cat eyes, the exotic tattoos freshly startling against her milky skin. Her hair was slicked back into a dark cranberry helmet and she wore a long black blazer and pants, sleek lines sweeping over any feminine curves. She looked like a pretty boy from the 1920s, who'd gone a little wild with a felt pen.

"I like it," she said, tugging on my tie. "Dave and Knowle look like pallbearers, but you remind me of a recruit, waiting for his uniform. And I can tell you've already seen some action." She was eyeing my bruise, curious but not displeased. "That's pretty spectacular. What did I miss?"

"I'm a fool for love," I said.

Her face opened with delight. "Now I am sorry. You didn't get that today, though..." She tilted her head toward the door. "Who started this party?"

I hesitated. "We had some protestors, but they left."

She squeezed me suddenly, laughing. "Oh, don't give me the official bullshit! I heard that already. What really happened? Come on, I'm with you guys."

She was giving me a flutter, or maybe it was her hands on me - any hands, after all this time. I stepped in close, my lips against her ear.

"That's sensitive information. You may have to torture it out of me."

She pulled back to take me all in, a smile crimping her lips, a woman's affirmation of her power. Her eyes darted to the crowd, instantly connecting with a double-breasted navy suit, as if she hadn't lost sight of our commander for a moment.

"Do you mind being second choice?"

I smiled. "I don't if you don't."

Jim Rusk was soaring, sailing, completely in his element as he led Phillips from cluster to cluster, introducing him. The bearded American was the honored guest, but Jim moved with such confident ease among the suits and jeans that people turned to him like a passing star. I heard him laugh once, genial and genuine, and the sound vibrated in the deep center of my bones. I wanted to be on the other side of the room, part of his tight illuminated circle, meeting the people and hearing what he said. I didn't know that the most interesting man of the night was already outside the hall.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was very near start time. People were finally settling into their seats, the noise dimming as I escorted a tiny, elderly gentleman to a chair. He weighed as much as a cat clinging to my arm, but he was a veteran of two wars, and he moved slowly enough to tell me about them. Both.

Then in the corner of my eye I caught hurried movement, Dave threading urgently through the crowd. He broke abruptly into the favored circle, tugged Jim aside and spoke into his ear. The man's handsome face turned to paper. When he and Dave started for the door, it yanked something inside me, raw and protective. I turned to the first person on my left.

"Please find this gentleman a seat," I said, handing the old soldier's arm over to a middle-aged woman in pearls and a pantsuit. She was astonished -- he was delighted. I was gone.

I was on their heels as Jim and Dave pushed through the double row that had gathered around the door. Outside the crisp January night was glowing like day.

The police had set up a make-shift barrier with black and yellow sawhorses, police tape and their own bodies holding people back. It created a corridor, a clear path that led up to the hall steps, but no one was walking it. On one side, the twenty Hammerskins I'd given tickets to were clustered around Rory Parke, who was shouting across the open space.

"God never meant for the races to mix. That's why black people were put in one part of the world, the white people in another, the Indians in another part. And if the blacks had any brains, they would have built the ships and sailed over to conquer the Americans -- but they didn't! Three hundred and fifty years they let that go on, one tribe selling out another for fucking beads!"

He was yelling at an illuminated wall. On the other side of the pathway there were at least fifty people on the sidewalk and road, each with a lighted candle, some singing a tremulous hymn in the face of Parke's onslaught. They were bundled in heavy coats, as if settled in for a siege. I could hardly believe our little meeting qualified for a candlelight vigil -- it wasn't an execution, for Pete's sake.

There was no time to ponder it. This was the trouble I'd been told to consider my own. I didn't know what kind of impact I could possibly have on Rory Parke, let alone twenty men, but I'd committed to it. I gulped a breath and started to shoulder my way down the steps when Jim caught my arm, stopping me. Just then, another voice broke through the crowd.

"Jamie! Jamie Rusk!"

A robed man bustled toward the step, looking strangely out of time among the bright parkas. His long, rough habit was deep brown, the coarse fabric of a wool blanket, that came within inches of his ankles and was tied at the waist with rope. On his feet he wore sandals and thick grey socks, and a heavy, simple cross gleamed against his chest. He was burly in a ruddy, masculine sort of way, with thick white hair that swept away from his face, flushed with cold. It was hard to tell how old he was, but he had the presence, the command of a body that had been around awhile.

He wasn't a Unitarian. I realized I'd seen his timeless robe before, on the bronze statue at home.

"It's not too late, Jamie," the monk called. "Stop this now, while you still can! It's a horrible misuse of money. It's not even a waste -- it's worse than that, more harmful than that. Tell me, is this what you meant to call forward?"

His arm swept out to include the badgering, belligerent Hammerskins. I felt a nauseating pulse of regret. Those men had been my doing, not Jim's, but how could he possibly admit that in public?

Jim was transfixed, a deer in a navy suit caught in the high beam that glared up at him. I don't think he knew he was still hanging onto my arm, but the monk noticed it. It was nothing, except that he noticed it.

The Brother moved in closer and his voice lowered. "How well do you know the man in that hall, Jamie? Have you read his book? Everything he's written is meant to incite people's emotions, but he has no answers! He's an arsonist, a coward. He lights the fire and runs away. What is he doing for human beings? What are you doing?"

At that instant there was a sudden commotion at the far end of the crowd, on the Hammerskin side.

"I said no fucking pictures!" A khaki man lunged at the photographer standing with Charles Turcott from the Sun, whose portly frame I hadn't noticed before. Black uniforms swept in on the pair, and the hymn stopped in mid-stride.

Jim was sparked back to life. He broke free of the monk's gaze and let go of me. There was a police officer on the crowded step with a bullhorn, and Jim took it from him.

"These doors are closing in thirty seconds!" The words were amplified but tight, as if someone had him by the throat. "This is a lawful, private gathering. If you are an invited guest, please join us. If not, I beg of you..." His voice cracked, and he had to clear his throat. "Please go home peacefully."

Then he fled back into the hall.

He was good to his word. About ten minutes later the audience was settled, doors shut tight against the throng outside. Jim was his smooth self again, or he looked it. Poised behind a lectern on the stage, he gave stirring introduction.

"For some of us, coming here tonight is an act of faith, an active statement of our commitment to the most basic of human rights -- the freedom to think and express ourselves. We know that without this basic liberty, we have nothing..."

But when he turned the stage over to Phillips and took his seat in the audience, he wilted. I didn't know who'd had the most impact, Rory Parke or the monk, but I was I was haunted by that child's name, intimate, belittling and full of power. Jamie. I resented it, although I couldn't have explained why.

Johnson Phillips was no fire starter. Not exactly boring, he was still a professor, used to a captive audience. He was methodical, circling each point several times before he actually made it, as if we were dim students. Would there be a quiz? I wondered wryly. Still, he was comfortable on the stage and hardly looked at his notes, pacing away from the lectern often. And he knew his material, dozens of incidents and legislation that he believed showed a frightening erosion of personal freedoms.

"But just as alarming to me is the silent implication that these facts suggest: the erosion of courage. We are a frightened society, so terrified of seeming politically incorrect that we will allow ourselves and our children and their children to be herded into cages designed by a very small, very vocal minority."

The hall seemed hot. I was restless against my piece of the wall, shifting from foot to foot, wiping my palms on my jeans. My True Love was nudging me, whispering softly, insistently in my ear.

You know, there'll be time. After he stops everyone will stand around talking forever. You'll have time to take a walk...

I was in motion before the applause had ended. No one noticed as I slipped around the corner into the dimly lit hallway. My heavy boots hardly made a sound as I slid past the men's room, toward the little unmarked exit.

The hall's back door opened to a small yard piled with refuse and overflowing cartons, stacks of liquor boxes, and an abandoned couch. The back lots across the lane were just as bad, dark labyrinths of garbage bins and crumbling cars. I could just make out the low rumble of the faithful on the other side of the building, not singing anymore, but still there, stubbornly poised to shame everyone as they left.

I absorbed all these details at an accelerated pace -- I was already moving. The takeover was as abrupt, as certain as the bar that locks over your lap on a roller coaster. The Bitch wasn't speaking to me anymore, she was driving. I felt seized, a passenger in my own body, face flaming against the cool air.

Wait a minute, wait a minute...

But I couldn't stop or even slow down. As I lit into the alley I seemed to separate. It was as though I was gazing down on myself, a haunting image of a pale body moving through a dark passage, furtive, dishonest, powerless. I felt sick.

This is what your devotion looks like, what it's always looked like.

What sound did I really hear? Was it real or my imagination? All I know is that I did hear a door slam, loud and startling enough that it broke the Bitch's hold, just for an instant, long enough to look back.

I was shocked at first by the distance I had not traveled, maybe half a block of pavement. The back exit I'd just left was still visible, in fact the whole alley was crisply in focus, grays and black, and two stark flashes of white. Jim had come out the door, mopping his face with a handkerchief. I saw the man stand up from where he'd been crouching behind a car across the lane. I recognized him, his thin body and lank hair to his shoulders, and he was holding something that looked all the world like an old-fashioned milk bottle wrapped in a paper towel, innocuous and terribly, terribly wrong.

In my bones I understood what this was and horror thumped me on the chest. There wasn't time -- I couldn't get there.

"James, down!" I screamed.

It was enough. He looked and dove, a violent lunge behind the broken sofa, the same instant the glass broke against the stucco wall and blew outwards in a soft, brilliant roar, igniting the boxes and trash.

It was, I learned later, a chemical fire bottle.

"The same principle as a Molotov cocktail, but more...advanced," one of the inspectors from the explosives unit told us. "The fire is ignited by the chemical reaction between sulfuric acid and potassium chlorate -- one inside and one outside of the bottle. It's a delicate thing to set up, but the failure rate is



less than two percent.” He sighed. “Somebody knew what he was doing.”

Everyone was very interested in me, not simply because I was a witness, but because the bomber had not thrown the fire bottle at me. I would have been an easy first target out on the step alone.

“What were you doing out there?”

“I wanted a cigarette,” I told them again and again. Jim heard that lie once and glanced at me briefly, but he said nothing.

It was a very long night, trapped in the timeless, dead-air fluorescent rooms of Metro’s main cop shop, looking through books of mug shots, answering the same endless questions for both the city police and the RCMP. Was I certain this was the same man who’d attacked the vehicle earlier? Did I know of any groups he might be linked to?

“It was the same guy. I can’t be certain of anything else.”

I was so calm I surprised myself, just a man telling the truth, or most of it. Then the realization would catch me again, and squeeze the breath out of me. He could have died. It made me dizzy, almost ill.

They kept Jim and I long after the others were allowed to leave -- Johnson Phillips released to his five-star hotel and Conlan, Knowle and Dave sent somewhere much cheaper. No one could return to the house on Rosemont until it had been cleared by the RCMP bomb unit.

“I’m going to Rhonda’s,” Knowle said, his pale face looking strangely young, body swaying with exhaustion or defiance or both.

“No,” Dave said, “we have to stick together. One hotel, one room.”

“Knowle,” Jim cut in, “go home to your wife.”

He and I spent most of the night apart, telling our story in separate rooms. But we did have one moment alone, waiting in the hallway. He clasped my arm.

“Thank you. I don’t know what would have happened if you weren’t there.”

My face prickled, thinking of where I’d been going. “I wish I could have caught the bastard,” I said.

By two a.m. I was fatigued and becoming surly, when they finally brought Jim and I together for a final run down. The explosives unit was scheduled to sweep the house in Rosemont the next afternoon, but did we have a place to go tonight?

“Yes,” Jim said. “You can reach me on my cell.”

“And what about you, Lee?”

“The same number,” I said. Jim straightened in his chair beside me, a creak and rustle of fabric.

As we headed through the police parking lot, I had to struggle to keep up with him.

“Are you sure you want this?” he asked without looking at me. “Is there no where else you could go

tonight?”

It kicked me in the stomach. The retort came up before I could stop it.

“I didn’t mean to presume. Just let me off downtown.”

We’d reached the Mercedes and he turned to look at me. There were hollows under his tired brown eyes, strong body bowed, the long night pulling on him like gravity.

“I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant. I just don’t feel like a safe bet for anyone tonight.” He shrugged helplessly and almost smiled. “I could use that friend now,” he said, holding out his car keys.

I took them in dumb wonder and disbelief, trying not to grab. I didn’t mention I hadn’t had a license in over a year, but slid behind the wheel of that sleek little car and drove more carefully than I had on my road test, my shoulders wide against the back of the soft leather seat. I cruised in long, slow loops, up and down empty streets, and Jim didn’t give me any other directions.

He was staring out the passenger window, leaning into his hand. “Well, that’s it,” he said with finality. “It’s over.”

“For tonight,” I said.

“No, it is over. He shut us down. A year’s work, everything we’ve built, tens of thousands of dollars. Finished, gone! Because some snot-nosed little punk laid his hands on twenty dollars worth of chemicals. Shit!”

“Wait a minute. The city can’t force you to stop operations. Isn’t that what this whole night was about? Freedom of thought and speech? They can’t stop you,” I said again.

“No, and they won’t. I’ll just do it all myself. The web site, the newsletter. A one man band, one more dog barking at the moon,” he said bitterly.

It made me uneasy. “Who said they wanted to leave? Not Conlan...”

He let go a short sigh. “This isn’t about want, Lee. It’s about safety. The ARM might have targeted just me, but it puts everyone -”

“You don’t know it’s the Militia,” I cut him off. “It could have been anyone. How many nuts are in this city, organized or not?”

There was a moment’s silence. I could almost feel his thoughts flashing around the tight, dark space of the car’s interior.

“No matter who it is, it puts everyone around me at risk,” he said finally. “I can’t allow that. I won’t.”

“They’re going to get the bastard,” I said. “They’ll get him, or we will.”

“No! This isn’t about revenge. It’s not even about one person, one bomb. Even if he’s caught and charged there’s always someone else, anyone who can follow written instructions. And believe me, what they did tonight was easy, page one of the cookbook. This was just an ‘announcement.’” His voice lowered. “I guess I said it last Friday. It’s all the same ugly animal.”

“What about the agency?” I demanded. “Didn’t they promise some kind of protection?”

He snorted. “I don’t know if they even showed up. One little laptop puts me low on the priority list.” His hand went to his head. “God, I was a fool! What if you’d been closer? What if someone had come out on the step with me? It makes me just sick...No.” He straightened suddenly. “This is a wake up call. I can’t depend on anyone to think for me. This is my problem, my responsibility, and I won’t allow anyone to be at risk. Tomorrow, once the bomb unit has cleared the house, you can all get your things. I’ll have the checks cut...”

I felt a desperate flare. It alarmed me to think of him doing this alone. He needed people around him, he needed me.

“You self-centered son-of-a-bitch,” I said.

His head turned so hard I heard it.

“Listen to yourself. ‘I won’t allow.’ These are men you’re talking about. Adults. What godlike power do you think you possess that you could make that decision for them?”

He tried to cut in but I rolled right over him. “You talk about the year you’ve spent. Well, what about their year? Do you think Dave left school because he had bad marks? Do you think Conlan stands on street corners handing out pamphlets for the fabulous wage? The True North isn’t about you -- I believe I heard you say that. So what makes you think you can dismiss everybody else? Because it’s your money? I didn’t think this was about money.”

“This is a decision based on safety,” he started.

“All right. So decide about your safety, and each of us will decide about ours.” My heart was thumping. I’d just included myself. “You have to ask men what they want, James, then be man enough to respect it. Because anything else is pompous, self-centered bullshit.” I took a breath. “And only your real friend would tell you that.”

He didn’t answer. He leaned into his hand again, staring out the window as I circled another long block.

“Turn left at the lights,” he said at last. “If it so pleases you,” he added, pointedly.

I’d been expecting he would direct me to a hotel, but the glass and concrete tower we pulled up to was definitely an apartment building. I was wondering who we were going to see, when he directed me into the underground parking, passing me a security card to open the door. Exhaustion fell from me like a coat. I followed him to the elevator, awake and tingling as these doors, these secrets opened to me, wondering how many more there were.

He pressed the button for the twelfth floor.

“An apartment?” I said.

“Condo.”

“Plus the house and a cabin?”

“Yes.”

“How filthy rich are you?” I said.

He smiled wanly. “Pretty filthy.” Then he looked away. “No wonder I’m such a self-centered S.O.B.”

I dropped against the elevator wall with a soft thud. It seemed like a very long time ago that he’d run his hand down my chest.

You know, you’ve done what you can, She whispered. You did your best. He’s cutting you loose -- he said so. Get out now while you still have some pride. You haven’t got a prayer with this man anyway...on and on as I followed him through a plush labyrinth of hallways on the twelfth floor.

He opened the suite and we went inside -- and both of us froze. The lights were already on. Then the smell hit me, sour and unmistakable, so familiar my nostrils prickled.

“Oh...oh, damn,” Jim said softly. I edged in beside him and for a moment we just stared.

There was no doubt they were brothers. Jack Rusk had the same basic shape to his face, square jaw and high forehead, fawn brown hair touched by fair highlights, or gray. But his was a smaller body, not delicate, but definitely more compact, twenty five years of liquor eating muscle, skin starting to burnish to the leathery finish of a farmer. The shadows that hinted on Jim’s face were distinct lines on his brother’s, around the mouth and ringing his neck.

He was splayed out on the couch, against the backrest, head lolling to one side, leaning onto his arm. He had vomited all over his shirt and the hunter green cushions. I could feel my heart beating in my throat, heat beaming off my face. I knew that position, conscious enough to avoid choking, beyond caring for anything else. I knew the bitter smell of stomach acid and liquor. I knew the taste.

“Towels?” I said.

“In the bathroom,” Jim said.

We cleaned it up, jackets and ties gone, shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow. I went down on my knees, mopping the carpet and then the couch, soaking it with tonic, then mopping again, painfully aware that I was an expert at this.

Jim handled his brother, carefully wiped his unresponsive face, wrestled his dead-weight body out of the filthy shirt, blotting at the undershirt that remained. He was efficient, but surprisingly gentle, impassive except for the slight crease between his eyebrows. The way, I thought, you would treat a paraplegic.

“Is this his place, too?” I said.

“No. He probably came to see me. He knows I’m usually here Friday night.”

There was no recrimination in his voice. He struck me as less judgmental than the monk in tonight’s crowd.

“How old were you when you decided you weren’t going to join the Franciscans?” I asked.

“Oh.” The sudden turn didn’t throw him. “About sixteen.”

“Then they’ve been hounding you for a long time. They must be hard up for recruits.”

He grinned faintly. “Brother Tom doesn’t...hound me. He’s just never been shy about giving his opinion. The True North has been the on-going subject of a long conversation.”

“Does he bring his candle with him?” I blurted.

Jim laughed quietly. “I know you might find it hard to believe, but we’re friends -- who just happen to have a strong difference of opinion. I feel as though I’ve known him forever. He was very good to me when I was thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. He got me into Ala-Teen, and the church basketball club, ‘Our Brothers of No Mercy.’” His smile faded into something more wistful as he wiped down his brother’s arm. “You need something at that age. It can be a pretty lonely time.”

I felt strangely off center, tipped over by this revelation. There was an intimacy to it, like Jamie, that I had no right to resent, but I did anyway.

“I had a dog,” I said defiantly, “and she was a better friend than any human being I ever knew.”

“Why?”

“A dog doesn’t expect things from you that you can’t give,” I said. “She accepts you as you are -- you don’t have to explain, or apologize. As long as you feed and care for her, she’s the most loyal creature on earth. If you train her properly, she’s the best citizen. And your dog knows when something’s wrong. She’ll try to make you feel better in the kindest way possible, just by being there and...loving you. And if you screw up -”

My voice broke, overwhelmed by the sudden heat in my chest and throat. Oh, God, I couldn’t cry in front of this man.

He seemed to understand and let it go. We worked in silence for long minutes, the simple, physical motions helping me smooth my surface again.

At last Jim arranged Jack Rusk in a prone position on the couch, a pillow under his head, then he dropped to one knee on the floor beside him. For a brief, strange moment I thought he was praying, but he was reaching up his brother’s left pants leg. He unbuckled the prosthetic and withdrew it, a strange, stiff foot in a sock, and set it on the floor. Then he picked up the bottle of Glenkeith from the coffee table, two fingers’ worth left in the bottom, and took it to the kitchen. I heard him pour it down the sink, but I couldn’t keep from staring at the horizontal figure on the couch, my eyes drawn to the space where his foot should have been.

Jim returned and set the empty bottle exactly where it had been, next to the glass of melted ice. He looked at me, eyes warm and brown.

“I never would have asked you to do this. Thank you.” He picked up the soiled shirt. “Washer’s over here.” I scooped the towels and followed him into a little utility room. Besides the washer and dryer there were shelves with detergents and cleansers, a broom and dustpan. I knew without asking that Mrs. Kruger didn’t clean this suite.

I was watching his back, the fluid movements as he loaded the washer and set the controls. I’d liked those shoulders from the first day, I liked it all, very much. Jim held his hands under the water running

into the machine, then wiped them on a rag, still turned away.

“We probably won’t be awake for the dryer. I’ll lend him one of my shirts in the morning.”

I took a bold step that brought me right behind him “Why is there no one to worry about you, James?” I said.

It stopped him cold, the question or my sudden nearness. “I don’t want anyone to worry.”

“How can you be so rich and so smart and so handsome, and live alone in that big house?” I said softly.  
“Where is your lover, Mr. Rusk?”

He was motionless, fingers resting on the edge of the machine. It had filled, but waited silently, the lid still up.

I decided he would hit me or he wouldn’t. I laid my hand on his trim waist, just above the hip, my skin so hot it seemed to fuse with the fabric.

“I worry about you.”

His head tilted back slightly and he took a breath. “Be very, very sure.”

Oh. I pressed in closer, my other arm sliding around him, my sureness already rising up in tangible proof. He twisted around and caught me, seized me in a powerful embrace, bent my neck with the hot force of his mouth on mine.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I was expecting straight and curious, or gay and shy; I was expecting Dudley Dorigt. He fell on me like a lion. And once I got over the delicious shock of it, I came roaring back. Aggression always lit a fire in my body and I liked to scuffle a bit, I liked to push. This time I pushed him off balance, into the dryer. It pleased me, thinking of how he'd knocked me around the basketball court my second night. It awakened the wrestler in him. He tussled me over to the wall and pinned me there, the light switch digging into my back, a solid rod of desire pressing into my thigh.

"Let's take this...somewhere else," he breathed.

He didn't turn on the light in his bedroom. The curtain was open and the never-ending glow from the city illuminated us in a soft hush. The moment he began to unbutton his shirt all the fight left me and I stood, entranced.

To see skin, finally. To watch the layers fall away and the male animal emerge, muscle and bone and flat patterns of hair. He wasn't huge, but solid and strong, his natural size refined and burnished to a glorious landscape of broad planes and subtle dips. He managed this with a morning jog? I wondered. I felt a momentary pang, remembering the archer's body I used to have. I was slight in comparison, hardly more than a boy. But that regret passed quickly as I watched his slacks fall, revealing splendid thighs and sinewy calves, waiting while he draped them over a chair, waiting drunk and dizzy with anticipation for that final flip of the shorts, to know for certain the measure of the man.

He was every inch a king. It stopped me in mid-strip, staring, agape. I won the lotto. He grinned as if he'd read my thoughts, or maybe he was amused because I'd halted, one leg still inside my jeans. Then I realized he was watching me with the same animal glint I gave him, hungry and ready, not disappointed. Not disappointed at all.

To hold someone. To seize the one you've been waiting for, longing for, the one you thought was beyond your wildest hopes, to take the rugged reality into your arms and hug it to you, press your desire and awe against it with all your strength. To be held, encircled and locked in, tasting the skin you've stared at, hearing the rush of urgent breath against your ear. To say the things you would never say, ferocious and tender, an assault or a plea, and to hear exciting words come back at you, secrets set free into your ear.

"I thought about you every day for four months."

To be naked with someone. To be wanted, to be stroked and admired, lost in the hot intoxication of skin on skin. To be met, lust sparking like metal on flint, and to feel that sound, that animal moan of pleasure and need rising up from your balls to your throat. To pull that sound out of someone else, wrest a god to the earth with the strength of your worship.

I was swimming in the rush of my own power. Devouring him, gripping his thighs, the carpet burning my knees as he gasped above my head, I reveled in his struggle to pull himself away.

"Wait, wait...protection..."

He had all the accessories. In the dark wooden dresser beside the bed, he had condoms and lube enough

to lay an entire legion. How could you be certain of that much sex? I wondered. The revelation struck me between the eyes. In this apartment, his name wasn't Jim, it was John.

But not to me. I became obsessed that he realize I was different. I wanted to burn my imprint into his body, wipe away every memory of the young men who must have flashed like fireflies in this room. I teased him forward, took us both to the brink and halted there, breathlessly, aching ready. I pushed him back on the bed, pulled away and made him look at me.

"Who am I?"

"What?" he gasped.

"Say my name."

He did, aroused but puzzled.

I took him in my hand, tugging him to slow, agonizing bliss. "Say it again."

And he did, that single syllable twisted into an exquisite moan.

All right. I let go and fell in beside him. He seized me and face to face, locked into each other's legs and hands, we thrust our way into pulsing animal joy.

Afterwards he went to the bathroom. I sprawled out on the pillows, one hand behind my head and the sheet pulled up to my hip. I was liquid with rapture and relief, still floating with heady disbelief that I'd guessed so right. But I wasn't entirely at ease, and as the seconds dragged on painfully, my anxiety woke up and stretched. It had been a long time since this mattered. I stared at the closed door of the ensuite. Don't put anything on, I prayed. Just come to bed.

He emerged from the bathroom still naked, and stopped in front of the clock radio on the dresser. It beamed a faint red spot on his flat, bare stomach.

"Good Lord, do you know what time it is? I haven't stayed awake all night since university." He bent over to set it. "If we went to sleep 20 minutes ago, we might get four hours before Jack wakes up."

"I guess I should be somewhere else by then, unless he's totally cool." I tilted my head to include the bed.

"No one...in my life is the remotest bit cool." The words sounded brittle. He picked up my abandoned jeans and shirt and for a terrible moment I thought he was going to hand them to me, but he draped them neatly over a chair. I drew back the quilt on his side, encouraging. I had a strong, irrational belief that if he just came to bed it would be all right.

He sat down with one leg up and bent, knee pointed at me. I laid my hand on his thigh. "You'll never fall asleep like that."

He smiled faintly and placed his hand over mine. My apprehension leapt into a trot.

"We need to talk," he said.

"We need to sleep."



"I don't know what my life's going to be like tomorrow -- today," he corrected himself.

Galloping now. "So who does? Who knows when they're going to walk out and get hit by a bus." Or a bomb. I let the insinuation hang there. "You're thirty-four years old, James. You're filthy rich and someone seriously tried to harm you tonight. When do you get to do what you want?"

"That's the problem, I've only been thinking of myself." He took a breath. "You're so..."

"Young?" I pulled my hand out from under his. "Don't insult me with that. I've had respiratory failure twice. I don't think you can get any older than that."

I regretted it instantly. His face fell. "Good lord. How?"

"Slight...overdose."

"Twice?" He got to his feet as if looking for a way out. Instead he pulled a robe from the closet and put it on, tightening the belt with a sharp tug. "All right, since you brought it up -- you have a substance abuse problem."

"As do other people under this roof."

"I don't have to depend on Jack," he said, his voice hushing as if saying the name would wake him.

"I think I've managed that problem pretty well so far. In fact I think I've -"

"Where did you go tonight? Why were you outside? I know what you told the police."

My face was very hot. I juggled a few lies in my head, then let them all fall. "Okay. You got me. I was going exactly where you think. But I didn't even make it down the alley. I looked back and there you were, and so was he. The guy with the bomb. And I made a choice."

Jim was standing with his hands at his hips. His mouth twitched, but he didn't speak.

"What I don't understand is what you're trying to tell me now," I continued. "Do you want me to leave? Are you saying this is a one-nighter, don't expect anything? Are you afraid I'll ask you for money? Or would you prefer that?"

It was a low blow and I saw it connect. He wasn't proud of this apartment or why he had it. My voice softened. "I know I'm not a bargain."

"It's not that. My life is just...complicated. I'm under a lot of pressure, scrutiny. It's not as though you and I have any distance in our lives. You work for me, you live in my house..."

"And you think I can't be discreet? James, I grew up in a city so small we didn't even have Wal-Mart."

"It just looks so bad. As if I was some kind of...predator."

I was stunned. Had he forgotten I was the one who'd come onto him, twice?

He let go a sigh that seemed to deflate him, and dropped onto the edge of the bed.

"I'm screwing this up," he said, running his hands over his hair. "I wasn't expecting it. I have a hard time believing it. I keep thinking, What does he really want? Why is he here?"

I couldn't stop the pang. Was it that difficult for him to believe I desired him? What did this man see when he looked in the mirror? Or maybe it was the only impression I gave him. It had been a long time since I'd kept company with anyone who wasn't of use to me.

He was sitting with his hands clasped, staring blankly at the solid dresser that lurked like a troll in the dim room. I leaned forward, put my hand on his hip that I could just reach.

"Let's get a few things straight. First, I'm an adult. Second, I went after you. I wanted you so badly I was willing to risk getting another shiner."

He smiled faintly and my hope quickened, emboldened me. "Third, sex is easy. I don't mean to brag, but it's not hard for me to find." I hesitated. "I'm trying to say I like you." A lot.

He absorbed that for a moment, then twisted around, his expression both wry and shy, and strangely young.

"Even though I'm a controlling son-of-a-bitch?"

"Well, yes, but sometimes that's fun."

He laid his hand over mine and squeezed it. "Spectacular fun."

The relief swept over me, turned me to silk. "Good. Now shut up and come to bed."

Jim shrugged off the robe. "So now who's controlling?"

He slid in and nudged me onto my side, tugging me into an embrace that followed his body, laid us together like a matched set. When his arm slipped around my waist, I put my hand over his. This felt so...complete.

"You stay in bed in the morning. I'll deal with Jack." His mouth was against the stubble of my hair. "Then you can make me breakfast."

The dark room had begun to sway, the irresistible lull of a boat on water, the Argo sailing into a calm night sea. "Yes, lord," I murmured against the pillow. "But the joke's on you - I can't cook."

He never had the chance to find out. We were awakened by Jim's cell phone just moments, it seemed, after we'd gone to sleep. I sat up next to him, blinking in the bright room, listening to one side of the conversation. To my astonishment, I realized a suspect was already in custody.

"No shit?" I blurted. He actually put his hand over my mouth to hush me. I'd forgotten we weren't alone in the apartment. Still on the phone, Jim got up and began to dress. I watched him intently, vainly trying to follow what was being said.

At last he hung up, and there was an odd expression on his face. "Russell Desjardins," he said. "They picked him up around three a.m., by complete coincidence. He was driving and ran a red light, then refused a breathalyzer, became abusive so they took him in. If you I.D. him they'll lay charges."

“That’s fantastic!”

“Stuart Pope was a passenger in the car,” Jim said.

My excitement seized. Oh, God -- was Pope behind this? My twenty Hammerskins had been arranged to splash a little humiliation back on him. But what if I’d pushed the man to something?

“We’d better get going.” I threw back the covers, but Jim held up his hand.

“Let me do this.” He pulled a white shirt from his closet, still in the dry cleaners’ plastic. “Just...wait quietly.”

He slipped out. I sat on the side of the bed for long minutes, struggling to follow the rise and fall of their voices, frustrated by my immobility, the secrecy. I wanted to be a partner, not a mistress. I got up and began to dress stealthily.

As soon as I heard the apartment door close decisively, I went into the bathroom. I was amazed by the number of toothbrushes in the drawer, still in their plastic casings. Like condoms and cleansers, there were some things Jim Rusk would not run out of.

He opened the door on me, which I hadn’t locked. I was brushing my teeth and I saw him in the mirror, surprised to see me dressed, that I had not waited. I spat out the mouthful of foam.

“You should knock. I could have been doing something more interesting.”

“Sorry.” He colored pink, but didn’t leave. I wiped my mouth.

“Come on, James. You’re dallying.”

“We need to be clear on this. No one can know. Nothing can change.”

I almost smiled. He didn’t know I’d already helped myself to clean underwear from his drawer. Briefs, not boxers. “All right,” I said.

“And,” he took a careful breath, “There are some things I can’t live with. I won’t. The next time you go out for that kind of walk...”

Keep going. It wasn’t a threat, but it was a promise. I felt a clutch of fear inside my traitorous body, but I didn’t blame him. “All right.”

He brightened, relieved that this sticky part was over. “Okay. Let’s go see if we can nail a bad guy.”

By the time we’d arrived at the police station, a surprising development had occurred: Russell Desjardins had confessed. But when the rest of the details emerged, the victory frayed and crumbled in our hands. Desjardins said he’d decided to disrupt the event when he read Thursday’s article in the Sun, and on Friday he’d convinced his drinking buddies to help him. No, he didn’t know their names or where they lived. No, they didn’t know about the bomb. And no, he did not know Stuart Pope. Desjardins swore that he’d only met the beefy little man that night - in a bar, of course, which is where any good terrorists went after a night’s work. All he’d done was offer his new pal Stu a ride home. Even worse, the officers considered Pope’s corroborating story so credible, they’d already released him.

“Bullshit,” Conlan blurted.

It was nearly two o’clock. We’d all gathered in the lounge of the Holiday Inn where the others, except Knowle, had spent the night. The five of us camped in a corner booth in the nearly-empty room, the three of them on one side, Jim and I on the other. Knowle leaned back, arms crossed over his chest, watching Jim’s face with an unwavering attention. Dave was hunched forward like an anxious runner in the starting block, and Conlan’s cigarettes were on the table, last night’s pristine package crumpled and worn now, only five left.

“That is bull...shit,” Conlan said again emphatically. “You told that detective, Mikey -”

“Boyce-Miko,” Jim supplied.

“Yeah, that fruitcake. You told him who the hell Pope is?”

“Conlan, believe me, they know,” Jim answered patiently. “The city police are working with the RCMP on this and they have a file an inch thick on Pope. But that doesn’t constitute proof. Right now there’s nothing concrete to link Desjardins to the Aryan Sons, or even prove that he and Pope are acquainted.”

“Get me to my computer,” Dave cut in. “I’ll find the connection between those bastards. I know a few chat rooms where you’d be amazed who turns up.”

“Has anyone ascertained whether Desjardins could actually have built that bomb?” I said.

Four faces turned to me. “The explosives unit said that it was a tricky thing to set up, that somebody knew what he was doing. If Desjardins can’t describe the process in detail, it would prove he had help.”

“Excellent point,” Jim said. “I’ll mention it to Boyce-Miko right away.”

“I’ll do a sweep of the net, too, just to check if the recipe’s online anywhere.” Dave’s eyes were glittering with excitement. “Dammit, I’ve got to get to my computer. Jim, when can we get back in the house?”

The question seemed to catch him by the shoulders. He leaned forward, both hands wrapped around his empty mug. “That’s something we have to discuss right now, because each of you has an important decision to make,” he began.

Everything had changed, Jim said. The True North was suddenly in a new and possibly more dangerous era. The potential for violence had always been there, but the reality of it opened the way to more. We were suddenly in the spotlight -- Turcott had managed to squeeze two paragraphs into the morning’s Sun -- and it would draw the attention of people who’d never noticed us before.

“And I can’t guarantee that any of you won’t become a target yourselves,” Jim continued. “I know how committed each of you are, the work and energy you’ve put out this past year. I value that more than you’ll ever know. But now you have to think of yourselves, your own safety and the people who care about you. You’re all men I respect and I won’t interfere with your decision.”

They were rapt and somber, transfixed by his eloquent sincerity. I was flattered to hear an echo of the speech I’d made to him last night.

"I'm in," Conlan blurted suddenly. "The fuckers don't scare me, either."

The table laughed, and one after another we hung our loyalty onto the common peg. Jim was trying to hide how pleased he was.

"There'll have to be some...alterations," he said. "We have to become more organized. The True North can't revolve around any one person. You know I've always hated the idea of rank, but I think we have to spread out the responsibility."

Surprise perked them up in their chairs.

"We need an Intelligence Officer," Jim began, "someone to develop and oversee an information pool or system, about all the organizations and the people in them -"

"I'm half-way there already, Jim," Dave cut in.

"It's a sensitive position, with a lot of responsibility and discretion required," Jim warned, but Dave was almost beaming out of his clothes. In his mind, this was second in command.

Jim also needed someone to develop security for the Patriot Nights and other events, and supervise all safety issues. I think Knowle actually flushed with color when he volunteered -- and received -- that post. His face was no longer a blank sheet of paper, there was something written there: Security Officer.

Conlan would stay in Recruiting, but with a bonus -- the first thing he had to recruit was a vehicle.

"Research it," Jim said, "Needs, costs, general budget. I think we're probably looking at a mini van or SUV. Once it's purchased, it's under your jurisdiction. You decide if a request to use it is warranted."

"Okay," Conlan said with a business-like nod, but he couldn't contain himself and a smirk broke out over his blunt face. "The answer is no," he said to us, and the table laughed again.

Drinking only coffee, they were all happy drunks, as merry as rich men. I grinned along with the chatter, heart at the bottom of my guts.

Knowle's mind had already run ahead to his new assignment. "Speaking of security," he said, "the first thing we have to deal with are weekends. Friday nights we all light out of the house like we're on fire. That's not going to work anymore. You shouldn't be alone, boss."

Damn! I'd envisioned weekends as our time, or I'd hoped for it.

"I've already been thinking of that," Jim said, "and you're absolutely right. I've made a decision. Do any of you have experience with dogs?"

"Fucking right!" Conlan exclaimed. "That's what we need -- Rottweilers."

The news hit me square in the chest, so unexpected and so close to my heart. The words jumped out of my mouth. "No, you don't want brutes. You want working dogs, intelligent and well-trained animals that can protect the house, but can also operate in public, without raising alarm." My mind was sprinting. "You could even train them to be alert to certain chemicals, explosives, at Patriot Nights or other events. And they'd be a good safeguard when you make that godawful run in the morning," I finished, looking at Jim.

The comment made him grin. “Those are all good points, but I want to stress it’s a big commitment. I know nothing about animals. Someone will have to choose the dogs, plan the training, oversee it, and care for them, weekends, too. Would you be willing?”

I could barely draw breath, yet I managed to squeeze the word out. “Yes.”

I didn’t say much the rest of the day, through the bomb sweep and our return to the house. But I handled the gift a thousand times inside myself, full of quiet disbelief, humbled. That night I lay awake while Security, Intelligence and Recruiting were snoring in the dark. At last I got out of bed and stole down the hall like a burglar. There was a pale line of light under his door.

I didn’t knock, but trailed my hand over the wood, brushing it in a caress. “James,” I said softly.

I heard him get out of bed, then stop. We both seemed to realize in the same moment what would happen if he opened the door, unstoppable and desperately dangerous.

“Yes,” he said, his mouth close to the wood.

“Thank you.”

He paused. “I know you can do it.”

I didn’t answer, but nothing he could have said would have meant more. I stroked the door again and glided back to my room.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

We found Sam and Inga on a cold, clear Tuesday near the end of January. At six months old, they weren't puppies but long-legged, gawky teenagers of German Shepard extraction. The breeder had hoped to train them as guard dogs, but his wife had become ill and the plan was abandoned. They'd grown up mostly in their own company in an outdoor pen. The breeder swore they were house trained and not the slightest bit mean-tempered, but I could see Jim's caution as we waited in the brittle winter sun. He didn't want animals that had spent their first months nearly wild.

Sam and Inga were just as cautious. Brought out from the enclosure, they hung back from us warily, tails straight with vigilance. Even half-grown, Sam was as fine a Shepard as I'd ever seen, his square, handsome skull and snout looked positively chiseled, powerful chest and legs already moving him with grace and authority. His black and tan coloring was picture-perfect for the breed, bristling with health. There was a certain aloofness to him, too, a self-possession that made me feel we were looking eye to eye, even though I towered above him.

Inga was all heart. Sam's sister was still a beautiful Shepard, but a smaller, more golden version, angles softened, brown eyes bright with curiosity and intelligence. She kept lowering her ears, taking a step toward me, painfully eager, but nervous all the same. I'd been playing the role of the cool, canny buyer, but finally I couldn't bear it. I dropped to one knee and held out my hand. Inga bounded over, an excited bundle of happy fur. The touch of her went into my bones. I could have melted the snow around me.

"Looks like a sale," the breeder beamed. Jim was silent, grave. I twisted around and grinned up at him shamelessly.

"Please, please, please?"

He was so surprised he laughed, and the breeder and I and even the dogs knew we were home free.

"Promise me something," Jim said as we loaded Sam and Inga into the back of the new Caravan Conlan had chosen.

"What?"

"Our yard will never look like that kennel."

"My shovel is ready," I promised. I sat in the back with the anxious dogs, hanging onto their collars, trying to calm them with my voice and touch. But my gaze kept drifting to the driver's seat of the van, studying the back of his head, his thoughtful profile. I didn't know what I could give back that would be enough.

I chose a vet and had the dogs examined and shots brought up to date, and acquired as much information as I could about their dietary needs. I scoured the yellow pages, interviewing trainers, and finally made the acquaintance of Miss Marnie.

She was sixty years old and about ninety pounds, a silver-haired, straight-backed sparrow whom I liked instantly. She had a complete and ingrained respect for dogs, their intelligence and instincts, but no illusions.

“Never forget that these are pack animals,” Miss Marnie said, “and the moment you’re not top dog, that one will try for the spot.” Her eyes touched down on Sam; she wouldn’t even point. “I’m not their trainer, I’m yours. You must train them, you must be their first priority.”

Miss Marnie listened as I outlined my plans. I wanted these dogs to work as a team, to understand both verbal commands and silent hand signals, to be able to identify and alert me to gunpowder. Her grey eyebrows gathered at the mention.

“You seem like a nice young man,” she said, her voice softening. “Please tell me this is for a good reason.”

“It’s for the best reason,” I said. Miss Marnie had been listening to silent creatures for decades, and she understood perhaps better than I’d meant her to. She laid her hand on my arm. “All right.”

So we began, three afternoons a week. Sam and Inga were my first thought in the morning and my last thought at night. The days we didn’t go to Miss Marnie’s, I practiced with them in the back yard, or after dinner on the school basketball court.

“Come on, guys, let’s go to work,” I’d say, trying to instill the different mind set of it in them, and me. I was nineteen and this was my first job. I was surprised to discover it felt good, the ring of the word when I said it, the certainty in my body as I snapped on their leads and strode out the door.

It made a difference to others, too. I was still the first one up in the morning, but the idea of New Boots had faded away with my shiner. I saw Dave watching me through the window once.

“Wow, they actually listen,” he said when I came in.

“We’re getting there.” I kicked off my snowy runners, brimming with pride. “Long way to go yet.”

I was treated as an equal now. I had a real job, just like theirs, and the territory was mine alone. All three asked permission before they patted Sam and Inga, knowing I didn’t allow it if the dogs were working. No one was afraid of them, but there was a polite distance that I didn’t discourage. One trainer, Miss Marnie said.

Jim was the exception. I gently nudged the dogs in his direction whenever I could, wanting them to bond, and watched him stiffen with a strange hesitancy.

“You never had any pets growing up,” I said finally.

“Not even a hamster,” he admitted. Finally one morning I took matters into my own hands. When Jim came downstairs for his run, I hooked Sam to his lead and pressed it into his hand.

“Take him with you, that’s an order.” I grinned to soften it. “Or I’ll report you to your own Security Officer.”

They went out together and were so long in returning I began to worry. What could have happened? They trooped in at last, Jim flushed and beaming, Sam panting and frosted around the mouth.

“Well, we had to stop and look at a few things,” Jim explained, pulling off his sweatshirt as Sam lapped at his water bowl.



It made me laugh. “You pushover! Sam’s not supposed to be leading, you are. Don’t let him mess with your schedule.” For effect, I rattled off a short lecture about discipline and the top dog. Jim listened with mild amusement, and when Sam planted himself beside his chair, he bent down to rub the happy, noble head with two hands.

“You hard-hearted taskmaster,” he said pleasantly. “Give the dog a break. He has a whole new neighborhood to sniff out.”

Watching the two of them at that moment, I was anything but hard-hearted.

He took Sam on his run every day after that. Inga would have been crushed with the injustice of it, but I let her into the house to spend that half hour with me, a special treat. Sometimes I even curled up with her on the black leather couch for a few more winks, silky with the pleasure of it. She insisted on lying full-length beside me, sandwiching me against the backrest, so that I was breathing into the back of her neck.

“I’m only your trainer,” I whispered once into the warm fur. “You are not my dog.” Inga didn’t stir.

We all walked a little taller in our new titles. On Friday night the three of them were eager to take their elevated selves to Die Maschinerie, which drew a fresh crease on Jim’s forehead. The potential for conflict had increased ten fold, he said, but Intelligence, Security and Recruiting were determined, arguing that it was important to maintain a profile in public. At last Jim shrugged and gave them a final warning. “A criminal investigation is underway -- that’s all you can say.”

He tugged me aside and pressed ten dollars into my hand. “God, I hate to encourage anyone to go to a bar, but -”

“Be your eyes?” I said.

“And ears.”

I’d been very good this week, all business, but I grinned wickedly at him now. “Any other body parts you’d like me to take care of, Mr. Rusk?”

“We can discuss that later,” he said softly, and his gaze ran over me in a thrilling tingle. “I’ll wait up.”

No one would have admitted it, but Jim’s apprehensions were ours, too, and we set out that night puffed up and swaggering, expecting a fight. It was a lot of bravado to squeeze into one vehicle. To our astonishment, the Aryan Sons were not in attendance at the club that Friday.

“Because I’m in a fucking mood,” Rory Parke explained, “and I wouldn’t let them in. The rest of you better drink three times as much,” he added, “or I’ll lose my shirt.”

“I don’t know if you could lose that shirt,” Conlan whispered into my ear. “It’s bigger than the flag on Parliament Hill.”

It was a revelation to me. I’d thought Parke was simply employed by the club, as a bouncer or door guard. It had never occurred to me that he might own the place.

It was strange to see the club only half full, but we had the new experience of actually getting to the pool

tables. With a beer under my belt I picked up a cue and shot one bad game, then a brilliant one, then another. I couldn't convince Conlan I really hadn't played in a long time.

"Sharked!" he swore. "I am getting sharked here."

But he was in a good humor, everyone was, because a dark glamour had blown in the door with us: We were important enough to be bombed. As the evening wore on, the room continued to fill, more True North affiliates than I'd ever seen here and even new people looking for us. They were all drawn to our table, asking questions, staying to drink, noisy testosterone lapping around us in a gathering tide.

Dave was halfway through his first beer and drunk on his own importance. He was the gateway to the True North now, all questions went through him, though he was generous enough to share some of the spotlight.

"That sounds like a security issue. Knowle?"

He was utterly obnoxious and so entirely happy that we let him be, holding court at the far end of the table. Since no dog issues came up, I was employed only by my beer and Tess, who surprised me by gliding out of nowhere and onto my lap without an invitation. She was a lithe, warm weight on my knee, exotic and elfin, with a low-plunging black t-shirt that revealed the curve of pert little breasts, sitting as upright as eager schoolgirls. Hungry, envious glances nipped at me from around the table. What had I done to deserve a prize?

Tess leaned in closer and slipped her arm around my neck. "I hear Pope's a suspect. If it's true, put your hand on my knee," she whispered into my ear.

I did, grinning to cover my surprise. No one aside from the five of us and the police knew about the Pope connection.

"That's very interesting. What makes you say that?"

"I talk to people who talk to people," Tess said. We were speaking in low, easy tones that would have seemed playful to anyone listening, but there was a subtle weight to her words, like her hand that she placed over mine.

"I'd like to talk to them, too."

"Oh, no. You'd really have to twist my arm." I felt an abrupt quickening. Did she mean the ARM? How the hell would the Militia know about Pope, and how would she?

"You are devastatingly beautiful," I said. "I think we need time alone."

She twinkled at the compliment, even knowing what it was. "I have a new boyfriend," she said with a coy smile. "He's picking me up in an hour."

"From here?"

"From near here."

Her breasts were very close to my chin. She was playing with me and enjoying it, cat and mouse and cheese.

“I thought Jim Rusk was your true love.”

“He is,” she said boldly, “but I cheat.”

A chair clunked down next to us, not a regular bar chair, but an old, solid piece of wood designed to bear up under three hundred pounds.

“So what do you have to do to get invited to one of those fucking Patriot Parties?” Parke said, one eye on me and the other on Tess’s boobs.

“You have to talk to that little man down there.” I pointed at Dave, very pleased to pass this one on to His Eminence, Intelligence Officer, second link in the great chain. Parke hoisted himself up and shambled away, dragging his chair. I said quietly to Tess, “I know a place we can talk.”

I held her hand as we threaded through the room, then ducked into the stairwell that led to the second floor. No rooms were lit this time. I led her up in solid blackness, my heart running lightly, her fingers hooked into the back of my waistband. We groped our way down the little hallway and settled on the floor facing each other, each with a back to the wall, peering for whatever glimmers we could catch.

“So who’s your boyfriend who knows so much?” I said.

Tess was digging in her purse, a soft, squirrel-like rustling.

“Did you ever wonder why I had my face tattooed?” she said.

“No.” I was surprised by the turn. “Maybe. Because it’s beautiful?”

“So people would look at it, instead of my tits.”

I saw a pale, familiar gleam near her mouth. When she clicked her lighter and lit the joint, the flare burned a brief spotlight into my retinas. I have never loved pot. It only tilts the world, pulls time like taffy and puts me to sleep. It’s not a high worth having. Yet my eyes were fastened on the fierce red dot as if it were all the light in the world.

I heard her exhale. “Did you ever notice that women are never the heroes?”

“To the Greeks they were,” I said. “Hera was Zeus’ wife and scared the shit out of everybody, including him, and the Fates -”

“But that’s not the same as hero,” Tess cut me off.

“No,” I admitted. The air was thick and sickly sweet, a dry, curling sort of smell that left me awash in memories and saliva. I could have crawled over her knees and sucked the smoke out of her mouth, like a vampire.

Hold tight, I told myself. I kept my hands flat on the floor on each side of me, pinning my shoulders to the wall.

“How do you know about Pope, and how does the Militia know?” I asked point blank.

“Russell Desjardins is their man.”

My mind skipped, like a heartbeat.

“And he wasn’t lying when he told the police he’d just met Pope in the bar,” Tess continued. “He’d never seen him before that night -- but Pope knew him.”

I had the strange sensation of the hallway telescoping, that everyone downstairs and even me had gravely underestimated this pretty young woman with the marked face.

“Tess, what the hell is going on?”

I saw her hold out the joint to me, a dim figure behind its brilliance. I pushed harder on the floor.

“No thanks,” I said softly, in pain. There was a scuffling sound as she shifted across the passage and settled in beside me. I hardly noticed when her hand came down to rest on my thigh.

“My old boyfriend was Hugh Reitsman, number three man in the ARM,” Tess began, and in that tight, smokey, swirling hallway she unraveled an amazing tale. Some very important, very incriminating documents had gone missing from the ARM, Tess said, and Stuart Pope knew enough about the details to scare the hell out of the organization. He had blackmailed the ARM into sending Desjardins to disrupt the True North’s lecture. Desjardins was just the donkey, a newly-joined, low-level dick who knew nothing, but was eager to get a few notches on his belt.

But the Militia hated the Aryan Sons, I argued. They’d never give in to Pope’s demands.

“You’re right -- the whole Militia wouldn’t. But Pope knew just who to call, who would go down if the information came to light. You only have to scare the right man, Lee,” she said, stroking my thigh.

“And how did Pope know the right man?”

“I told him,” Tess said.

The revulsion came up like nausea, a hot, sick surge. She’d been playing me, she’d been playing us all. I wanted to grab her, shake her, but a cold-edged clarity clamped down and held me still. What else did she know, what else had she done? I had someone to worry about.

“Why, Tess?” was all I said.

She paused so long I thought she’d forgotten the question. She took a series of drags, the tiny, bitter tokes at the end of the joint. “Why does anyone do anything?” she said finally, languidly. “To make things happen. Well, it was my turn.”

“And what if Jim had died! What if you’d made that happen?”

“I know, I -- Ow, you’re hurting me.”

I’d been gripping her forearm without realizing it. I let go and rubbed it gently. “I’m sorry,” I forced myself to say.

Tess hadn’t known in advance about the bombing, and she couldn’t wrangle the truth out of Pope,

whether it had been the ARM's idea, or his. The romance had turned, she said with a careless little laugh.

The hallway seemed to be breathing, the atoms of the walls and floor drifting away and coming back. Was I getting high second hand? If that was the case...

Hold tight. A tingle whispered up the back of my neck, like a promise.

Stuart Pope didn't really have the information the Militia thought he did, and if they discovered that, his power over them would evaporate, Tess said. Even better, they'd be so furious they wouldn't let Desjardins go down alone over the bombing, but would incriminate Pope in the case.

"So tell them!"

"At 11:45 tonight I'm getting on an airplane with my new boyfriend," Tess said. "And no, you can't ask who he is. But this is where you come in. You have to tell Hugh Reitsman the truth."

My arm went around her shoulders and I held her close, pinning her to my side. "You've got it all figured out, don't you?" I said in a low, even voice. "You think you can drop this shit and run. But you're not going to drop it on me. I don't have to tell anyone anything -- except who started this disaster. We could go downstairs together. Tell me, do you think you'd make your flight?"

I could feel her alarm, rapid little breaths against my ribs, but her words were bold. "So New Boots is all you want to be? You could do something, be somebody. I'm giving you the chance."

I still held her tightly, maybe so I wouldn't shake her.

"Why should Reitsman believe me?" I said. "Where the hell are these documents, Tess? Who has them? What are they?"

"One disk is lost, I know that for sure. Hugh said it was stolen, but the stupid prick probably left the laptop on the roof of his car and drove away. He did that with his briefcase once."

"Laptop?" I repeated.

"But you print off a page of this and mail it to Hugh, and he'll listen very carefully to everything you have to say," Tess said. She pressed something into my hand -- a disk. "The password is 'pooky.' It was his fucking cat."

"What's on it?" I said.

"His hit list, his jerk-off fantasy. Everyone who holds a dangerous, racist philosophy or who pissed him off. Jim Rusk is number twenty-three, right below the head of the CBC."

My mind was running, racing, counting the cards in my hand.

"And he'll believe it?" I said.

"Well, you might have to lie and say you've got the other disk, too, but that's easy. Just tell him you've got the shopping list, the ladder. Tell him," she continued with a pleasure that was almost savage, "that if he's looking for 70 proof nitric acid, Vincent has it."

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

We were swept into a season like we'd never seen. I never did call Hugh Reitsman. Jim and I left that to CSIS, who surrounded him with their attentions. With Jim on an actual hit list, they had a terrorism case made in heaven: intent, evidence, back-up evidence and an actual crime. It was a case that brought local, provincial and national law enforcement agencies together as one happy family, and made headlines in all three Toronto dailies.

Reitsman was silent for less than twenty-four hours before he launched on a shrieking, finger-pointing rampage, at his own people and Stuart Pope. Like Reitsman, Pope was indicted for conspiracy and not released on bail; I liked to fantasize about them sharing a cell. In remand, Stu stewed, and plotted vengeance against practically everybody, including the True North. The Aryan Sons were loyal, the organization didn't bleed like the Hammerskins had, but they seemed disorganized without their mastermind. Rumors rolled in like fog, but never materialized.

"Those shitheads couldn't organize a piss-up in a brewery," Conlan chortled.

"They'd like you to think that," Knowle said shortly.

Pope's number one priority, I heard, was Tess, whose treachery rippled in a shock wave through every circle.

"The scheming bitch!" Conlan said. "All that time I thought she was shy, she was listening to us."

"A woman with tattoos, there's something wrong there." Knowle crossed his brilliant arms over his chest.

"But you've got to blame the guys in all this," Dave said, with heat. "Reitsman and Pope. They told her sensitive information -- she didn't steal it. Blame the idiots who were thinking with their dicks."

"I mean, a rose or something on her shoulder," Knowle said. "Or her ass. That's nice. But on her face?"

"The bitch!" Conlan said again. "You know, I saw the two of you leave. I thought you were balling her." He hesitated. "Were you?"

I only smiled.

"Shit!" Conlan shook his head.

I'd heard that Tess had been tracked as far as Montreal, where she'd vanished into a different kingdom entirely. Her new boyfriend was a full member of the Rock Machine bike gang. As angry as I'd been that night, I couldn't hate her and wondered about her sadly, anxiously from time to time. She was swimming with the sharks now.

The True North was a rising tide. I watched people stream into the hall at my first Patriot Night and wondered, Where did you all come from? Where were you before?

True, it was a smaller building, so a hundred people seemed to fill it to the rafters, and Rory Parke

counted for three. To his credit, he paid for that many, stuffed a trio of five dollar bills into the donations jar by the sign-in sheet, where Knowle was scrupulously checking I.D.

“Now, you all better drink this back,” he said with a shake of his fat finger. He looked around. “What’s the chair situation here?”

I was back of the table with the dogs, trying to acclimatize them to being in public. It was a losing battle -- they were over-stimulated and I was outnumbered. While I was settling one, the other would lose composure and strain forward on its leash, alarming people. Sam’s every movement looked like a lunge, but Inga was more inclined to bark. I lost track of how many times I had to grab her muzzle.

Yet there was hope. When I was finally took a seat at the back of the noisy hall, the dogs became still and sat down, almost on cue. I followed their gaze to the front of the room, where Jim had just taken the lectern and was shuffling his notes.

“Good girl. Good Sam,” I whispered, stroking their coats.

Jim didn’t talk about the bombing, although there were plenty of questions at the end, which he fielded as frankly as he could, ‘without compromising a criminal suit.’ His main address began with him commending the protestors at Phillips’ lecture.

“Not the cowards who hid in the shadows, who did their damage and ran away, but the men and women who did the bravest and most powerful thing of all: let their faces be seen in opposition. And although those people came to protest us, I think we can admire them, follow their example.”

He went on to describe a foreign aid summit that was being held in Toronto in two months’ time, and the formal protest he was organizing. My mind ran ahead, wondering how to train the dogs for the event. Yet I kept circling back to one thought. He considered Brother Tom brave.

\* \* \*

More and more our days were spent at a dead run, or at least Jim’s were. He went out more and even had guests to the house, in the study with the glass door closed. The only one occasionally invited on the outings was Dave, who came home humming, as dreamy as a man in love.

One morning, when Jim came in from his run, I settled across from him, patting Inga who leaned against my leg. “So. You had a good time last night?”

He grinned ruefully. “It depends on your definition of good. If you mean productive, then maybe. If you mean fun, not a chance.”

“Who did you and Dave see?”

“A paranoid little man who isn’t ready for anyone to know his name.”

I felt a flare of irritation, but I swallowed it back. “Oh, that doesn’t matter. All I care is -- was he good looking? Charming? I’m hopelessly jealous.”

Jim was amused. “He’s fifty-two and has the saddest comb-over I’ve ever seen. He wears a Beirtling watch and must have reached across the table a dozen times to make sure I saw it. He looks exactly like what he is: a miserable bureaucrat who’s bitter enough to do something, but terrified of losing his

pension.”

“Do something -- in the information line?” I said.

Jim hesitated. “In that line.”

“Department of Foreign Affairs?” It was a good guess, with the summit coming up, and our demonstration in the works. Jim didn’t answer and I looked at him evenly. “It’s not like I can’t keep a secret, James.”

“And I keep yours, too,” he said quietly. “Lee, I gave the man my word.”

Inga nudged my hand. I’d forgotten her. I turned aside and leaned over, stroking her with both hands, staring into her devoted brown gaze. Loving an animal was such an uncomplicated thing.

Friday nights could have been simpler, too. Jim encouraged me to go out with the others to the club, maintain a profile and pick up what information I could. It was his night to visit with his brother anyway, the unbreakable date.

“I’d like to meet Jack,” I said. “Conscious.”

I was leaning in the doorway to his study, stretched languidly against the frame. I watched him stiffen with apprehension.

“Why?” he said.

Because he resembles you, I thought, because you love him. Because you have thirty-four years together I don’t know anything about.

“If I had a brother, I’d introduce you,” I said.

“He’s not expecting anyone. We’ve always done this alone.” Jim shifted uneasily at the desk. “We don’t get much time together these days.”

I straightened at the blow. “Oh, really?” I said, and left.

So Fridays I went to Die Maschinerie, stayed too late and drank too much. I knew people now, too, and some of them liked me. I had the status of being the man who’d ‘uncovered’ Tess, and that bought me a lot of drinks on its own, or I played eight-ball for beer. I didn’t dare play for money.

The city outside the club pulled on me like an undertow, every drink loosening the grip on my resolve, dope logic snaking through my thoughts. He wanted to keep me at arm’s length? Well then maybe we needed some time apart. I wasn’t chained to that house, or to anyone. I was a free agent in a world sparking with possibility...

Except he’d made a promise that morning in his apartment. He wouldn’t follow me, he wouldn’t come looking. That reality sat like a rock in every foaming, churning Friday night. I didn’t like Jim’s word, but I didn’t doubt it, either.

If all the lights were out when I got home I went to sleep on the couch, stubbornly petulant, even vengeful. But I always awoke sober in the timeless dark, as if from an uncomfortable dream. It was so



quiet I could hear the clock in the kitchen, a soft, rhythmic swishing, like someone dealing cards. How many nights had I slept alone? I wondered. How many days did we get to ourselves? I'd creep up the stairs and feel a rush of gratitude to find his door open. I'd shed my clothes in a silent pile and slide into bed as stealthily as a thief. He knew me anyway, even in his sleep, moved in and enfolded my cold limbs more tenderly than when he was awake. At last I would really sleep.

Saturday dawned on a different land. I woke up bashful with regret, determined to be nice. I appreciated everything and drank it in, the lines of pink light glimmering on the closed Venetian blinds, the peaceful shape of Jim's shoulder beside me, the extravagant luxury of knowing we were alone. He didn't run on weekends and I appreciated that, too. I would touch my forehead or lips against his warm back, but softly, so not to disturb him or give false hope to my morning erection. I had dogs to feed.

I'd slip out of bed and into his robe. I didn't own one and his was handy, or maybe I just liked the rich, velvety sensation of it, the smell of him that lingered in the fabric. I'm sure Sam and Inga heard my movements from the back yard because by the time I'd reached the kitchen, they were dancing and jumping on the back step. I was smart enough not to open the door until I had their bowls filled. They were good animals, but getting big, and breakfast is important to a dog.

Before I'd measured out the coffee, they'd inhaled their meal and were gone, a happy gallop up the stairs that made me smile to myself. They knew their job on Saturdays and reveled in it.

We got four newspapers on the weekend and I retrieved the weighty stack from the front step. Sometimes I'd catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror by the stairs, swamped by the robe, two newspapers sandwiched under each arm, a steaming cup in either hand. There wasn't another person in the world who would have recognized me as that domestic creature.

Jim, of course, was awake by the time I arrived upstairs -- wet noses work. If he was already in the bathroom, the dogs would have commandeered the whole bed, Sam eyeing me with regal indifference, Inga turned away, pretending to be invisible.

"Okay, guys, down."

They were reluctant but obedient. I'd only had to hit the bed with a newspaper once. They also knew their eviction was temporary and sat, as vigilant as palace guards, as I crawled back in.

"Aren't you wonderful," Jim would say, coming out of the bathroom in boxer shorts and noticing the coffee, newspapers and polite dogs. It was the weekends that made me realize my heart lifted every time he entered the room.

"Yes, I am," I would say. "Very wonderful." As soon as he was beside me the dogs were back on the bed, shouldering into the leftover space, vying to be within petting reach. The narrow wedge between Jim and I was the most prized spot, and Sam usually bullied his way into it.

"So what if he's the dominant male?" I told Inga. "You don't have to take that. Rise up, rise up!"

She misunderstood me and excitedly tried to push her way up between my legs, causing me to twist suddenly to protect myself. Jim laughed and spilled his coffee on the quilt.

"That's what you get for trying to subvert the natural order," he grinned.

He read all four newspapers with avid attention. I leafed through one or two to pass the time, dawdled

over a crossword. The morning was like a warm bath that I floated in, stroking Inga and Sam, listening to the familiar, comforting rustle of Jim turning the pages, thrilling to the occasional caress of his foot against mine under the blankets. He wasn't a cold man but he had acres of reserve, a shyness that had to be overcome every weekend. The first move, I realized, was always mine.

I was patient as long as I could be.

"James, you're filthy."

He'd put down the paper and look at me with a glint. "So are you, I was going to mention it."

"Are you never going to take that shower?"

"Frankly, you need it more."

We'd get up at the same time, the dogs watching intently until they were certain of where we were going - and then they took over our spots. They knew we would be awhile.

Shower sex was good because all sex was good, but it was limited in a way. I'd convinced him that this was not a plasticized event and that brought forth a whole set of guidelines. Jim Rusk's capacity for rules frustrated me.

"We know I'm clear -- you saw the test results yourself," I said.

"But I've never been tested," he admitted.

"Have you been careful?"

"Very."

"So what are you worried about?"

The hand of God, perhaps, although he never said it. I just knew that he was unyielding on the subject and almost...superstitious. He wouldn't take chances, but he wouldn't get tested, either, as if he was walking some high wire of luck that he didn't dare vibrate. If he was the immovable object, my first impulse was to be the irresistible force. I wanted to be the one who lured him over the edge, who aroused him into letting go of his handholds. I thought of it as something I could win.

He had to be coaxed into every activity, from shooting baskets on a Saturday afternoon to the rare shopping trip. I knew it worried him for us to be seen in public together, but by the end of February I desperately needed clothes. I didn't want cash -- I still didn't trust myself with a wad of bills -- and he wouldn't give up his credit card.

"You know, most people don't give a damn about us," I said.

"And a very few of them would care a great deal," he answered.

In the end, we wound up going to the mall together and splitting up in the parking lot. I chose things and put them on hold. He went in later and paid for them. I had a drunkenly good time with Jim Rusk's money -- me, who hadn't cared about clothes since my early club days. But I was liking myself, that cocky figure who grinned back at me in the long mirrors, blonde hair growing in, body filling out, blue

eyes twinkling with the very specific thrill of dressing for a lover. He would only look at me all week, across a table or a room, and I wanted to be worth looking at. I even decided on a sport coat for patriot nights. I chose navy blue, thinking of his gallant Captain suit, but not double-breasted. When I came out of the cubicle the dapper young salesman beamed, and even colored.

"Nice," was all he said, but the word was as smooth and thick as unwhipped cream.

I stared at the transformed young man in the mirror, neat, dashing and straight-shouldered and wished, with a pang, that Louise could have seen me.

The Mercedes' little trunk was filled with bags by the end of the day. Jim had refused me nothing, but he teased me as we drove home. "Good Lord, who was your last sugar daddy? Gates?"

I had a fleeting thought of weeks I'd spent more than this, but not on clothes. "I like your money best," I said, giving his thigh a surreptitious squeeze.

Saturday afternoons were ripe for a forgotten pleasure -- reading. Jim Rusk's library was a glorious, sprawling buffet of ancient lives and I was famished. I dug in first with the Irish and devoured my way through the treacherous English, the greedy Spanish, the belligerent Vikings, fascinated by them all. I was particularly delighted by Mehmed, the Muslim ruler who undid Charlemagne, sacked the largest holy Roman outpost and generally sent Christianity sprawling on its ass.

"Now this is something you didn't pick up in parochial school," I said, laying the book down on my chest. "The losers don't write history, and Charlemagne didn't gain even a moral victory."

We were amiably sharing the black leather couch, him sitting upright at the end and me stretched out to my full length, feet resting comfortably against his thigh.

He laid his book down, too. "Well, you're right and you're wrong," he said, eyes lighting up. "You have to remember that Christians never actually lose, they're only further persecuted. Beaten back by the forces of darkness, further tested by God. It's better for recruiting if you're fighting a great evil."

"No one can call the Crusades anything but an unqualified disaster," I argued.

"Except for the men who wiped out their sins by going on them."

"What about the confession-contrition thing? I thought that was the system."

"Well, sure, for the everyday transgressions. But what if you'd done something truly terrible, the sin of a lifetime?"

It snagged me like a hook on an underwater log, but I grinned. "Sin of a lifetime. Sounds like a game show."

He smiled. "The Crusades let those men make their restitution directly to God, and to the rest of Christianity. Of course, some people went just looking for adventure, or plunder. Or the chance to kill. There are always those," he finished softly.

"So how was I right?" I asked.

"I didn't get that book in parochial school -- which I never attended. I was the only one in my family

who even went to church.”

I had a vision of him sitting in a cavernous cathedral, a handsome, serious, neatly-brushed teenager sitting alone in the crowded pews, eyes riveted on a dashing monk in a coarse brown tunic. Jim had gone back to his book, but I nudged him with my foot.

“What was it about the Franciscans that you liked so much?” I said. “What made you think about joining them?”

A veil of shyness seemed to fall over him. He looked young and self-conscious. “It was so orderly. Catholics have a time and a place and a ritual for everything. I liked that, wanted it. When you live with an alcoholic...you never know what to expect.”

But there was more to it, I even thought I saw a faint pink blush creeping up from his collar. “The army is orderly,” I teased him. “What else?”

“Oh.” He hesitated. “You’re going to laugh at this.”

“I won’t.” I rose up on my elbows, heart beating lightly.

“It just seemed to me that it was a way to...live a larger life. That touched a lot of people, had an impact. Francis of Assisi didn’t start out as anyone special. He was just the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. He could have made a good living, and he did; he had parties every night. But he gave it up when he heard the call, and he managed to bring the Gospel to people who’d never heard it in their own language, only in Latin. It changed everything, revitalized the whole faith. Francis gave people hope.”

“So he was a hero,” I said quietly.

His smile was endearing. “Well, the technical word is saint. But yes.”

I savored it for a moment, the secret he didn’t know we shared. Did a boy ever live, I wondered, who didn’t have a hero, or want to be one?

“What made you decide not to join the order?” I said.

“I figured out what ‘celibate’ really meant.”

“And it took until you were fifteen?” I laughed.

“Hey, I was slow,” he said, grinning.

In truth, he knew a lot without being told. Saturday night wasn’t an easy time for me. Never mind that I’d been to the club on Friday -- alcohol had always been the last horse in the race. I was unconsciously restless, cells sharply awake with indelible memories, an endless little tune humming in my mind. You have been so good, so very good, so very, very good for so long...

“Why don’t you take the dogs out?” he’d say, tossing my jacket to me.

It was a diversion and I resented it, but from the moment he opened the closet the dogs were in motion, Sam bright-eyed and attentive, Inga dancing around me with an excited whine in her throat. I took them, grumbling under my breath, but only a few minutes into the dark street the magic began to work on me.

The air was fresh and crisp, whispering water and the coming spring. To walk under the arbor of old trees, no sound but the dogs' happy feet, kindled an unexpected nostalgia in me. So many times I'd drifted along the paths in the timberland, far from the smell of the mill, my future still an unspoken promise in my body.

"You would have liked Chelsey," I said out loud. Only Inga glanced back at me.

We walked for an hour or more and came home thirsty, bringing the scent of fresh air into the warm kitchen. The dogs went straight to their water bowls, which Jim had thoughtfully filled, and I shrugged off my jacket, watching him lean patiently against the counter.

"Nice out?" he said, his concern stroking me without pressing.

"Beautiful." I hesitated. "Thanks."

There was a lot that went unsaid; confession wasn't part of our bargain. Some people make a sport out of their previous lovers -- the best lay, the worst lay, the strangest place. We didn't talk about it at all. The jealous, curious part of me craved to know the details of every man or woman who'd ever touched him, but I wouldn't ask questions I wasn't prepared to answer myself. And Jim Rusk would never ask me for anything, I had to volunteer. It made me the leader in every erotic game, although he caught on quickly. Very quickly.

"Did you ever wonder what I was thinking about the night you tied my tie?" I asked.

His gaze turned to smoke. "Yes. What?"

"Go put your blue suit on."

He did and by the time he reached my bedroom, all was as it had been: me standing in front of the full length mirror in a white shirt and jeans, the same blue striped tie a sorry tangle around my neck. He hesitated in the doorway, face flushing.

I smiled. "Well, come on."

He strode over, but this time his hands trembled a bit as he threaded the silk, his breath was audible. I suspected it wasn't just me, it was everything -- the rustle of our formal clothes, the stark line of beds, a barracks from a steamy, unspoken fantasy.

"Call me a handsome devil."

He whispered it.

"Do you think I look like a cadet?"

His answer was a kiss that bent back my head. I deftly unzipped him and dropped to my knees, tugging us both around so that nothing obstructed his view in the mirror. My hair was just long enough to grab and he clenched it in his fists, the mild pain and sound of his deep-throated moans almost bursting me out of my own clothes. I thought this would be the time he'd let go, but we wound up on my little cot, both of us sticky and half-dressed, spent, but safe.

"Well, that's one suit that's going to the cleaners," I grinned at him. "What will you tell them the stains

are?”

“You’re a dangerous, dangerous man,” he said, kissing me gently this time.

But so was he. If I had a flair for the dramatic, Jim had timing. He liked to talk at night, in the close darkness after sex, when I was smooth with rapture and the murmur of his voice behind my neck was the only thing that kept me from drifting away to sleep.

“Did you ever phone your dad to tell him where you were?” he said.

“He doesn’t want to hear from me. I left him twenty messages from detox. That’s when I needed to talk.” I couldn’t keep the edge out of my voice, calm and happy though I was.

“But you could try again and not ask for anything, just tell him you’re all right.”

I felt a twinge that Jim knew how the conversations with my father had gone, and maybe I was a little ashamed of all my demands.

“I can’t call him. Not yet.”

“Then write a letter, even a note. Or you could tell someone else in your family.”

“They’re in Thunder Bay.”

I felt him smile against my skin. “I think I can afford the call.” Moments passed; I was hoping he’d fallen asleep, but he said, “You never talk about them.”

“There’s nothing to say, they’re just people. I have an aunt and uncle, and cousins. One brother. He lives with our mother.”

“Older or younger?”

“Mom? Oh, she’s older than me. It would have been a difficult birth otherwise.”

He gave me a little shove. “Come on. You know what I mean. You made me think you didn’t have any siblings.”

“Well, Reine’s seven years older than me. I don’t think that really counts as a brother.” It felt so strange to say his name in this bed, this life.

“That must have been hard for both of you,” Jim said thoughtfully. “You wouldn’t even speak the same language. When you were a boy, he was a teenager. When you were a teenager, he was a man.” He hesitated. “For a few years after Jack lost his foot, he was a real bully.”

I could feel the space he was giving me, letting me decide whether to fill it.

“My brother was fine,” I said softly. “The worst things, I did to myself.” Turn the corner, any corner. “All right. I’ll write my dad a note.”

“When?”

I sighed. “Tomorrow.”

He gave me a squeeze. “Good. I’ll get you the stamp.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY

The summer I was sixteen was unlike any other. I was in love and it was fishing season. Barry's dad was always away, leading packs of eager Americans from the lodges out onto the water, casting for walleye and Northern Pike. Barry and I made that little trailer our own, romped and wrestled and lounged naked in every room, Chelsey sprawled like a thick golden rug in front of the fan.

When we weren't actually having sex, or revving up for it, we watched TV or talked or read. He had me bring books from home and my chest swelled with pride to lay my treasures out in front of him. I dog-eared the stories I thought he would like. "You've got to do the seven labors of Hercules," I'd say, or, "Don't read about the battle of Troy until you've read the histories of Achilles and Paris and Hector."

But Barry wasn't much of a reader; I think he stumbled over the acrobatic Greek names. Finally he handed the book to me. "You read it, out loud," he said, and I did. I could have sung those stories, they rolled off my tongue as if I'd memorized them. Barry listened quietly, his head on my thigh, brown eyes dreamy and distant. Sometimes I would come across a passage I really loved, and it would catch me in the chest. I felt as though I was telling my dreams out loud, all my secret hopes laid into his hands.

Barry wanted to go to university, computer sciences or even an education degree. "I could teach gym. Man, I'd make those archers run," he grinned. Then his face clouded over. "I'll need a scholarship, though, maybe I can get one in track. Or a student loan if I have to. But I'm not fishing for a fucking living."

I was only going into grade eleven and life beyond this summer, this trailer, seemed hazy and golden. I dreamed of moving to Toronto with him, of earning a fortune and buying a car. I would drive him everywhere, drop him on campus and kiss him goodbye in broad daylight. I had no idea how I'd accomplish this, what I would actually do for the money, but the future was light in my body.

Barry would have been the ideal son, if any parent had been around to appreciate him. He cooked his own meals, lugged his wash to the laundromat, folding it neatly before he hauled it back. He worked all summer at Pal's supermarket, bagging groceries and stocking shelves. I made a point of buying something several times a day -- a pack of gum or a liter of chocolate milk.

"Would you have the boy carry it out to my car?" I'd ask the tittering cashier.

Fuck off, Barry would mouth at me, but there was laughter behind his eyes.

I made sacrifices for him I never would have made for anyone else. That summer I wasn't the ideal son but I was more dutiful than I ever imagined I could be. Reine left me with a list every day - the lawn, the vacuuming, the laundry -- and I finished it, smiling pleasantly through gritted teeth. I needed the money my brother doled out to me, and even more importantly, I needed the car.

We had only one car in our family, a grey tone Pontiac Grand Am that Reine had bought. It was called mid-size, but it looked small for him as he eased his growing bulk behind the steering wheel.

"I got it for mom," he said. "It's a good ladies car. Easy to park."

Yet my mother didn't like to drive, not really. When they went to work in the morning, Reine was behind



the wheel. Tuesday was grocery night and he drove then, too. I was always on hand when they returned, carting bags, running cans to the cupboard in the basement, eager and hopeful. Could I borrow the car now?

“What for? Where do you have to go?”

“I need the practice,” I said, although it stuck in my craw. I’d gotten my license the week I turned sixteen and I was a good driver -- damned good, I thought.

“Practice using your legs,” Reine snorted. Then, finally, “Maybe on the weekend.”

I’d go out the door with my gritted pleasantness because on rare occasions he actually came through. It didn’t keep me from being sour for a good portion of the evening, though.

Barry didn’t understand what the big deal was. “So where do we have to go? We can walk to my place, we can walk just about anywhere.” He grinned. “Hey, I run five kliks before you even roll out of bed in the morning.”

“You’d understand if you had your license,” I snapped. “People want to drive. It’s normal.” I’d teased him about this before, one of my few footholds up. He was already older, faster and sometimes stronger than me. And secretly I liked being the one behind the wheel. I’d be happy to drive him around for the rest of my life.

He was silent so long I felt the sting of regret and a little flutter of panic. “Sorry. Listen, he just pisses me off.”

Barry shook his head. “You shouldn’t let him own you, Lee.”

All of Thunder Bay owned me that summer, chafed me like starched clothes. We were careful where we went, how often we were seen together. I fantasized about sneaking out at night with a can of red spray paint, and painting our names in a heart on the side of the mill. If Barry and I ran into acquaintances, the smoldering inside me burst into a defiant flame.

“They walk and talk before your very eyes,” someone sneered. “Joined at the hip, a horrible mistake of nature, but it lives.”

Barry tried to play it off, grinning at me. “You never told me we were Siamese twins. You said we were just walking in step.”

“Oh, it’s worse than that. We’re multiple personalities of the same guy.” I grabbed him around the waist from behind, tucked my chin onto his shoulder. I felt him stiffen with alarm and it made me clutch him tighter. Surprise spread out around us in a silent shockwave -- I was definitely hugging him.

“So we’re the two-headed man,” Barry said with an uncomfortable laugh.

Later in his bedroom, we lay on top of the sheets. The whole city seemed to be outside the trailer that humid night, jarring voices invading us through the tiny window. I would have closed it if I didn’t think we’d die from the heat. Sex had been a silent event, not exactly mechanical, but as determined and needy as when you did it yourself.

“I guess you’re really mad at me,” I said finally.

I heard the rustle on the pillow as he shook his head. "I just don't know if you really want what you think you want."

Out. That thrilling, terrifying, cliff-edge of a word. I tossed it around in my imagination sometimes, a soldier playing catch with his own sword.

"Doesn't it bother you that we can't be who we are? It's like everyone else can have somebody except us."

"But we do what we want anyway," he said mildly. "It's perfect."

"Perfect except we live like fugitives. Thieves." I felt the boldness rise in my chest. "You're...my best friend. And I'm getting to the point where the world is just going to have to cope with that."

He hesitated a painful half-second. "I love you, too," he said softly. "And I can't even phone your house after five o'clock."

He was calling my bluff. My brother was included in the world.

"Reine will have to cope, too," I said at last.

Barry pushed up on his elbow. "If you mean that, really mean it, then come to my grad with me. That's all I want. Promise you'll be my date for grad."

His beautiful face was shadowed by intensity. This was important to him, more than I'd ever realized. He wasn't playing with his sword, he was talking about an actual day, months and months away, but it would come.

My heart beating at the base of my throat, waves of longing and apprehension gusting over me.

"Yes," I said.

For a moment his eyes searched my face, but at last he smiled. "You are going to be so cute in a tux." He leaned down and kissed my shoulder, then bit it. "You want to have a shower with me?"

That night I went out into the heavy August air swaying like a drunk. I'd never made a promise this big. I felt like a footsoldier on the morning of battle, frightened to the point of nausea, exhilarated by the freedom of knowing something would change forever. I would be a hero or dead. Life had suddenly become very simple.

Of course I meant in June, yet I discovered the strangest thing. Once you've decided where you're going, your mind runs there ahead of you. I found myself staring at tuxes through shop windows, mesmerized by the dashing swaths of black and grey, my blood rising with fear and arousal. They'd become the sexiest thing a man could wear.

I worried I wouldn't be able to get the car on grad night, and I already knew I needed to drive. I bugged Barry to get a credit card because you couldn't rent a car without one.

"You need to build up a credit rating," I nagged. "Get it now, while you're gainfully employed."

"I know, I know. Quit pushing." We were walking through the dark, quiet trailer park and I tugged him suddenly into the space between a mobile home and its septic tank. I pinned him against the wall, one strong thigh between both of his, the rest of the world just one dangerous step away.

"I'm a pushy guy," I said.

I heard him take a breath, jeopardy and excitement, as he opened his mouth against my bare neck.

I was pushy, I was defiant, I was hungry. The second last week of August Barry's dad came home and stayed there, cleaning guns, tying flies, pacing aimlessly inside the little trailer like an unhappy animal. I'd met him before, a lean, quiet man with leathery skin and greying stubble, who seemed shyly uncomfortable in civilization. I didn't dislike him, but Barry and I no longer had a place.

I squeezed my frustration into the bull worker, made the spring squeak as I forced one tube almost completely inside the other. I took my glowing, pumped-up body around Thunder Bay, walking restlessly beside Barry, hands in my own pockets. The golden summer was running away so fast I could feel the breeze.

"This is how it's going to be all winter," I said miserably.

"Duck hunting's coming up," Barry answered hopefully, but so was school. Supplies were already piled neatly on my desk. I couldn't fight an unreasonable anxiety that was building up, the sense of seasons shifting, but not fast enough. I needed it to be June, not September.

The Kinsmen Valley Garden Park had a dozen barbeque pits that were booked solid every Labor Day. I knew about two barbeques that year: one for the staff of Pal's supermarket, and one that had been organized by my cousins.

"You're coming. Nobody's seen you in ages. They ask if you still live here," Reine said, but his voice was easy, almost jovial. "It'll be a good time. We're having a bonfire and everything. I'm burning the mortgage."

I blinked. "You paid off the house?"

"I said I would." He shook his head, tiredly it seemed. "It's a shitty thing to live in debt. No one should be a slave to the bank."

I stared at my brother. He was only twenty-three, but his face hung as heavily as dough, and in the fading light his dark hair took on a gunmetal sheen. I felt an unexpected tug. Had he ever been a kid?

"You could have bought a house of your own," I said.

He looked at me without a word, and his lips curled the tiniest bit, tilting his moustache. He had bought himself a house, and I was living in it. I felt as though I'd swallowed a chunk of ice.

Dogs weren't allowed in the Kinsmen park. Still, I felt guilty that morning as I hooked Chelsey to the chain in the back yard, trying to keep my mind blank. She could smell my thoughts.

"I won't be long," I said, giving her an extra pat.

"She knows you're lying," my brother said behind me. "She knows we're going to the park. Don't you,

Chelsey?”

She knew that word. Chelsey began to whine, tugging on her chain, brown eyes pleading with me. She was in agony now. I pushed abruptly to my feet and spun around.

“You’re an asshole,” I blurted

My brother was carrying a folded lawn chair in each hand.

“She’s just a dog,” he said.

“She’s my dog.” We hadn’t fought all summer, but the adrenaline surged through my veins, a rush of loathing and protectiveness. I wasn’t little anymore.

He seemed to hesitate, studying me, then suddenly tossed one of the lawn chairs. “Help me load the car.”

The damage had been done. The last thing I heard as we drove away was Chelsey’s pitiful whining yips.

I didn’t hate my relatives. My aunts, uncles and cousins weren’t interesting, but they were harmless, easy-going people who had always felt a bit sorry for me, born so far behind my brother. My cousin, JR, was my age, a good-natured, effortless companion when our families got together. We hung around at every gathering, and I forgot him the moment I walked out the door.

My relatives thought my brother was a saint. It was no secret that Reine put his paychecks back into our household.

“Helen had two sons, one blonde and one golden,” I overheard my aunt say once.

That day in Kinsmen Park was rare and cloudless, the heavy sun sapping energy until the adults were permanently lodged in their lawn chairs. There were hotdogs and endless bags of chips, hard boiled eggs casting their faint, repugnant smell over the sandwiches. There were cases of beer, in trunks, in coolers, but it was too early to sneak one.

I smiled at people, answered their polite, empty questions. I had a pretty good idea where the Pal’s party was, but I didn’t dare go find Barry yet because my younger cousins had circled me like crows on road kill. Did I want to play badminton? Did I want to go see the ducks? I tossed the frisbee around with them, passing time.

I kept an anxious eye on the horizon, hoping for JR.

At last he sauntered up, paler than me for the first time in my life. I knew he’d been working all summer in one of the mills as a sweeper. I hadn’t seen him in months, and he was taller than I remembered, handsome in a smooth, goofy way.

“Hey,” he said. “Want to come see something?”

We gave the little kids money for ice cream and slipped away. JR led me over the dry, sweet-smelling grass into the crowded parking lot that shimmered with metal heat. And there I died.

“This is her,” he said. He laid his hand on the black hood, then pulled abruptly away. “Ow, shit. That’s hot.”

She was hot, she was stunning. The gleaming black 4 x 4 had huge, hungry tires and a chrome roll bar, it smacked of power and speed and daring. It was a powerful leap into some next level of life and the sight of it twisted in my stomach like a knife. I had nothing and I'd done nothing, all summer, all my life.

He wouldn't let me drive it. We went back to the picnic and I found myself smiling more tightly at my relatives, snapping at the kids. No, I didn't want to play any more.

At last the endless sun began to go down and JR and I broke into the beer. I downed two in the hastening darkness, boldness spinning a larger circle inside me. The mortgage papers went up in a clean flare of red and yellow, and everyone clapped.

"That's something," JR said beside me, his voice thick with awe. "That's going to be me. I'll do it just like that."

I decided I was going to do it differently. I set my empty bottle on the picnic table and pushed off, gathering momentum with every step, buoyed and invulnerable by beer and anger. I knew the fire I was looking for.

The staff of Pal's had drifted into two groups: full time and summer help. The bakery, pharmacy and meat cutters were comfortably settled in lawn chairs, talking shop, while the cashiers and stock boys sat on logs around the campfire, toasting marshmallows, beer bottles cradled surreptitiously between their feet. The girls I knew only in uniform looked strangely civilian in shorts and halter tops, tucked in next to Barry, two on each side.

There was a little burst of laughter when I walked up,

"We were wondering when you'd get here," one of them giggled. "We were taking bets. What do you want today -- chips or gum?"

I looked down at Barry who was crouched forward on a log, burning two marshmallows on a coat hanger. "Ready to go?" I said.

I could see his discomfort, the flash of his thoughts as he looked for a way to laugh this off. He got to his feet, grinning. "It's my marshmallows, right? This is piracy."

"No, it's just time to go," I said.

"Wow, Barry, your dad is strict," a box boy said, and everyone laughed. I glanced at the little turd, eighteen years old, pale face studded with acne, and the gust of my calm hatred was almost pleasurable. I stepped over to Barry, took the marshmallow rod out of his hand, put my arm around his shoulders and kissed him on the mouth.

He didn't have time to pull back or maybe that movement had become so natural it didn't register right away. When I let go I saw the stunned disorder in his brown eyes, felt the silence spread out in a lavish hush around us. I turned and tossed the marshmallow rod to the box boy, upright, the way you'd throw a sword.

"Guess I'm not his dad," I said, walking away. I left Barry standing there, to follow me or not. It was a terrible choice, I knew, but I was in the mood for terrible choices. There were two awful seconds of silence before I heard his feet on the grass, catching up. Voices rose up behind us, murmuring in our

wake, like a film that had been paused and allowed to run again.

“Oh, fuck,” Barry said.

I was rushing, riding an adrenaline wave of terror and triumph. I would pay for this, I would pay, but in that instant it was worth it.

“I don’t believe you did that -- I do not fucking believe it!”

He shoved me suddenly in frustration. I caught myself and turned on him.

“Look, if you were ready for June, you’re ready now.”

“And how many beers did it take you to reach that brilliant conclusion?”

“I’m sick of this place. I’m sick of lying. Maybe it was just time to get some guts and live real.”

“That’s great,” he snapped. “I noticed you were ready to live real at my party, not yours. Oh, Jesus.” He wilted then, ran his hands over his face.

We’d reached a grove and I tugged him into it. The path through the trees was a corridor of darkness now, touched only occasionally by moonlight. I felt him lean into me, melt against my arm, and a raw, protective surge swept through my body. We sat down on the dirt path.

“Okay,” Barry said. “It could be okay. We’re in this together. It’s going to be okay.”

He needed to talk and I let him, about how this might be, or not be. He had finished at Pal’s anyway, his final check was in the mail, and none of them went to our school. This might never leave the park.

I was feeling large, legendary. With my arm around Barry’s shoulders I was Jason or Achilles, unconcerned with mortal details. I had chosen my path and started down it bravely at last, and it made me prouder than I’d been all summer. Beer alone couldn’t do that for you.

In the distance the warning horn sounded -- the park was closing and I knew my family would be packing up. Let them leave without me, I thought. I’d already left them long ago. But the noise made Barry turn.

“Maybe we should head out. We don’t want to go over the fence.”

I kissed the side of his face. I pulled him in closer and opened my mouth on his salty, sweat-dried neck, running my hand up his bare thigh.

“Hey,” he said softly. “We’re...outside.”

But it was exciting, my frustration and the exhilarating rush of my daring tonight. I was a pushy guy, and I remembered that sometimes he liked it. I wrestled him over, until we were lying on the dirt.

“Jesus, Lee!”

But I was locked into the trance of my lust, stoked by his alarmed, aroused breath and even his hot, bare limbs twisting against me. I knew him, he was simple machinery, like me. My pride and power gusted

over his protests as I pulled his desire up into the night.

“Someone...might...” he gasped.

“Be fast,” I said, unhooking my belt with a quick tug.

In minutes it was over. We wiped off and zipped up, hurrying across the grass to climb the chain-link fence that surrounded the park. I was faster than him and leapt to the ground, turning in time to watch him cautiously straddle the pointed top.

“Careful,” I teased, “you don’t want to lose anything important.” He didn’t even smile.

We were silent on the way home and at first I didn’t notice, locked into my own thoughts, body still echoing with the rapid-fire erotica. Sex like a drive-by shooting was still sex. But when we reached the entrance to the trailer park and he made to turn off without a word, it woke me.

“Hey,” I said, catching his arm.

Under the yellow yard light, the dark, dreamy features I loved were so distant my heart leapt with alarm.

“Let’s go somewhere for awhile,” I said.

He shook his head. “It’s after one. I’m probably in shit and so are you. School tomorrow.”

His voice seemed to come out of a well, but in the next instant he reached forward and clasped my forearm. It was an affectionate, old-fashioned embrace, more than a handshake, but not quite a hug, the way men used to greet their true friends.

“Are you okay?” I said.

“As long as we’re in this together,” he said. I squeezed back and finally let him go.

I don’t know what I thought about walking home. I knew I’d plunged both Barry and me into a new life, but it wasn’t real yet, and all I wanted was to fall into bed. I felt as though I was walking half a step behind my own body.

The house was still and quiet, the car in the driveway, and I was relieved. I slipped into the backyard to unhook Chelsey from her chain and was greeted by dark silence. They must have taken her in already, but part of me couldn’t believe it -- that was my job. I whistled a soft note. “Here, Chels,” I whispered.

“It’s a real bitch when something disappears, isn’t it?” Reine said.

I whirled around and my eyes caught the faint outline of his torpedo shape against the stucco wall of the house, next to the door.

“Where is she?” I demanded.

“It’s a real pain when you have to go looking for something. You never know what you’re going to find.”

Bitterness broke through my exhaustion. I was really sick of this game. I took a step, blood pumping,

body swelling.

“If she’s not in that house -”

“Maybe she’s out licking the asses of other dogs.”

The words slapped me, stopped me, and in that micro-second my brother lunged. He swung his arm around my neck and yanked me down into a headlock.

“You want to kiss the boys? I’ll give you something to kiss,” he hissed.

He knew. He’d gone looking for me and had gotten as far as the Pal’s barbeque. But that thought was a fleeting speck. The thick flesh of his arm had closed around my face and sixteen years burned up from my belly like a roar. I seized him, behind the back and under the legs, lifted him right off his feet like a child. I heaved 240 pounds away from me with all my might.

Reine tumbled across the concrete step before he hit grass, skin scraping. There was a stunned second before he twisted over onto his knees and glared up at me in fury and disbelief.

“You little shit...!”

“Come on!” I was Achilles and Jason and Ajax, towering over him, drenched in anger and adrenaline. My heart was a sword. “You want me, come on! But you touch me and one of us is going to jail.”

In that moment I knew he believed me. He got to his feet, wincing, never taking his eyes from me. “Keep your fucking voice down.”

“Why? She’s already deaf. She’s deaf and blind and I don’t care anymore! I’m going to be loud. Get used to it.”

He was swaying slightly, one hand on his ribs, wanting to come at me, but held back by the threat of my body. It thrilled me, almost as much as telling the truth. I wouldn’t have given up an inch even if I died for it.

“You make me sick,” he said at last, turning away. I stared after him, panting lightly, muscles taut for the moment he would whirl around. But he went into the house. It was over. I was out and I was alive. The shot of triumph pierced my rigid body, a bullet-hole of euphoria that drained the tension away. I would have cheered if I didn’t feel like rubber.

I heard Chelsey before I even opened the door to my room, whining, scratching against the wood. I pushed in and she was all over me, nosing, licking, trying frantically to make it better. I stroked her with a tired, heavy hand.

“It’s okay, Chels,” I said. “It’s all okay now.”

I kicked off my runners and lay down on top of the blankets in my clothes, feeling sleep glide over me like a silky sheet. But I was there, the place I’d wished for, dreamed of. I had a lot to tell Barry.

I woke in an odd, brilliant silence, the room stuffy and golden with sun. Last night’s tussle lingered in my muscles and there was a sour haunting of old beer in my mouth. But aside from that, I felt calm and well rested. Very well rested. I turned my head to glance at the clock on my dresser. It was noon.



Shit! The first day of school and I'd missed the whole morning. No one had woken me. Chelsey was still in the room and once I stirred, she began to dart anxiously between the bed and the door, whining reproachfully. I was instantly in motion. Afternoon classes started at 12:50 but I was more worried about Barry. I'd said I would meet him. I didn't want him to think I was...hiding.

I was a block from the school when the bell rang.

It was a strange afternoon. One minute I was surrounded by the familiar herd, faces I had known for years, and it was a slingshot back to grade school. This was the first day of every year: the jostling, the little punches and shoves, male animals re-establishing themselves, the girls twinkling and laughing. And then a memory would hit me, the marshmallow taste of Barry's mouth, the suffocating crush of my brother's arm.

I was astonished to discover that I was somebody this year. The muscles, the tan and even my unavailability over the summer seemed to create an aura, the suspicion that I'd been up to something secret and dangerous and extremely cool. I admit I did nothing to dispel it; it was a bit of a rush to have a mystique. No whispers from Kinsmen Park had blown this far yet and I couldn't help but be relieved. I was ready, I'd said I was, but what was wrong about a few days' grace?

I saw Barry only once, across the hall during class change, traveling in the opposite direction. His face caught me fresh. Hemmed in on all sides by rough-edged, pimpled teenagers, he was as smooth as a fine piece of Greek marble. He wasn't handsome, he was beautiful. Did he look queer? I wondered for the first time. Did I?

"Barry!" I called across the noise. He twisted around and I held up four fingers -- I'd meet him at four o'clock. He lifted his head in a little nod, pursed his lips in a silent kiss.

I turned away, flushing with the erotic shock and dismay. Did anybody see that?

Four o'clock never came. At 3:45 I was called down to the office from my last class to find my brother waiting, dark and patient, thumbs hooked through the belt loops of his jeans. It shocked me to see him in the middle of a workday, not wearing his mill coveralls.

He tilted his head, almost smiling. "Come on. I want you to see something."

The smart bastard. What was I going to say with the entire office staff watching us? I followed him out of the building, clutching my books, ready for anything. He stopped in front of the most beautiful car I'd ever seen.

It was an older Chevy, a two-door, and I knew the name without even looking. Camaro reverberated in every powerful metal line. From the broad hood to the windswept curl of its saucy back end, it looked fast and butch and hungry. It was as white as a snowstorm.

"She's third generation, an '89 RS," Reine said, "but she's fully restored. 2.8 litre, 6 cylinder, 305 TBI. This car is fucking mint."

He didn't have to sell me -- I knew she was perfect. But why had he brought it here? To torture me? He never asked my opinion.

"Are you buying it?" I blurted.

Behind us, the school buzzer sounded, and within seconds people began to stream into the parking lot.

“You want to drive?” Reine said, tossing the keys at me. I almost dropped my books scrambling to catch them. And the whole school, it seemed, watched me swing behind the wheel.

My brother got into the passenger seat, which was disorienting because it never happened. I didn’t think about it long. The Camaro caught me up, the black interior curving around me like a cockpit, the engine surging in a deep animal growl to my every nudge. We cruised a few streets, turning heads, then veered out of town. I hit the Canada Number One and let the big engine open up, 120 klicks, 130. I was devouring asphalt, Dionysius riding the tiger.

“All right,” Reine said, “turn around at the campsite. I’ll drive it back.”

I turned in obediently, aching as I handed over the keys. In the passenger seat I let myself be buffeted by wind from the open windows. I was silent as long as I could stand it.

“Are you buying it?” I finally asked.

“I already did,” my brother said.

“You traded in the Grand Am?”

“No, I took out a loan.”

I felt a pulse of astonishment -- he hadn’t been out of debt for twenty-four hours. “Why?”

“Lots of guys have two cars,” he said, with a trace of defensiveness.

I stole a glance at him. He was doing the speed limit, one elbow resting languidly on the window ledge, settled back comfortably in the deep black seat, a throne. I imagined him briefly twenty-years from now, still at the mill, still in the house, still with the woman who wouldn’t have him. She would use him, but she wouldn’t have him. No wonder he needed this. No wonder I made him sick.

We passed the school on our way to the house. I’d missed four o’clock and I’d have some apologizing to do. But Barry would understand. This was about a car.

We pulled into our driveway, behind the Grand Am. Maybe I would get that more often, I consoled myself. But I got out of the Camaro quickly, the way you rip off a band-aid. I’d only gone a few steps when I heard the driver’s door slam, and I looked up. He’d intercepted me, his big body blocking my path. He was holding out the keys.

“I’ll pay the shot,” he said. “Loan. Insurance. Plates.”

I stared in stunned disbelief. He was offering this dream of a car to me?

“Families shouldn’t fight,” he said quietly. I felt the revelation ripple through me. I’d finally scared him. He knew I could throw him, beat him, and he was ready to make peace. I took a step, drawn forward by the irresistible magnetic pull, and his hand closed around the keys.

“You will never see him again.”

Barry. I hesitated, waves of hot and cold breaking over my face, a horse race of excuses thundering through my mind. I could do this, I could make it work. We'd see each other in secret, like before. He wasn't ready to be out -- we'd just go back to how it was. And we'd be free. I'd have the car and we'd be free. Barry would understand. I wanted this, I needed it. Sixteen goddamn years and I deserved it.

My hand reached out in a convulsive twitch of desire, and Reine let go, the keys hitting the pavement with a dull jingle. I didn't bend over to pick them up, I dropped to one knee.

# CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

I passed the fifty day mark the first week of March, fifty days clean counting the time in detox, and I didn't mention it to Jim. I think I was afraid of crowing out loud. The Bitch was never very far from me, cooing her siren love song or sharpening her blade on my little accomplishments. Oh, what a warrior you are. Five dollars on the table in the morning. You know the name for that, don't you dearie...

She still stole into my dreams with unspeakable pornography, woke me with that plummeting freefall of loss and horror. But every day I got up and fed my dogs.

"Fifty days, Inga," I whispered.

The five of us worked like machinery that month. Dave bragged that he had files on over 300 people, and guarded the computer like a lioness. Both he and Jim were so busy they were hard pressed to get the monthly newsletter out. At last an ad was placed in Strong and Free, for an office assistant two days a week. We had only one applicant, but there was no doubt in Dave's mind it was a winner.

Delia was nineteen years old, in a fallow year between high school and university, and there was something about her that whispered a Spanish descent. She had long, curly dark hair pulled back in a bushy pony tail, and a body so female it was almost fascinating. Everything about her was round, her bright face, shoulders, melon-sized breasts. When Delia walked, the movement was undulating, as if her joints were set on wheels.

Jim and Dave interviewed her in the office where there was no door to close. Knowle, Conlan and I couldn't help but overhear, considering we loitered in the living room as close as we dared.

"I should really be in there," Knowle said. "If he's bringing someone new into..."

"Shh," Conlan hissed, straining closer.

Delia had read about the open position in Strong and Free, which her parents subscribed to.

"But I read it, too," she added hurriedly. "I particularly like the columns."

"Really?" Dave broke in. "Did you see the one last month about security at Sky Dome? That's mine."

When Jim asked what drew her to journalism, Delia paused thoughtfully.

"The world is an interesting place. I like to follow what goes on, and why people do what they do. I like to research." She giggled suddenly, girlishly. "Or maybe I'm just nosy!"

I thought Dave would hurt himself laughing.

"That's a dead man," Knowle said softly, shaking his head.

Delia made a difference the days she was there. For the most part, Dave had her cordoned off in his den, but if she came out for any reason, Conlan and Knowle materialized, brighter and more boisterous than I'd known them to be sober. Lunch had always been a casual affair, on Delia Days it was an event. They

actually argued over who would make the sandwiches. I saw them at the table when I passed by, the three men turned in toward her like the petals of a flower.

She couldn't have missed the effect she had, but I don't think it was planned. There was something guileless in Delia's round face. I would have liked to talk with her, just out of curiosity, but whenever I entered the room, an invisible thread pulled tight. Security, Intelligence and Recruiting did not want anyone else throwing his hat into the ring. I walked away smiling to myself. I had other places for my hat.

With all the distraction, Jim and I could get away to the apartment for some quality time and hardly be missed. We only chanced an hour or so and it was no-frills interlude, as needy and thrilling as any parking lot encounter. I was happy with every stolen minute, and leaving the house lifted a weighty cloak off Jim. In the car, his eyes actually twinkled.

"You should have hired Delia a month ago," I said, lying in the delicious aftermath, the bedroom hushed and golden with afternoon light.

"Two months ago," he said dreamily.

"No. You'd be bored with me by now. How long do you think I can sustain this level of charm?"

He rolled onto his elbow toward me, laid his hand flat on my stomach.

"I think you have a significant level of charm, to which I am particularly susceptible." He said it playfully, but he was gazing at me with such soft eyes that I felt a leap. Tell him. Tell him now.

The moment passed.

"Well, we should get our lazy asses out of this bed," Jim said finally. "We're on company time."

We had a protest coming up at the end of the month and none of us forgot that, especially Knowle. He went down to Queen's Park, where the event would be staged, and surveyed the terrain and landmarks, drawing himself a detailed map. On Friday nights at Die Maschinerie, while I played pool and Dave held court, Knowle talked to people. Yet when Conlan told me Knowle had recruited twenty-four guys to work Security at the event, I was amazed.

"He holds meetings, you know," Conlan said. "Here on Saturday nights, upstairs."

"Does Jim know?" I said, feeling uneasy.

"Well, yeah. Someone's got to pay the bill. Parke's not giving it away."

One afternoon I found Knowle waiting for me in the kitchen, when the dogs and I came back from a practice session. He was sitting at the table in a long-sleeved black sweatshirt, so different with his arms covered that he looked like someone new.

"So, how's the training going?" he asked pleasantly, watching Sam and Inga at their water bowls.

"We're getting there," I said, hanging their leads on a hook. This was my standard response. I was protective of my dogs and didn't want anyone to judge them before they were ready -- or I was.

Knowle nodded. “Well, I need to know if they’re going to ‘get there’ by March 28th. What can they do now?”

I sat down at the table, conscious of his eyes on me. I counted off the commands they were proficient at, both verbal and silent hand signals: heel, sit, stay, come, stay together. Even though I was terribly proud of them, in that moment the list felt...lacking.

“And, as an added bonus, they can bark real loud and scare the shit out of people,” I added.

Knowle grinned. “Okay. That’s good. Scaring is good.” His face sobered. “I was just kind of hoping for more. Don’t take it personally. We’re all working at our own speed here.”

He took an apple from the bowl on the table and spun it thoughtfully in front of him. “Jim talks about security, but he doesn’t really think about it. And that’s okay, because it’s my responsibility to think about it.”

The air seemed to press on me, a strange blend of guilt and embarrassment.

“Listen,” I said, “there is something I want to try, but I need to get back to you on it. I have to see if it’s possible.”

“Okay. Get back to me.” He bit into the apple with a wet, noisy crunch.

\* \* \*

“You’re sure?” Miss Marnie asked the next day.

“I’m sure,” I said.

“Why gunpowder? You’re not checking people for guns, are you? You know you shouldn’t confront them if you do get a strike, that’s for the police.”

Her manner was so motherly I couldn’t take offense. “It’s the most consistent element in almost all amateur...explosives,” I said. She sighed.

“Yes, it is.” She got up and went to a cabinet, a beautiful scrolled piece that could have easily held fine china. She withdrew a cotton ball, a felt marker and a black film cannister with holes punched into the lid. She sat down beside me again and began to mark the cotton ball, saturating it.

“This is a pseudo-scent for gunpowder,” she said while she worked. “Years ago we had to use the genuine article for scent training.”

I was intrigued. “What other flavors do you have?”

“Cocaine, gasoline, natural gas and decomposing flesh.” She lifted her eyes to gauge my reaction. I was fascinated.

“All right, the jig is up. Who did you used to work for?”

She smiled. “Vancouver police. I just helped them train their dogs, and co-ordinate searches. Tracking is very interesting because you’re dealing with about six different kinds of scent plumes, depending on the

weather and time of day.”

She described some of the searches she’d conducted and I hung onto her every word, rapt. I experienced a sensation that was entirely new: I was visualizing myself in a job. Something I could work at every day, with a pay check, that was of value, that mattered to people...

Where you could be the hero? the Bitch sneered. Would they put you in charge of the drug squad at the airport?

“We better get on with it,” I broke in gently.

Scent training wasn’t difficult, it was repetitious, and simply took time and patience. The dogs caught on amazingly well, even in that first lesson. Sam had the better nose, but Inga made up for it with determination. She seemed to live and breathe to please me.

“Now, it’s just a matter of practice,” Miss Marnie said, stroking their happy heads. “Hide the scent container around the house, and eventually start working with them outside, and in crowds. Get your friends to help you.”

The word plucked an odd note. I had, I thought, a lot of acquaintances.

Conlan picked me up with the van.

“Hey, hey, guys,” he said to the dogs as they bounded into the back, “what’s the lesson today?”

He listened patiently while I rattled on about scent training, probably more than he wished to know.

“Don’t mention it to anyone,” I said finally. “I want it to be a surprise.”

“They won’t hear it from me,” Conlan said. He paused. “Do you think he dates?”

“What? Who?”

“Jim. Is he seeing anybody?”

“I...don’t know.”

“I bet he’s not,” Conlan said with conviction. “I’d put money on it.”

My whole body was on sudden alert. “Why should he tell us anything?”

“Doesn’t it strike you funny, though?” Conlan continued. “Here’s this good-looking son-of-a-bitch, rich, got the house, the car, knows people all over the city -- and he spends his time with us? There’s something wrong.”

I started to bluster indignantly, but Conlan cut me off.

“It’s just funny, because it’s wrong with all of us. Knowle’s divorced, or mostly. You, me, Dave, we’ve got nobody. And where are we going tonight? The fucking club so we can sit around and get pissed with a bunch of losers who can’t get nobody either!”

He wasn't just talking about getting laid. For a minute there was only the sound of the van's engine, the amiable panting of the dogs. "I thought she was just shy," Conlan said.

Tess. There was something so plaintive in his voice, simple and lonely and at a loss. I regretted my lie, the empty smirk that had said nothing and everything.

"So anyhow," Conlan continued. "I've decided I'm going out tonight, somewhere new, you know? You want to come?"

I could hear the pleading in his voice, but I was gripped by uneasiness.

"Con, there are some places ..."

"You've got some enemies, bud?"

"People I'd rather not see."

"Dope?"

The air in the van was very close. "That, too."

He exhaled, a suspicion being laid to rest. "Well, yeah, I thought so. You were in pretty bad shape when you showed up in January, shot full of holes. I thought, there's a guy running. He's in it up to his neck. But we've all done shit we're not proud of."

"Thanks for not saying anything." I meant it.

His glance was thick with gratitude. "You don't rat on a friend," he said.

I held that for a little while, feeling the turn inside me.

"Sure," I said, as we pulled into our own driveway. "Let's go somewhere new tonight."

I thought briefly of telling Jim about the conversation; he'd laugh that Conlan considered him good looking. But the idea stopped in its tracks. I didn't want Jim Rusk thinking he had to date.

Conlan and I started with a club called Rascals. I chose it because I'd never heard of it. "If I say I have to go, don't worry about me," I said. "I'll make it home."

Before the bottom of the first glass, we met up with a girl Conlan had known in high school, a buxom, cheery armful with hair streaked into a rainbow of Kool-aid colors. She surprised him by sitting on his knee and stroking her hand over his freshly-buzzed skull.

"Jesus God, Con. What happened to your hair?" She turned to her giggling girlfriends. "This was the cutest guy in grade eleven. I had the worst crush on him, but he wouldn't even look at me."

"I was shy," Conlan blurted.

"You were bloody dim," she said, laughing. Their sparks were lighting up the table. It was hardly ten o'clock when Conlan pulled me aside near the men's john and pressed the van's keys into my hand.



“Listen. Don’t take this wrong. I know I bugged you to come out...”

“But you’ve got a ride?” I said.

“I think so. Especially if I don’t have one, you know?”

I put the keys in my pocket and backed away, grinning. Conlan beamed his thanks at me, brighter than the lights on the dance floor. I walked out to the van whistling, weightless with the pleasure of doing the right thing.

And I wasn’t finished yet. I was so proud of myself when I pulled into the driveway, delighted to see the main floor lights on. I’d thought Jim would be out with Jack, but luck was on my side. I opened the back gate and was met by Inga and Sam, wagging and dancing around me until I dropped to one knee and gathered them into an embrace, a secret, grateful hug. I didn’t do this in front of people.

As I got to my feet again, I had an idea. The dogs hadn’t barked, I could still surprise Jim. I gave them the hand signal for ‘stay’ and I slipped into the kitchen, tingling with anticipation. I’m home and I’m sober. What’s my prize?

“And why should I care what other people think?”

“It’s not what they think, it’s who you attract, James. Are attracting. The lowest sort of men...”

The voices stopped me cold. I hadn’t seen a car in the driveway. A flicker of conscience passed through me, barely registering on its way out. I needed to know who else called him James.

“That’s harsh for a Christian,” Jim said.

“Is it? Then how would you introduce the gentleman who was yelling at us that night, who believes that the blacks would have enslaved the whites if only they’d been smart enough?”

“All right, I admit there were people there I personally would not have invited...”

“That’s the problem with a crusade, there is only one invitation.” The other’s voice was rising. “There you are at the front with your good intentions, and meanwhile all sorts of people are joining in, the good, the bad, the violent.”

“This is a violent world, Tom,” Jim snapped. “If that man hadn’t thrown a bomb at me it would have been somebody else -- somewhere, sometime. I can’t take responsibility for his actions, and I won’t let him control mine!”

“Jamie, Jamie, I’m not attacking you. You know I think the world of you.”

There was the hush of intimacy in the monk’s soft voice, and in Jim’s chastened silence. I was dying, every jealous nerve twitching, painfully aware that they’d known each other before I was born.

“But what happens,” Brother Tom continued gently, “if that ‘violent world’ makes its way into your house? What if these things happen not to you, but through you?”

“I trust the people around me,” Jim said.

“But do you know them? We barely know our own hearts, how can we know another man’s? And these are only boys, still forming, still proving themselves. A dangerous time.”

I was formed, and at that moment I felt dangerous. I opened the door with conviction and motioned at the dogs, who bounded in happily. Then I closed it with a solid bang.

The two men fell to silence.

“Hello?” I called.

“We’re in here,” Jim called back in a tight, formal voice.

“Heel,” I whispered, but Sam broke away and dashed ahead.

Jim was turned sideways at the desk and Franciscan monk was in the guest chair, pulled so close their knees almost touched. They’d been drinking tea - tea! - from delicate blue and gold cups. Jim was trying to restrain Sam who had thrust his nose into the monk’s crotch. I would have enjoyed the good Brother’s discomfort except I felt keenly on display, that the dogs’ behavior was a reflection on me.

“Sam, sit,” I barked. He obeyed promptly, but fixed me with an unrepentant stare.

The Franciscan was as handsome as the last time, yet hardly as old-fashioned and formal out of his frock. He wore a navy turtleneck and jeans, and a small gold cross around his neck. In close quarters I could see he was in his early fifties, thick silver hair brushed back into a neat mane, body glowing with virile health. He must have been drop-dead gorgeous twenty years ago, when shy, beautiful Jamie Rusk was playing guard for Our Brothers of No Mercy.

“Lee, you remember Brother Tom,” Jim said.

“Yes.”

“And of course I remember you,” the monk said, rising to his feet and clasping me in a strong handshake. His gaze penetrated me, registering not simply my face but my location, the fact that I was in this house.

“Lee is the dogs’ trainer,” Jim said hastily. “He’s on my staff.”

The sting was so sharp I caught my breath.

“They’re very fine animals,” Brother Tom said, reaching out his hand to Inga, who slunk over to him, fearful she was betraying me somehow. “Not full-grown, though -- nine months?”

“Eight,” I said numbly.

“We had a Shepard on the farm when I was a boy, in Saskatchewan. Mike,” Tom said, fondly stroking Inga’s beautiful head.

Jim’s quick smile was almost a grimace, his adult poise deserting him. He looked like an alarmed fifteen-year-old caught with his first joint. He kept trying to signal me to go, but I stubbornly missed the cues. What the hell did I know anyway? I was only staff. I took off my jacket and leaned insolently against a wall of books.

“Actually, I’m surprised to see you here,” I said. Tom discreetly brushed the fur from his hands onto his knees.

“Oh, really? Why’s that?”

“Well, none of the other protestors from that night have come to see us. You’d almost think they didn’t care.”

Jim’s eyes flashed, but Tom smiled benevolently. “Good friends can have philosophical differences.”

“I’d be very interested to hear what you object to most about the philosophy of the True North,” I said.

“Tom is my guest,” Jim bristled. The Franciscan lifted the fingers of his left hand, the faintest gesture, like my signal to the dogs. Stay.

“I’m so glad you asked,” Tom said to me. “I object to people who argue for their rights, yet never argue for their responsibilities, never mention the obligations which are inextricably bound to those freedoms. I object to people who use their rights as a platform to vent themselves against other human beings, such as Mr. Johnson Phillips.”

“But you didn’t come inside to hear his lecture,” I said.

“No, I read his book. Did you?”

My cheeks were hot. Jim had copies in this very room, but I hadn’t gotten around to it yet.

“I object,” Tom continued, “to any vehicle that people use to separate themselves from their fellow man -”

“The True North is a political watchdog,” I cut in. “All we advocate is alertness so that a few ‘special’ groups don’t have complete freedom to sway the whole process.”

“A noble intention, but that’s not how it’s used. It’s become a cart that each person can heap his grievances on and roll down the hill at whomever he pleases.”

“That’s not our fault,” I said, almost triumphantly. “That’s like saying a man who has his car stolen is responsible for the accident the thief is in.”

The dogs were becoming agitated by our rising voices, the tension in the air. They glanced anxiously from Tom to me. Inga began to whine in her throat.

“And what if he left the keys in that car?” Tom countered. “What if he was too lazy to lock it?”

“It’s still ludicrous! There isn’t a court -”

“I’m not talking about the law, I’m talking about people, our conscience, our responsibility to other human beings.”

It pierced something inside me, the flow was hot. “Oh, and that’s the commensurate Christian attitude, isn’t it? So committed to your fellow man, providing that man follows your set of rules. The last Catholic I knew wished a terminal illness on me, and said she was glad I was going to hell when I got it!”

“Lee, you’re upsetting the dogs...” Jim blurted.

“Then put them out, James!”

It sounded exactly like what it was -- a snap at my lover. Jim went pale, as if I’d sucker punched him. The monk glanced from one face to the next, moving only his eyes. I felt the sickening sway of déjà vu, tasting marshmallow, smelling wood smoke.

Then Jim got to his feet, the movement deliberate and restrained, almost ceremonial.

“Tom, I’ll drive you home.”

“I parked the van behind your car,” I started. He thrust out his hand for the keys and I passed them over with a sinking sensation.

The monk rose unhurriedly and pulled on a stylish leather car coat. As he methodically did up the buttons, he held me in a gaze that was both searching and compassionate; it almost seemed to pull me out of myself. I understood in an instant why people would confess to this man.

“I’m sorry if someone of our faith treated you unkindly. Fear makes people behave in strange ways. See if you can find a way to forgive them.”

He reached out his hand to me, a goodbye, but when I took it he clasped me with both of his and squeezed. His touch was so warm I felt suspended in it. Jim made a move toward the door and I let go so he could pass, his brittle profile reminding me of the broken granite that lined the highway to Thunder Bay.

# CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

I worried the dogs, made them anxious with movement I couldn't stop. Inga followed me until she realized I wasn't really going anywhere. Then she got her toy, a knotted rag, and lay with it between her paws beside the couch, watching me fretfully. Sam stationed himself outside Jim's study, waiting the way only a devoted animal can.

I walked and walked, a storm in three rooms, gusting between regret and anger and a strange, clutching fear. But I didn't walk alone. Oh, no. She had me by the elbow, my endless companion, my True Love. Around we went through the long hours, the same thoughts revolving in small, dangerous circles.

How could I have done the one thing I'd promised him I wouldn't?

And why not, after he introduced you like the cabin boy? He wasn't just telling Tom your place, he was telling you.

I could have fought with him about it later. I should have kept my mouth shut just this once.

But it isn't once, that's the problem. Don't say this, don't do that, don't stand next to me. Heel. Sit.

I knew his terms when we began. I promised!

And what did he promise? Nothing -- and that's exactly what you've got. Never mind the credit card, the man won't give you a nickel's worth of his life. You'll never know his family or meet his friends. You'll never go to the movies with him. He's in the closet, but you're in the dungeon, where he keeps his dirty secrets. Sam has a better deal than you. They go out together in daylight.

Through the churning torture of this conversation I had flashes, wordless memories striking me like sniper fire: the sudden, surprised ring of his laughter, the feel of his chest when he pressed me against it, the unbearably beautiful sound of a fingernail tapping the narrow tube of a hypo, coaxing out the air.

I needed to know how bad it was. What could be taking him so long?

They've gone to the apartment. Come on. The Catholic church is the last stronghold for terrified queers. They're fucking right now. They've been fucking for twenty years.

That's ridiculous. Outrageous. Impossible.

Really?

At one a.m. I went into the study and dialed Jim's cell number. I heard his phone ring in the kitchen, where he'd left it on the table. God damn!

There's his answer for you. Go, go! He deserves it, the bastard.

But in the study I noticed the little blue and gold tea cups, standing cold now, and I was seized by an idea.

“Inga, Sam,” I called.

They came eagerly. I picked up the monk’s cup and felt a pang as I did. This was pathetic, beneath me. It couldn’t possibly work, and what if it did? Could I bear knowing, for sure?

I let them smell the cup. “Find him. Where is he?”

They became excited - they knew the Find command. They went directly to the chair he’d been sitting in and sat down, our strike signal. I felt a surge of wonder and pride.

“Good dogs.” I patted them, trying to imitate Miss Marnie’s high pitch. When she praised them they almost rolled over in bliss.

I led them out of the study and held out the cup again. “Find him!”

Sam set off to the kitchen and stopped in front of the cupboard, his tail wagging. He felt he was owed a treat. Inga followed her nose to the foyer and sat, looking around for me eagerly. Strike number two - Brother Tom had come in the front door. I quickly grabbed a few reward kibbles, then brought the dogs back to the middle of the living room. I produced the cup and they returned to the front door, but I repeated the command.

For a moment they sniffed around, looking confused, but we were playing for high stakes now, and Sam was on the job. Find him. He turned abruptly and trotted up the stairs, Inga a step behind. I gripped the bannister, reeling, faintly sick. If they led me to Jim’s room, to his bed... But I had to know. I pulled myself up the first few stairs, then faster, gaining speed.

They weren’t in Jim’s room, they were in mine, sitting triumphantly beside Knowle’s bed. Understanding seemed to register beneath my skin, before words or thought. In a dream I walked across the floor and got down on my knees. I groped under the mattress, then under the bed. My hands struck metal and I pulled out an old fishing tackle box, dull army green, rusted in the dents. The dogs were whining excitedly -- this was it. I clicked in the latch, surprised that it wasn’t locked, and lifted the lid.

The scent of fish, of a lake, wafted up to me. It was here, bundled in tissue paper and masking tape, but I knew that shape. Everyone knew that shape. With trembling hands I tore at the paper without lifting it out, and stared at the smoky black molded metal underneath, so familiar and so strange. Glock was written on the barrel.

I’m amazed that I fell asleep at all that night. Maybe I was exhausted by emotion or weighed down by my discovery, but I remember sitting on the leather couch well after 2 a.m., with a dog on either side of me. I had a hand on each of their furry backs, needing the comfort of them desperately. I laid my head down just for a minute and I was gone.

The next thing I knew someone was rubbing my arm. I opened my eyes and saw Jim beside me on the couch, still in his jacket, the green leather one he’d let me wear home from detox.

“Hey,” he said softly. In that blurry moment I was so relieved that the long awful night melted away. Every fibre in me wanted to slide up against his strong, familiar body, meld against it and fall asleep again.

But he was turned sideways on the couch, his knee up toward me. I lifted my head from the backrest and blinked, trying to focus.

There were circles under his eyes, stubble on his chin, the careworn features of someone who'd spent the night in a hospital waiting room.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"About four."

My hand reached out beside me, touched empty space, and he guessed what I was looking for.

"I let them both out."

"Do you want to go to bed, and we'll fight in the morning?" I said.

"It is morning. And I don't want to fight with you."

"That's a bad attitude for a lawyer."

"You'll notice I chose another line of work."

Memory caught me, a gust of apprehension that blew the final traces of sleep from me. "What did Tom say?" I asked, sitting up.

The specter of a sardonic smile touched Jim. "He likes you. He thinks you have a good sense of yourself, for such a young man."

"But what did he say?"

He sighed. "That when he saw you on the steps at the hall, he knew you were in my life, or you would be." He paused. "Yes, he knows. It's not something we talk about, but he's always known."

The information cold-cocked me. For a second I couldn't speak, then the words came out in a hot bluster.

"So it didn't matter. This wasn't some terrible bombshell, I didn't 'out' the Great Man! But you wanted me to believe that. You wanted me to sit here all night and sweat it out, put myself through the meat grinder...you controlling son of a bitch!"

He grabbed my elbow. "I wanted you to think, because you didn't. Today it was Tom, but what about the next time you're mad at me? What will you say, and to who? Will you stand up at a Patriot Night?"

He let go of me, but I still felt pinned by the force of his earnest eyes. "Lee, we're not just building now, the True North is on fire. For the first time in a year, there's real momentum. Do you know how many we're estimating will show up at the protest? Seven hundred to a thousand. Think of what that will look like! A few months ago we were scraping to get two hundred people into a hall. Now we could put a thousand in Queen's Park. I never expected this kind of success, not so soon. I didn't even hope for it." The words were touched by wistfulness. "But believe me, people are easily distracted. They only have to smell a scandal. Pope's in jail, but don't think his hands are tied. And anything he missed someone else would pick up on." A shadow crossed his face. "I don't think I could stand to get this close, and lose it."

It hit me in the heart. He'd never said he'd failed at law or the church, but I could see now that they were both in the same room of his life, on the shelf where he kept things that didn't work.

Jim looked down at his hands. "I don't know what I imagined...living with you would be like, but it's better than that. I wish the weekends were five days long. But I told you what I needed on that first day, and I still need it. Even more now. It was a real kick in the teeth that it mattered so little to you."

I was feeling very small. My own wound, even the brushfire of my jealousy, tasted like ash. But I had to say it.

"I just never expected you to introduce me as the help."

He nodded ruefully. "You're right, I did. Even Tom mentioned it. I guess I was so surprised you were home early, it threw me for a loop. And when you came in...well, sometimes my envy gets the better of me."

Envy? He must have felt my astonishment, even without looking up, because he smiled to himself.

"I never walked into any room like that when I was nineteen. Or twenty nine."

"Walked in like what?"

"Cock first. A truck load of pride. Not just the best-looking piece of ass, but the best-equipped, ready to heal the needy and convert the straight."

I laughed -- it was so out of character for him, the language and the flattery. He told me things in the dark safety of bed, urgent, erotic sweet talk that I savored for days. Yet to hear it in the living room made it different, made me believe that this long, terrible night would pass.

"I've never been good at coloring inside the lines, James," I said, "but I'll try harder." He nodded, accepting it, and I grinned at him. "For you, I can do everything harder."

My wickedness brought light to his eyes. "We should call it a night," he said, lying his left hand on my thigh.

But there was still the other calamity weighing on my mind, and as long as I didn't tell him it felt like deception. It was too important to keep from him, even for a few hours.

"There's one more thing," I started. I explained about scent training and said I'd been practicing tonight, although I didn't tell him what I'd had the dogs looking for. From this distance my jealousy seemed like a strange, embarrassing fit. When I told him what I'd found, Jim took his hand from my leg.

"Here, in the house?" he asked.

The words, his calm face, struck me oddly.

"Yes, I told you - it was under his bed in a tackle box. Jim, it wasn't even locked! Do you want to see?"

He turned aside, ran his hands over his face. "No, it's all right. I'll...talk to him about it."

"Talk to him?"

He let go a short breath. "Lee, I'm so tired I can hardly see straight. I'll deal with it tomorrow." He



forced up a half smile, to put me at ease. "Let's just go to bed. "

But it wasn't the same bed he'd meant a few minutes before. He undressed with his back to me, and once under the covers he kissed my shoulder and rolled away.

"See you in the morning," he said. I could sense him lying awake beside me, the static electricity of his thoughts, a man holding himself still. He'd known about the gun, I was sure of it. He hadn't been alarmed or surprised -- maybe he'd even allowed it. I felt a sickly sway in my hollow body. I teased Jim Rusk about his virtues, I goaded him. But in the quiet of my heart I admired him ferociously. I wanted to keep on admiring him. In his house I'd been a better man. Not noble, God, not even good -- but better.

I felt Jim get out of bed, stealthy movement on his side of the mattress. He hardly made a sound as he left me.

I could lie here, I thought. I could go to sleep. And tomorrow would be a Saturday like any other. Except for that.

I threw back the covers, reaching for the pants I'd taken off less than an hour before.

I'd been in that kitchen so many times before dawn, yet it had never looked so stark, the white counters, fridge and stove glaring. Jim sat at the wooden table in his robe, a glass of water in front of him. He looked up guiltily when I appeared in the doorway.

"Couldn't sleep?"

"How long has he had it?" I said, brushing the facade away.

"I don't know."

"Bullshit."

He shifted as if to get up, but I sat down across from him. "Did he get it before the bombing, or after? Was it part of his 'package?' Conlan got the van, Knowle got the gun?"

"Listen, don't think I'm not upset. He's in breach. He knew I didn't want it in my house, I wouldn't have it."

"But you do have it, James. And so do I, and Conlan, and Dave. It was wrapped in paper. That's anybody's gun."

"You're acting as if I encouraged him, gave him permission. Lee, he didn't ask me. He's an adult. He went out and got what he wanted. I...was appalled. And now I'm sick."

He did look ill, paler than I'd ever seen him. He leaned his forehead into his hand and I thought of what Brother Tom had said, the conversation I hadn't been meant to hear. What if these things happen not to you, but through you?

"But he knew he couldn't keep it here," I said.

Jim looked up. "Of course he did. I warned him -- not in my house or on any True North business. He knew he would lose his membership, and his job."

I straightened. "Then you don't have a problem. Fire his ass out the door. I won't miss him."

The look that came over him was strange, as if he'd taken a step back from me. "He's a good man."

"If a good man lies to you."

"It isn't that simple." Jim got to his feet, tightened the belt of his robe and began to pace. "Do you know what worries me most? It isn't a bomb, a single act of violence. I mean, that's terrible, but it's finite. A limited number of people will be affected, most likely it'll be directed at me. No, what I'm most afraid of is wildfire. Do you remember the rally at City Hall?"

September. It had been so long since I'd thought of it, but it came back in a rushing blur -- the overturned cars, Conlan's bloody face, dozens and dozens of people on the ground. I'd had a crystalline distance from it that night, but it was a terrible thing to remember, straight.

"That wasn't a rally, it was a riot," I said.

Jim nodded. "That's when I decided I could never stage anything that big, that uncontained, open to the public. I wouldn't risk it."

"But you're doing it."

"With twenty men. Twenty people will be in the crowd, who've already liaised the police, who have only one goal -- to put out the fire before it starts."

"Knowle's army."

He grimaced in irritation. "It's not an army, nothing like that! It's just twenty volunteers organized for a single -"

"Twenty-four, James," I broke in. "That's how many he has every Saturday night on the second floor at the club. If you don't believe me, ask Rory Parke. Knowle has already cut you out of the loop."

It was an unexpected blow, yet I had the feeling it touched on some silent fear, a deep suspicion he'd kept to himself. He veered away, leaning his hand on the counter for support.

"And do you know what the worst thing will be? If he succeeds. What if those twenty-four guys are perfect little soldiers? What if the protest runs like clockwork and nobody even sneezes. Then you're screwed. You can't say no to anything after that. You're...in his pocket."

He turned back abruptly, eyes blazing in his cold face. "You have all the answers, don't you? Nineteen years old, no education, never had a job, the last two years strung out on dope, but you know everything. That's why you don't need to accomplish anything. You've done it all, you know it all."

I was shot through with the pain, staggered by it, but I didn't stop.

"Yes, I know some things. I've screwed up enough for that. Do you think I wanted to be this? Does anyone? Do you think I never had any bigger dreams?" I let that rest on him for a moment. "You talk about a thousand people in the park, but I don't think you know why they'll be there."

“Because they’re concerned...”

“Maybe. But they can be concerned at home. To come out, to this protest, a patriot night, even to see Phillips, there has to be another reason.”

He was watching me with guarded eyes. He knew where this was going and he didn’t like it.

“When you walk into a room, James, people turn. When you’re up on the stage, they lean forward in their chairs. They believe that decent man is really you. They believe you’re telling the truth as you know it, that you’re sincere. The world is full of smart liars. You don’t know what that means, to find an honorable man.”

“Don’t do this! Don’t heap something on me I don’t deserve. I never asked to be held up...”

“Well, it’s too bloody late. They admire you, and so do I. You’ve got their trust. Worse than that, you’ve got their hope. And if you betray it for a day, for that one day to get what you want, you’ll do yourself more damage than you can stand.”

What did he hear in my voice? It drew him back to the table and he sat down, gazing at my transparent, burning skin.

“Why do I believe you?” he said softly.

I sighed, trying to release the metal bands from around my chest. I could feel him waiting. I let go another breath, ran my hand through my hair. Still waiting.

“I wanted a car,” I began. “I was in love and I wanted a car.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

I didn't drive all the way to Barry's. I parked a block from the trailer compound and walked the rest of it, although I was loathe to leave the Camaro even for a few minutes. I just knew I would need some time to make this all right with him.

He answered the door when I knocked, but didn't open the screen. I could see the reproach in his beautiful face, even through the mesh.

"What happened to you? I waited half an hour."

"I got called to the office," I said.

"For what?"

I shrugged sheepishly. "I slept in, missed the whole morning."

"They wouldn't give you shit for half an hour," he said stonily.

I was trying to peer over his shoulder, into the rooms that were so dim they looked shrouded. All the blinds were drawn. "Is your dad home?"

"Yes. He's packing up his stuff, to leave tomorrow at dawn. I told you, it's duck season," Barry said, an odd edge in his voice. I was elated anyway. I could make up with him for anything in an empty trailer.

"I really needed to talk to you today," Barry said.

"So come out. Let's go for a walk." I was thinking, Jesus, don't pout.

He glanced over his shoulder and slipped out noiselessly. He fell into step beside me, his hands in his pockets.

It was dinner hour, the narrow avenues of the trailer park busy with traffic. The air bustled with noise, people unloading groceries and hungry, arguing children. Barry and I threw long shadows on the gravel ahead of us, the slanting sunlight deeply gold, making it seem later than six o'clock. When had the season turned? I wondered.

"I told my dad," Barry said.

"What?"

"I told him about us, about me. He was waiting up when I got home last night and I thought, Shit, everybody's going to know soon anyway. I didn't want him to hear it...like gossip." He looked at me, his face lit up with shy pride that was almost defiant. "And why should you always be the brave one? I've got guts, too, or I'd better have. Seeing that we're coming out."

I was staggered, reeling.

“How...did he take it?”

Barry sighed. “Quiet. My dad’s not the kind of person who freaks out, he goes quiet. You know, I wish he would. I wish he’d yell at me or break something. Instead he just walks around muttering God Damn under his breath. He wasn’t supposed to be leaving on this trip yet. He doesn’t have to be at the lodge until the weekend. But he’s going tomorrow,” Barry said softly. He tried to slip his arm around me. “That’s why I really needed to talk to you. I waited and waited...”

I pulled roughly out of his grasp. “Christ, Barry, will you lay off that? I was late. I’m sorry. Get over it!”

He looked as if I’d struck him. He thrust his hands into his pockets and glared straight ahead, his marble profile turned to glass. I ached with regret, longed to touch him and smooth the prickly space between us. Touching was important to Barry and it always worked to take him into my arms, even when he was mad, even if he fought it at first. I looked left and right for a shadow, a dim, neglected place, and caught sight of a familiar navy blue uniform.

The alarm went through me in a spasm, a painful pulse from my heart to my fingertips. But no, it wasn’t my brother, just another mill monkey. I was shaken anyway. Was this how it was going to be now? I wondered.

We’d reached the edge of the compound, the gates where we’d parted the night before. Barry made to turn around, but I leaned in the other direction, coaxing him out with the slant of my body.

“Just a little farther,” I said. “Please?”

He glanced over his shoulder. “I can’t be long. I think he’s making supper. Or I should.”

“You’re such a good son. Way better than me.”

He looked at me sharply, searching for mockery, but I was serious. Please, please, I begged with my eyes. At last he followed me through the gate.

This street was quiet, secluded, small war-time houses with families tucked inside for dinner, a thick, leafy arbor above us turning gold. I could see the white car at the end of the block and my heart kicked up a notch. I leaned my shoulder against his and he let me.

“Did anyone say anything today?” I asked. “About the picnic?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“Why is it good? It’s like waiting for the other shoe to drop, the sword to fall.”

“Barry, it doesn’t have to be a sword, okay? We could just do this...carefully. Ease into it. Maybe it’s like you said, it’ll never leave the park. We could just take some time, do it at our own speed.”

He pulled back from me, searched my face as if I was a madman. “Lee, I told my dad.”

“Well, it’s not like he’s going to tell anybody.”

We'd reached my car, looking larger than it had in the school parking lot, a gleaming, ferocious white animal. We weren't ready for this part yet and I should have kept walking, but my whole body turned to it in a reflex of longing. I stopped.

And he knew.

"What is this?"

I tried to laugh. "It's a tricycle."

"Why the hell do you have a car?" Barry blurted.

"Why does anyone? To drive."

"But you don't have any money. He bought it for you." It was an accusation and there was something so raw and true in it, I felt the stab at my core.

"I'm not an idiot," I said. "If someone offers me a car, yeah, I'll take it. People want to drive, Barry."

He glanced back at the sidewalk behind us, the way we'd come, as if the things I'd just said were still lying there on the pavement.

"Then drive me," he demanded. "Right now! Let's get in this car and drive up to your house."

The image alarmed me before I could stop it, like the sight of the mill uniform. He was goading me! I swallowed my irritation back and stepped up to him, took his elbow and eased him against the passenger door, gently pressing my body against his hip.

"It'll be like it was before," I said soothingly. "Except we can get away whenever we want. We can be alone. You know I'll still be your date for grad. I'm living for that."

He was surprised by this sudden turn, my soft words, the press of me. His eyes were liquid as he gripped my forearm.

"Then give it back," he said earnestly. "Otherwise he owns you, Lee. You're in his pocket and...we're both screwed. What about our plans? We said we weren't going to lie anymore. You said."

"Nothing will change -"

"It already did! I told my fucking father!"

He thrust my arm away from him and the shock released the exasperation in my chest.

"So who told you to do it? That was your own brilliant idea!" I snapped. "You're such a good little beaver boy you had to run and tell daddy. What did you expect? That he'd love you for it?"

The tears swelled over the rims of his wild eyes, running in a straight trail down his cheeks, his perfect skin blotchy with fury. "I believed you. God damn it anyway. I believed you!"

He twisted around abruptly and booted up hard, blasted the Camaro's side mirror with his foot, a brutal cracking of metal and glass.

“Shit!” For an instant I was stunned, more by the violence than the damage. I moved toward him in an angry twitch and his arm flew up in a warning.

“Don’t you ever touch me.” The low words were full of danger, of loathing that held me still as he turned and started to walk away. I could see him trembling even from behind, and the sight of his back in the calm, shadowed lane tore me open with anguish.

Don’t go! I wanted to shout. I just want it, Barry, I just need it! But I couldn’t bring myself to make a sound in that public road. My voice was a dead thing.

Ten paces away he turned, walking backwards, stumbling, his whole face wet with tears. “You were my hero.” It was a plea, an accusation. It was hardly more than a whisper, but I heard it. I will hear it until I die.

He wrenched himself around and began to jog, his natural graceful stride a ragged lilt now, a wounded deer running. I watched until he veered off into the compound, then I got in my car. I squealed onto the highway and let the big engine open up, the mirror dangling, rattling in the wind like a broken tooth. I drove and drove, glaring at the asphalt that faded from twilight to the burned circles of my headlights, thinking, Tomorrow. He’d be alone and I would touch him. I would win him again.

Reine was livid about the mirror until I told him there had been a rash of vandalism at the campsite; seven cars besides me had their mirrors kicked off. And it was true.

Barry wasn’t at school the next morning. Somehow I’d expected that, but I was lightheaded with anxiety as I waited through the afternoon, giving him the time I thought he needed, counting down the minutes until four o’clock. I drove there directly and when no one answered my repeated knocks, I peered in the windows, relieved by the dim sameness of it. Barry sometimes went for long runs on the timber trails. Still I went from trailer to trailer, looking for someone who’d seen him that day.

“Sure,” a neighbor said. “They were loading gear into the truck first thing this morning. Boxes of it. They were gone by seven.”

I felt a thud at the news. Barry had gone with his dad. Barry had gone.

“I’m to pick up their mail,” the neighbor finished.

“Any forwarding address?”

He laughed. “Yeah. The fucking bush.”

In one way, it calmed me, put to rest a nameless fear I hadn’t known was flutter-kicking in my chest. Barry was safe, he was with his dad. He’d hate that life in a day, but he’d be...reassured. They’d straighten it out between them, I thought. The rest of me was tortured, suspended, dangling in regret and loneliness. I needed to straighten it out with him. I needed to win him back.

I lived in tight rotations, missing him terribly, waiting restlessly, unable to concentrate. I rehearsed in my mind a hundred times how I’d do it, give the keys back to my brother. And a thousand times the man I loved tumbled into the sheets with me, proud of me again.

The days stretched to a week, then two, then three. How much school could Barry miss and still catch

up? I wondered. How much before he risked graduation? I haunted the trailer and sustained myself with the sight of the dusty, untouched rooms. I knew the unit was only rented, but Mr. Tanner would never abandon the TV. Barry wouldn't go anywhere without his trophies. He'd come home and when he did, I could do anything. Until then, I could do nothing.

"Jesus," Reine said, "you need a haircut."

"Soon," I said.

He didn't push me any harder. I'd been so good.

October. Thunder Bay's short season of color had come and gone, the trees were layering the hillsides in sheets of brown. The mill seemed to churn with activity twenty four hours a day, a stench that mixed with the fog to hang over the little city, a white, bitter apparition of the of the winter to come. There was frost on my windshield the morning I saw Mr. Tanner.

I'd gone to the trailer park as usual, before school, left my car in its regular place on the nearby street and walked in. I was shivering, swearing in my light jacket, and even the gravel sounded cold under my feet. But as I approached the trailer, all of that fell away.

Barry's father was beside the battered pick up, tightening the straps over the load in the truck bed, which bulged under a waterproof tarp. I flew up the road toward him, heart hammering, but he looked up at my approach and it stopped me, like the cocking of a gun.

The bush was still on him. He wore a cap and flannel shirt with a padded vest over it. There was greying stubble on his chin and cheeks, the burnished brown of his summer's tan faded to the color of a weathered canvas. He wasn't exactly thin, but the bones of his face seemed to leap out at me, painfully clear and familiar. Barry's face. I'd never noticed it before.

"Please, Mr. Tanner," I blurted.

"He's not here."

"I just need to talk to him. For a minute!"

"Well, he doesn't want to talk to you," he said, tugging once more on the strap.

"I don't believe that," I said boldly.

"I don't give a shit what you believe." He wasn't looking at me with hate or even disdain, just less regard than he'd give a twitching fish in his hand, as he yanked out the hook. He walked around to the driver's side and I watched him in agony, grappling vainly for some kind of logic.

"He's missing school," I said. "If he doesn't come home right now, he'll never catch up."

Was it satisfaction in his face, or pride? "Barry's going to work with me. He'll be a good guide one day."

The revelation blew the hole in me open larger. He was going to be a teacher, I wanted to shout.

The driver's door slammed shut and the engine fired up. It spurred me and I dashed up to his half-open window, desperate and humbled, my fear thrown overboard with my pride.



“You can’t do this to him! Please, Mr. Tanner.”

He looked down at my fingers that pressed against the window, then into my face.

“If Barry had wanted to come, I wouldn’t have stopped him for the world. We Tanners are as loyal as dogs.” He put the truck in gear, turned his face forward again. “You’d better move along.”

I let go before the truck tore off my arm. I watched it trundle down the narrow avenue, exhaust hanging in the crisp air. I realized my fingers were so cold they hurt, but in seconds another sensation completely overtook that, the plummeting nausea of knowing I wasn’t dangling, not anymore.

No one was home when I got there. Chelsey was so surprised to see me, pleased and then anxious as she danced around my feet, following my zombie’s body from room to room. In the distance the buzzer sounded to start class, the same time I took the first beer from my brother’s stash in the fridge. Then I went into the bathroom with scissors and a razor, and gave myself that haircut, right down to skin.

# CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

I woke up alone. The bedroom so quiet and dim I couldn't tell if it was seven a.m. or noon. Jim was gone and I'd twisted all the blankets over to my own side. But I didn't have the ambition to straighten them and let myself lie in the tangle.

I didn't know what confession was supposed to do, all I was sure of was that I felt uneasy and bare, stripped naked by the story I'd told the night before. How did you look at someone after you'd admitted you were a selfish coward? How did he look at you?

Jim had listened to me in complete silence, not interrupting even the awkward silences, letting me stumble along on my own. Yet through it I'd made a small, remarkable discovery. I was able to say Barry Tanner's name out loud.

But what did it matter this morning, I wondered. Had it made any difference to Jim? Or had I made a spectacle of myself for nothing? What did he think of me, and what was he going to do?

I heard the door open downstairs in the kitchen, then the bouncy clatter of the dogs, the distinctive clicking of their nails on the wooden stairs. They pushed through the barely-closed door, assaulting me as a team with excited tongues and wet noses, big bodies wriggling with happiness as I gathered them into my arms.

I looked up when Jim came in. He was in his running clothes, and I felt an anxious twinge at this break in routine.

"Thanks for feeding the dogs," I said, peering shyly over Inga's shoulder.

He strode over and nudged her aside, making room to sit down on the edge of the bed. He looked younger this morning, a lighter man.

"Thank you," he said, and took my face in both hands to kiss me.

Knowle was the last one to come in Sunday night. Jim was in his study, and Dave was in the office on the phone to Delia, a call he made every night now. Conlan tromped in with a mile-wide grin, another happy dead man. He followed me down to the Pit, his weekend overflowing out of him, and hovered around the pool table while I lined up practice shots, listening with my whole body to every movement, every muffled word above my head.

"So Sherry lives with her sister, but it's not all the time, right? Her sister's dating this trucker and she goes on the short hauls with him. So we're thinking next weekend we could have a party. Now Sherry's got this friend, Lorraine. You saw her on Friday, she came to the table once..."

"No, I won't stay fucking calm!"

Knowle's voice reverberated through the house, smacking of threat. I threw my cue on the table, but Conlan still beat me to the stairs.

Dave had already let go of the phone and was outside the office, his mouth agape. Jim was in the

doorway of his study, looking at Knowle who'd backed into the living room.

"This is shit. This is all...shit. This man is lying to you!" he blurted when he saw us.

"Knowle, this issue is between you and me." Jim's voice was even but his face was white.

"He says, Oh, I appreciate you, I value you. Just keep on doing the grunt work. Then the lying asshole opens the door and boots you out."

The name struck them across their bewildered faces. I'd never heard any of them swear at Jim Rusk, sober or drunk.

Conlan took a step, a solid brick in Knowle's path. "I think you've got a problem with your mouth, bud."

The movement had an effect on Knowle, but it wasn't fear. He gathered himself, looking unexpectedly dignified. "He's not worth that, Con. He's not worth your loyalty or the year you've busted your ass. I'll even give you some advice: Don't think you're on a team. It's a kingdom and there's only one king.

"Copy your files," he said to Dave, "You never know when you'll need them. And watch your backs, both of you. There's a nigger in the woodpile." Knowle turned his bitter gaze on me for the first time. "You're right in there, aren't you? In his pocket. You know, I always wondered what you were for." Back to Jim. "I want my property."

"On your way out," Jim said.

After Knowle had left the house, Jim enlightened Conlan and Dave about our discovery. Dave was less surprised about the gun than Conlan; maybe he already knew. His pointed face was aloof and thoughtful.

"Knowle was part of this organization for a year," he said. "You didn't give him any warning, any option. He worked very hard for you."

Remorse flickered across Jim's face, but Conlan said, "Do you think Delia would walk into this house if she knew? Do you think she'd ever come back?"

Dave bit his lip. We made plans for contacting as many members of Knowle's security team as we knew about, but we only had a dozen names, and he might get to them first. A subdued air settled over the house. We separated into our quiet corners, except for Jim, who went out for a long drive. I brought the dogs into the house for the night, a new fear moving under my skin.

When I went upstairs to sleep, Conlan was in the room, looking at the empty bed between his and Dave's, the blankets and sheets already stripped.

"It's so strange," Conlan said. "How things are, you think they'll always be." The wistfulness in his voice touched me with guilt.

"I wasn't looking for it, Con."

He nodded. "Fucking idiot," he said softly, without malice. Then, "He snored like a snowmobile."

"You snore," I said.

“But not like that!” Conlan grinned. “Jesus, the bed vibrated. You’re one over. You didn’t get it full force like me.”

I grinned back at his uncomplicated face, thinking how glad I was the dogs hadn’t found the tackle box under his bed.

By Monday afternoon we were all in motion, trying to pick up the pieces of Knowle’s plan to see if we could make it work. When I got Jim to agree that we needed Delia every day to help out, Dave was reignited. I even heard him singing softly to himself as I passed by the office, tuneless and strangely touching.

Knowle’s absence created more work, but it also gave each of us more elbow room. I knew what to do with mine.

One Thursday evening I went upstairs and heard the shower running in Jim’s ensuite. I knew he had a meeting that night and Dave wasn’t invited. He and Conlan were down in the Pit, watching TV.

The water had stopped and I stole quietly into his bedroom, entirely off-limits on weekdays. The bathroom door was ajar now, to let out the steam. My heart kicked up with danger and excitement.

Jim stood in front of the sink with a damp, scanty towel around his hips, the hair on his legs and chest still glistening, wet. He’d already wiped a circle clear on the large mirror that ran from the ceiling to the counter top. His eyes flashed when he saw my reflection in the mirror, but he didn’t turn around.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he said quietly.

“I’m not here,” I said, pressing up behind him, my arms sliding around his waist. “This is a fantasy.”

“Where is everyone?” His voice was thickening, the towel beginning to strain.

I grinned over his right shoulder and my hand slid down his stomach. “Watching TV. It’s the playoffs.” With one smooth twist the towel opened and dropped. The sight of his naked, aroused body, the faint sound of the television two floors below, drifting up through the old vents, was powerful and thrilling. I could hear his breath, and my own.

“I’m going to be late,” he whispered.

“Yes, you are. Put your hands behind your head, James.”

To my surprise he did, heavy-lidded eyes riveted on the mirror, locked into a dream of lust. I reached around him like a second pair of hands and took the can of shaving foam, decompressing a healthy white dollop into my palm. He moaned helplessly when I gripped him.

“Shh,” I said, covering his mouth with my clean hand. He allowed that, too, and it broke his last strings of restraint. He gave himself over to my will and his own pleasure, and that submission stroked something deep inside me. The touch and the sight of him, the danger and surrender carried me away on my own erotic ride; I thought I would tear my jeans. Faster and harder I worked him, the stifled, urgent sound vibrating against my whole body -- then there was a shout of joy up through the vents. Someone had scored a goal. Jim groaned and a hot geyser shot up from the foam.

I didn’t linger; the nature of a fantasy is to come and go. He seized me before I left and pressed his lips to

my ear.

“You’re incorrigible,” he breathed.

The compliment was a caress. “Yes, I am.”

“Believe me, you’ll get yours. I’ll catch you off guard.”

“You can’t, I’m always ready,” I said.

But he did. The next morning, Friday, he said, “I’m going out for dinner with Tom tonight. The Church of Her Infinite Light will be protesting our protest, and we want to get the details straight,” he explained, smiling. Then, “Do you want to come? He specifically invited you.”

I was so surprised it took three full seconds to answer. “Sure,” I said.

I wore my dashing blue suit jacket and tie and walked out of Rosemont definitely cock first, but on the drive I discovered little anxieties tucked into every pocket. I decided I would have to charm Tom.

The restaurant was old-fashioned, a deep, quiet cave with linen tablecloths and candlelight on crystal, not exactly stuffy, but a place where money spoke in hushed tones.

The Franciscan met us in the foyer in a gray sport coat and black sweater, handsome and genial, yet still so commanding a presence that the maitre d’ deferred to him. I couldn’t stop myself from twinkling at him, just a bit.

“I was kind of hoping for the brown number,” I said, nodding at his clothes.

Tom smiled. “Well, it’s like Batman. You save the costume for when you need it. A cape just gets in the way.”

He gave my hand an extra squeeze when he shook it, and touched my shoulder when he ushered me ahead of him, so fatherly I felt a brief tightening in my throat. I set my charm down quietly in an aisle.

We hardly talked about the upcoming demonstration. We tossed around local news and current events like an easy football. Tom asked me about the dogs and I explained about scent training, my enthusiasm bubbling up unstoppably, although I didn’t mention what they’d already found. I suspected Jim’s pride had kept him from sharing that news.

The topic I hadn’t expected was Stuart Pope. Jim seldom talked about Pope or the court case, but on this night he pulled out a platter of grievances and kept circling back to it, nibbling. Pope’s distinguished counsel, “The Ferret” Jim called him, had overturned the bail restriction, and it had been set at a paltry ten thousand dollars.

“It’s outrageous! You can raise that much on a credit card, for Pete’s sake,” he grumbled. “And believe me, Pope will be gone. There are grubby basements around the country for him to camp out in.”

The pettiness was so unlike the Dudley Doright I knew that I laughed, but Tom’s smile was more reproving.

“It’s the Crown’s case, not yours,” he said. “Stuart Pope belongs to the Queen now, Jim,”

"Well, I wish Her Majesty would come and get him," he said wryly, and the mood was untethered again, rising up and lifting off.

Jim was blooming, more relaxed than he'd ever been in public with me, animated and pleased, the light catching on every surface. I was entranced by him all over again. And there were tiny thrills, like the moment he let his arm rest across the back of my seat, or his knuckles affectionately nudging my thigh under the table, saying nothing except, "I'm here." I thought my happiness would spill out onto the table.

My mind ran ahead to an irresistible wish -- that we could live like this all the time. Go places together, see people we knew, laugh together in public. I would train dogs into brilliant trackers. I'd keep Sam and Inga forever, but I'd have more dogs, maybe even a bloodhound, each with its own specialty. We'd be flown in on cases when all hope was lost, and we'd find what was missing -- a child, a criminal, a treasure. And Jim... My fantasy sputtered to a stop. Jim Rusk was already pursuing the thing he wanted, and it just happened to be a life I was invisible in.

I must have lost the thread of the conversation because the next thing I knew Jim was getting to his feet. "I'll be right back. Order me a coffee when the waiter comes by, please." He touched my shoulder as he slipped past.

"It's good to see him so happy," Tom said.

I was tempted to be flattered, but I didn't dare take the credit. "He's accomplishing some things he's worked very hard for. They're expecting almost a thousand people at the protest," I added proudly.

"I know what they're expecting," Tom said softly. He turned to look at me, a gaze I felt it in the pit of my stomach. "Lee, I've known him a long time. I used to tease him that I was wasted as a spiritual advisor. He was completely self-penancing."

"Grapefruit without sugar," I said.

"Exactly." There was a pause. "Please don't think he falls in love easily."

The words swept the table clean of niceties and polite falsehood. Jim Rusk had not said those words to me, yet I believed this monk who was leaning earnestly toward me. It carried me away on a dizzying rush of joy and sudden strength. I could have leapt over the table and lifted Tom up, chair and all. I was Achilles with a shit-eating grin.

"Well, neither do I. Easily," I said.

"Then you and I agree he's a special man. I've always thought, always known, that Jim has great potential. His intentions are so sincere, I know he'll touch people's lives." He paused. "But it will not happen while he's the head of this endeavor."

I was falling to earth, the brown mud of reality coming up fast beneath my feet.

"I think that's your opinion," I said, straightening in my chair, "and he already knows it. You don't need me to tell him." I was gathering momentum. "And do you know what? I wouldn't, even if I believed it. Because this is what he wants. And if you were really his friend, you'd accept it, too."

It seemed he was going to say something, but changed his mind. "What do you plan to do with your

life?”

It was a strange U-turn and my hackles rose, maybe because I'd been ruing about it just minutes before. "I'm considering several possibilities," I said boldly. "It's wide open."

"Yes it is. Today." The Franciscan's voice lowered. "Lee, do you know what I did over Christmas? I worked shifts at the 29th Street shelter."

My face was on fire. He knew me, he'd seen me on my darkest days. The response came out instinctively, like a right hook. "If you're thinking of blackmail, Brother, don't bother. Jim knows where I've been."

Tom gave his head a shake, tossing that thought away like the worthless scrap it was.

"I'm not telling you this to hurt you, I just want you to see what you already know. Every human being has the power to change. And the people who love us encourage us to live our highest life."

I was silent, thinking. In my mind's eye I could see Jim handing me the stamp for the letter to my father. I saw myself getting out of bed to ask him about the gun.

"If the day comes when Jim wants something more than the True North," Tom said, looking into me deeply, "say Yes. Even if it hurts, even if it seems impossible. God will give you the strength to live your highest life."

For a moment I was transfixed, tingles running up the back of my scalp.

"Well, this looks serious. What are you plotting?"

I lifted my head, as if from a dream. Jim had returned and despite his light tone, his face was etched with concern. Tom leaned back easily in his chair.

"We were just planning on how to get you drunk," he said, and Dudley Doright laughed.

The weekend before the demonstration Jim surprised me again by inviting me out to his cabin. Saturday morning we loaded up the van with the dogs and a few groceries. It was a three-hour drive and the weather was warm and clear, the yellow haze of the city falling away behind us. I luxuriated in the hum of the highway and the delight of going somewhere with him. He was excited in a way I seldom saw, his whole body leaning forward behind the wheel.

"We spent every summer at the lake for as long as I can remember, except for my father, who stayed in the city. I think he had a girlfriend. It was...an oasis for Jack and mom and me."

"Is there any chance they'll show up?" I was more nervous for him than me.

"Oh, no. My mother hasn't been out in five years, and Jack turns up once or twice in the summer."

It snagged a memory. "Wait a minute. I thought you met him there in January. Remember? You left me a note -- family crisis."

He grinned at the road. "Oh, there was a crisis, all right. I had to get away from you. You were far too charming, Mr. Dahl, even drunk."

I was flattered. I looked out the window, watching the industrial towns give way to vineyards, then trees, enjoying the spring day that felt all the world like summer.

The highway turned into a gravel road, and we drove a long way through woods so thick the dwellings were only shadows between the trees. At last we came to rest in a clearing. Jim's cabin was a two storey building with a pointed roof like a chalet, much larger on the first floor than the second. A deck ran across the whole frontage which faced the lake, glass doors behind it so that the rooms had an unobstructed view. I guessed the wood was cedar, eased to a comfortable, washed-out grey after decades of weather. It didn't look worn, but strangely graceful, like a distinguished lady happily becoming a grandmother.

Beyond a stony beach the lake stretched out in a blue-grey dream, touched white by waves, but still immeasurably calm. There was a dock that jutted out fifteen feet, weathered like the cabin, without a boat.

Old bells were ringing inside me, I felt embraced by a ghost. What was it about this landscape? I hadn't given Thunder Bay a backward glance when I left, but the faintest echo of it made my eyes mist over, like the hand of an old friend.

"You might want to put a leash on the dogs," Jim said. "The lake's still too cold for them to go in."

I hooked up Sam and Inga and we got out of the van. We began to walk toward the lake, the dogs straining on their leads, almost wild with the thrill of a new place. I paused to let them have a drink, and Jim continued on, strolling to the end of the dock where he stood, hands in his pockets. Even from a distance he looked suddenly weightless.

I strode up beside him and for a moment we just gazed out together. "What do you think?" Jim said.

"I think that if God doesn't live here, he comes out for the weekends."

It made him smile. I never used the G-word, except in vain. But he had one of his own.

"You know, I almost feel guilty that I have all this to myself."

"All this?" I asked. The chalet was spacious enough, but didn't seem huge. Jim pointed to another dock in the distance, so far away it looked small.

"That's the property line," he said. "That used to be the McCaskills' dock. I don't know who owns it now. All our friends complained that they had to pack a lunch to walk over." He beamed at the memory, but I was in awe. He was talking about quite a chunk of earth.

"You know," he continued, "I always thought that if I was the last one of our family, I would donate this land when I died. There's a little hospital that serves all the local communities. They could build here, or enlarge the cabin, as a satellite. It could be a place for patients to recuperate, people who don't need a lot of care, just..."

"Peace," I said.

He nodded. "It certainly was for me," he finished quietly.



I found his hand and squeezed it, not caring if he got mad at me, which he didn't.

We had a wonderful day. The cabin was a third of the size of the house in Rosemont, and ten times more welcoming. The living room had cabinets of books, a fireplace and a large L-shaped sofa, worn on the arm rests, comfortable dips in the cushions. The kitchen was small and bright, leading to a secluded patio and chopping ground, where piles of wood waited to be split.

"And this is where you come in," Jim said, grinning.

"Wait, wait, I was hired for my looks!"

Yet I let him teach me anyway and once I connected to the aim and rhythm of it, I enjoyed it, the physical movement kindling a warm glow in my back and limbs. And to see the solid stack of kindling at the end gave me another glow altogether. I liked contributing.

In the afternoon I staged an experiment. I sent Jim into the woods with a half-hour's head start, then set out with the dogs to see if we could find him, using one of his T-shirts for scent. There were distractions -- squirrels and rabbits and other smells I couldn't even guess at -- but we did it. After an hour they led me, almost frantic with excitement, to where he was waiting patiently on a log. I was enormously proud of Sam and Inga, but Jim was amazed.

"I guess this means I can't leave you," he laughed.

"Well, not on foot."

That evening while he made dinner I prowled around the cabin. I was most interested in the photographs, enlarged and framed, resting on the fireplace mantle. There were the usual line-em-up, firing-squad photos, family and friends on the beach, in the water or around a barbeque pit. But two photographs took me by the shoulder and drew me in.

One was of Jack and Jim standing in front of a Mack Truck, the huge front end and chrome grill dwarfing the boys, filling the entire space around them. They were perhaps seven and three years old, standing as straight as soldiers, Jack's lanky child's body a sharp contrast to Jim's solid little toddler's frame. They were squinting in the sunlight and smiling -- of course they were told to smile. But my eyes were drawn to the center of the photo, Jack's protective, tender hold on his little brother's hand. I knew no one had told him to do that. I turned away from the picture, contrite, thinking of all the Friday nights I'd bitterly resented Jack Rusk.

The second photo was of James at fourteen or fifteen, carrying a bulky cooler with two hands, face turned to the camera. I could tell it was a surprise shot -- someone had called his name and then clicked the shutter, before any mask could go up. His sun-lightened hair was longer than I'd ever seen it, falling over his ears, curling at the back of his neck. His high school body tugged at the shoulders of his t-shirt, but there was a youthful slenderness to his face, the bones still growing into the man who would be.

And he was in love. It struck me between the eyes. Jim's look was so bare and eager and trusting I knew he'd wanted that person to call his name more than anything. His heart wasn't on his sleeve, it was on a platter. I felt my stomach knotting. It was the kind of face you only had once. It was Barry's face.

"Oh, not that one," Jim said behind me. "What terrible hair."

"Who took this picture?"

He hesitated. "One of my brother's friends. Roland or Roger or someone. I don't remember."

He slipped his arm around me. I had the suspicion it was to hold me fast, so I wouldn't look at him, see him blush.

"Did you have a crush on him?" I asked.

"What makes you say that?"

"Because I would have swam across the lake for someone who looked at me like that."

"I had crushes on all of Jack's friends," he said lightly, but I could feel the damp press of his fingers through my shirt. We both knew Roland was the one who had taken the platter, and taken that trusting, one-time face away with him. Like I had.

"You're too hard on yourself, about Barry," Jim said in a soft voice. "You were a boy, and so was he. You have allow for that, forgive for that."

This comes from the King of Penance, I thought, but without bitterness. To hear Barry's name from his lips made it sound more human, a sad memory, but only that. Is this what happened when you told someone a secret? Some of its painful power began to drain away?

"What is too terrible is also too interesting," Jim said. "You can get...stuck on something that's no longer appropriate."

How very strange that word was, appropriate. It curled in on itself, like a snail in a shell.

Just then my nostrils twitched. "The stove..."

"Damn!" He dashed away. Dinner was mostly saved, only one portion black and burnt. Still, he gazed at the pot with enormous dismay.

"I don't know how I'm going to get that clean," he said gravely.

"James, we're men. We throw it away and buy another pot."

He laughed and the disaster vanished out the windows with the smoke.

That evening we built a fire and lay side by side on the comfortable old couch, the dogs stretched out on the floor in blissful exhaustion. His arm curved around me, our fingers locked together, his breath warming my scalp. We were watching the flames in effortless silence, and I was thinking, This is enough. If it's all I ever get, it's enough.

"You know, it's funny," Jim said behind my left ear, "but I don't want to leave tomorrow, go back and be those two other people."

My heart was in my throat; I had to swallow before I spoke. "Let's just stay then. We'll forage for roots and berries. The dogs can eat the neighbors."

I felt his smile against my hair. His grip on me tightened. "I want you to come back with me in the

summer.” He paused. “When Jack’s here.”

It took a moment - I hardly dared believe what he was saying. He wanted to come out to his brother, one small step out of the closet that I knew was a terrifying leap to him. He was saying he trusted me, and the gust of emotion brought water to my eyes. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I whispered.

We were different men in bed that night. Maybe we were each so happy it was easy to be generous, or maybe his decision had moved us into another country, where the old boundaries didn’t apply. Or maybe I’d stretched my own boundaries a week ago, with the story I’d told in his kitchen. I just knew what he wanted, the thing he’d never asked for, and at last I was ready to give it to him.

Possession.

He was puzzled when I pushed away from him. Then I lie down placidly on my stomach and he quickened, arousal pulled into taut, breathless need.

The words were thick. “You don’t have to.”

“I know I don’t.”

Did the dogs hear me, the inarticulate sound of my lust and submission, the sheets balled up in my clenched hands, not my first time, but my first time straight, utterly conscious that I was giving my ultimate trust. But he gave me his, too -- skin. That night he let go of his old anxiety, let himself be carried away by raw desire, not pausing for plastic or anything else, a victorious animal grateful beyond words. I was overwhelmed and yet triumphant, hearing the moans pulled from the deepest part of him, blending with my own until we were a single sound, a god falling to earth without regret, a demon raised up and absolved.

# CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

We were wrong -- there weren't a thousand people at the protest, there were more. Someone had finally convinced the Beirtling bureaucrat to share his special insights with the world, and two days before the Foreign Aid summit, the Sun ran a double-page story. It proved the Department had full knowledge that aid funding to a certain locality in Malaysia was being completely absorbed by government malfeasance, and the money had continued to flow anyway. The cry had echoed through the media and on that sunny Tuesday, Queen's Park and the University grounds swarmed with the outraged and the curious. Conlan drove around, cursing as he searched for a parking spot, and Jim gave me a glance across the packed van, a look that was both amazed and apprehensive.

We realized how ridiculous our idea of security had been. We had thirteen people scheduled to hand out pamphlets, plus six security volunteers, plus ourselves. We could have doubled the number and it wouldn't have made any difference.

"We're piss in the ocean," Dave said. We were supposed to be unloading the mountains of printed material from the van, but he gazed in dumbfounded wonder at the gathering sea. "Whatever's going to happen, we can't stop it."

I was thinking the same thing but I said, "Well, it's not going to happen to him. We'll stick together, form a double ring. We'll escort him wherever he needs to go."

Dave looked at me and nodded, but an odd hesitation was in his face. I noticed for the first time that he'd shaved off his scruff of a goatee since last night. By a strange twist it made him look older, and less rodent-like.

"I said I would meet up with Delia at one," he said, lowering his voice so only I would hear. "She's...bringing her parents."

I almost liked him in that moment, completely understood the awkward hope painted so plainly on his new face. I was meeting Jack this summer.

I grinned. "Then you'd better not be late."

We waded into the crowd, the others with placards and pamphlets, me with my dogs. It was difficult to escort Jim Rusk anywhere. Our destination was the far edge of the park, closest to where the politicians would pass. But every few feet, it seemed, Jim met someone he knew, or who wanted to ask a few questions in front of a microphone or a camera. The others were frustrated by the delays, as if Jim was cargo they were supposed to transport. I was untroubled, enjoying his sleek, princely presence as he moved from person to person, his face lighting from somber intensity to sudden laughter. I could watch him, I thought, for the rest of my life.

The person we didn't stop for was Brother Tom. He was there with four other monks and two dozen of the faithful, who were distributing handouts of their own. Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself.

Tom was a striking set of contrasts in his rough brown cassock and sandals, quarter-back shoulders and silver hair ruffled by the breeze. Jim didn't glance at him as our small group shouldered past, but Tom caught my eye and winked.

Jim was rushing, high, every stride taking him more surely forward. It wasn't exactly happiness that I could feel beaming from him, it was fulfillment, proof to himself and maybe everyone that his convictions were right, that he was walking into the larger life he'd dreamed of.

And I was walking beside him. I'll never forget how that felt, the warm day and my own excitement raising a light film of sweat over my face. I had Sam and Inga's leather leads wrapped securely around one fist as they pulled me forward, the crowd parting magically in front of us, instinctively respectful of those two powerful animals. I was Dionysius again, or Achilles driving his chariot into the astonished Trojans.

Then, "Hey!"

I turned to look, a reflex, and a photographer snapped my picture.

How long can you fall without hitting? I remember the rest of that day in pieces: that we made it to the guard rail; that only one Cabinet member had the balls to come over and shake Jim's hand; that there was a fight when one man threw another's bicycle into the street where it was trashed by a car. If any members of the Aryan Sons or the ARM were in attendance, I never saw them. Dave showed up again just as we were loading up to leave. He and I were the quietest ones in the van.

I hadn't thought I was afraid. For days before the rally I'd mulled over the possibility that I might meet someone I knew, who'd think it was funny to see their queer friend locked in tight with these ultra-straight men, complete with boots and dogs, and say so -- loudly. I was ready for that, prepared to stare them down or charm them away. Face to face I felt I could handle anyone.

I wasn't prepared to be identified by every man who'd known me in one of the thumping clubs, or a parking lot or a stairwell, and who missed his wallet afterwards.

You conceited ass, I told myself. There were a half-dozen photographers who probably took hundreds of pictures. You won't get in, so stop worrying.

Yet I couldn't. I knew a line had been cast into a deep part of the ocean and something would bite. I felt it in my bones.

My first impulse was to talk to Jim, but he got on the phone as soon as we arrived home and stayed on it, one call after another. Through the glass door of the study I watched him pace while he talked, too excited to sit, still flying on the success of the day and making more plans. My chest tightened. I didn't want to be a ...liability today. I'd deal with this myself.

A light was on in the office. After the dogs arrived Dave had lightened up on me, content that I really was working, and we'd kept a respectful distance. I think he was grateful that I'd never made a play for Delia; maybe that was why he'd told me about meeting her this afternoon. Still, it didn't make what I had to do now any easier. Dave was usually the one who picked up the messages on the True North phone line. I was going to tell him to be ready for some unpleasant lies.

I leaned into the long, narrow room. Dave was at his desk with only the little lamp on, burning a circle around him. The computer screen was dark and he was bent over a yellow notepad, doodling intently, rows and rows of boxes.

I knocked softly on the wall.

He looked up, blinking. “Yeah, what’s up?”

I meandered in, hands in my pockets, slipping around the question. “I thought you’d be working.”

“Working?”

“I thought you took attendance at these things, who shows up, who goes ballistic.” I smiled faintly. “Something to add to the files.”

He let go a breath, a sigh, and looked at his doodles.

“I don’t know. You start to wonder, what are you going to do with all this shit?”

I was nonplused. This was Dave talking? I sat down in the other seat, Delia’s chair, that now had a flowered cushion on it.

“Well, what does anyone do with data?”

He studied me for a moment, but there was something bold, even angry, in his newly-bare face. “That’s the question, isn’t it? Here, look at this.” He took a few typewritten pages from a pile and handed them to me. I saw in a glance that it was Jim’s column for the next edition of Strong and Free.

How much does CSIS deserve to know about you? Almost everything, thanks to the revised Anti-Terrorism Act...

I didn’t have to read much more. I knew Jim Rusk’s views on privacy. I handed the pages back.

“So we bitch about the government,” Dave said, “and here we are, doing the same thing. How hypocritical is that? I collect data on the ARM, they collect it on the Aryan Sons, who collect it about us, and on and on. And for what?” He rattled the paper, his eyes burning. “To trip someone, catch someone, bring a man down if we can. Isn’t that fucking patriotic.”

“You don’t have to do it,” I said.

“But it’s done to every one of us. You, me, Delia! Every one of us.” He stopped short and his voice fell. “Her dad’s black,” Dave said. “Her mom’s white.”

Oh. The impact registered like a sonic boom, sensation before the sound.

“It doesn’t matter to you,” I said.

“No, it doesn’t. But it’ll matter to someone -- a lot. Delia doesn’t even know, she has no concept! None of her family do! They read the newsletter...and they think that’s what it’s about,” he finished bitterly.

Jim Rusk’s eloquent voice. I thought of what Brother Tom had said, about the cart that men heaped their grievances on. Dave hadn’t been there, but he understood how wheels rolled and gathered speed. He leaned into his hand. “I don’t know what to do.”

I looked at his bent silhouette. “Yes you do. If you care about someone, you protect them,” my voice caught, “whatever it costs.”

He didn't answer, but I saw the words settle on him. I decided not to mention the concern I'd come in the door with. He didn't need my troubles today, either. I got up and without thinking, gave his shoulder a press as I left. It occurred to me it was the first time I'd touched Dave on purpose.

I was still vibrating with apprehension, and knew I'd never sleep without some help. The others were already in bed when I slipped down to the kitchen and let the dogs in. They followed me upstairs happily, excited by this surprise treat, although Sam gave a glance down the hallway toward Jim's room. The reminder was painful.

I thought the others were asleep when the dogs and I squeezed into my cot, but Conlan sat up on one elbow.

"I don't fucking believe it," he teased. "Man, you've gotta date."

"Leave him alone," Dave's voice rang out in the darkness.

My photo ran the next day in the Star. There were others along with the story - crowd shots, the police, the Cabinet Minister shaking Jim's hand. But my own image leapt out at me from the newsprint. The photographer had caught my body and the dogs in mid-stride, my face turned boldly to the camera, chin forward, as belligerent as a dare. A tiny, vain corner of my mind was pleased by how butch I looked, the rest of me wished I felt a quarter of that confidence now. In the background Jim was one step ahead of me, gently blurred, looking forward.

The phone rang and rang that day, my body seizing each time it did, but it was never for me. My call came the following afternoon and by sheer luck, I was the one who picked it up.

"I'd like to speak to Lee Dahl," the woman said.

"Speaking," I answered tersely.

Her voice softened to laughter. "So there you are!"

The wave of surprise and relief almost kicked my feet out from under me. "Louise!"

"I thought of you so many times, I looked and looked for you," she said hurriedly, either excited or afraid I'd hang up. "I know that wasn't strictly...professional. But the man you left with didn't give his real name, and I was worried. Then yesterday I opened the Star and there you were! You're the last person I expected to be politicized. How are you? Where are you? Whose dogs are those?"

I was entirely glad. Louise had been the hostess of my most turbulent flights, my worst crash landings, yet the sound of her genuine interest reached out and touched me through the line. Maybe, too, she was the only one who I could be unabashedly proud of myself in front of.

Still I felt a tug of worry. Dave had always felt this line was tapped.

"Louise, wait. Let me call you back on my cell."

"No -- I want to see you. I have to. I want to hear everything."

"I won't...come to your office."

"I'll buy you lunch," she said, instinctively understanding my hesitation. "There's a little deli not far from the office."

I didn't take much convincing. We made quick arrangements and I hung up, wondering at myself. Why was this so important?

Jim must have noticed the call. He came into Dave's den with a handful of paper.

"Well, that was someone you like. Who was it?" he asked casually, but I could feel the smallest string of concern. A lover's question. I smiled because jealousy was so unlike him.

"An old friend, a woman," I said and grinned. "About my mom's age."

"Oh." He looked endearingly sheepish for a moment, then leaned against one of the filing cabinets. His voice lowered so it wouldn't leave the room, the low masculine murmur he usually saved for the telephone or behind my ear. "Think you can get away for a few hours tonight?"

I gave him my barest bedroom gaze. "I'll have to check. My boss is a controlling SOB."

This time the epithet made him twinkle. "Yes, but I understand you're not inclined to listen to him."

"No, I'm not. And we like it that way."

And we did.

I dressed with care the next day, a pair of khaki pants and a black and khaki golf shirt. There was something about those contrasting colors that drew out my features sharply -- the various shades of gold in my hair, my blue eyes. I even had a black leather bomber jacket, bought, Jim said, so I would quit borrowing his green one. Yet I never pulled the soft, supple leather around me without feeling an embrace, like an echo of him against my skin.

Only Conlan noticed the shine on me as I tucked my cell phone into my pocket.

"Woo hoo! What are you up to on company time?"

"Lunch date," I said, and an idea seized me. It would be way more impressive if I bought Louise lunch. "Con, lend me some money. This could be a winner."

I said goodbye to Sam and Inga. I never left the house even for a few hours without slipping into the back yard to pat them, lean into them with the secret animal nudge, my promise to come back.

Jim was in his study, his back to the glass door, pouring over the laptop on his desk. He was in one of his old cotton shirts with the sleeves rolled up and I gazed at his shoulders for a moment, and the back of his neck, where the fawn-colored hair was starting to creep down. The urge to kiss the bare skin above his collar was so strong I took a step forward before I caught myself.

I hadn't told him about my lunch date with Louise. I'd hardly ever spoken of her and certainly not what she'd meant to me. Jim thought I'd survived three rounds of detox on determination and grit, and I wanted to leave that little myth intact. I didn't have many legends.



Maybe, too, I was afraid he'd see in my face that I planned to do the unforgivable. All these weeks the miracles had been tamped down tightly inside me, but from the moment I'd heard her voice, they were released, hurtling toward the air. I couldn't write our names in a heart on the side of a mill, but I could tell Louise. Jim would have worried himself sick over it, not understanding that secrets with Louise were as safe as with Brother Tom. I was protecting Jim Rusk from his own anxiety.

I slipped out of the house quietly, taking care that my path didn't cross in front of the study windows.

# CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

The deli Louise had chosen was within walking distance of the hospital. It was unnaturally narrow, a larger room that had been divided; some of the plaster cherubs on the molded ceiling were sliced in half. I saw her in one of the back booths, her white uniform like a beam of light against the dark leather. I'd rehearsed my cool on the bus, but as I drew up to the table her familiar, feminine smile brushed that all aside. I sat down across from her, grinning like a fool.

"You're good in black and white, but you're deadly in living color," she said.

I laughed at the unexpected compliment.

"You know, I was so surprised. I never thought of you as a joiner." Louise paused tactfully. "Do you know who they are?"

"I've known since September, but I didn't move in until January."

Her eyebrows raised. "Then that's who came and got you?"

"Yes."

"I was disappointed you didn't say goodbye," she said, reaching across the table to touch me. "I needed to talk to you."

I took her hand in both of mine, the delicate bones a marvel. It was like holding a little bird. "Louise, I saved you a long and useless argument. I wasn't going into residential treatment."

"I tried to track you down, but your guest didn't sign in under his own name. When I called the number, I got a priest."

"A priest!"

"Or something," she said. "Tom Rutherford."

He'd signed in as Brother Tom! I grinned at the revelation. Oh, I'd find a way to tease him about that.

The waitress came to take our order then, and we pulled apart to look up at her. She was about twenty, with a high frizzy ponytail and a low-cut t-shirt. When she turned to me, one of her razor-thin eyebrows arched slightly, telling me I could do better than holding hands with my mom.

I met her gaze dead on. "I'll have the same as my wife," I said. I didn't really want a BLT, but the stunned stare was worth it.

Louise shook her head as the waitress walked away. "You are naughty." I could almost see her thoughts shift, little lines deepening around her eyes. "Have you seen your dad?"

"Thanks to the Star, I'm sure he's seen me. I wrote him a letter a month ago, just saying I was all right," I added.

"If you ever want to meet with him, I could facilitate. It doesn't have to be at the hospital."

I knew this was the sort of thing Louise did, and yet it still struck me odd. I wasn't her client anymore.

She seemed to read my thoughts. "How are you?" she said.

That question from this person was like no other. It leapt past all my sentries of pride and into the place where no one was welcome, the part of me that grieved.

"It is," I began with a granite grin, "spectacularly hard. I still dream about it all the time. Every little irritation, every success, is a reason. Pain, pleasure, jealousy, despair -- pick a mood, they're all good. Cutting myself shaving is a perfectly logical reason, so is having lunch with you."

"Then what has gone so right?" Louise asked.

"Pardon?"

"You have all these good reasons and a source of money," she nodded at my clothes, "and you're still clean. I can tell by the color of your skin. What makes it different this time?"

A handful of images flitted through my mind. "He won't give me a second chance," I said at last.

"He?" Louise repeated pleasantly, expectantly.

I cocked my head. "We're in your office, and the door is closed."

She understood. "Yes, it is."

For the next half hour I waxed poetic about Jim Rusk. I had told tales to Louise before, paramours woven into the story of my drug use, mostly for comic relief. This time it seemed I'd driven a semi-trailer of awe up to the table, and began to unload. When I caught the sound of my own voice, I realized how insufferable I was, but it was such bliss to share this with someone. His nobleness, his ambition, his wealth, his kindness. Even his little anxieties I pulled out with affection, like a treasured collection.

Our lunch came and I guess I ate, although I don't remember it. Louise was on her coffee while I was still working through my fries. She was indulgently patient with me, in fact I worried her lunch hour must have come and gone. But it didn't stop me. I told her about Sam and Inga, our trip to the cabin, and even what was going to happen this summer, with Jack.

"I know what you're thinking," I said, grinning. "He's meeting the drunk brother in a secluded cabin. That's not exactly a public pronouncement. But it's a huge step. Jim Rusk is a careful, careful man..."

"And are you a careful man?" she broke in gently. There was a subtle, unmistakable weight on the word.

"Oh, you know I'm a good Do-Bee," I said. "And it doesn't matter because he's paranoid. The safe-sex poster boy." Except that once.

"You've told me yourself there have been times when you couldn't be completely sure of what you'd done, with people, or needles."

I felt a pulse of hurt, almost anger. “Louise, do you think I’m lying to you? I’m clean. I’ve been clean for seventy-two days.”

She reached across the table and laid both her hands over mine, imprisoning my clenched fist. “Lee, I want you to get tested.”

“Why? I’m negative, you know that. I saw the results in January. Check my file, it’s there! I’m negative and I haven’t –”

“I have seen them, and they came up ‘not positive.’ That’s not the same as negative, Lee. It means inconclusive. And there were some anomalies in the blood that concern me. I wanted to talk to you but you didn’t give me the chance. You need to get tested again. That’s why I’ve been looking so hard for you.”

I laughed, a single breath. “And here I thought you cared.”

I didn’t realize I was trying to get up from my seat until I felt the press of her hands, holding me.

“Don’t panic,” she said slowly. “I’m not doing this to frighten you. There are other explanations. I know of a woman who tested positive twice -- her husband almost divorced her. It turned out she had a rare blood disorder that gave her a very low T-Cell count. You owe it to yourself, to your partner, to know for sure.”

“I’m not going into that fucking hospital again, even for a blood test.” My voice smacked the air so hard, it startled me.

“There’s a satellite blood lab, two doors from here,” she said, tilting her head.

She meant now, today. The revelation drove into me like a nail. “Of course there is,” I blurted. “This is all too perfect. The phone rings out of the blue. ‘Oh, come for lunch, Lee. Spill your guts for an hour. Tell me how happy you are, roll in it. Now let’s go around the corner and put an end to this bit of noise, finish it off right now...’”

“Stop.” She shook me for emphasis. “Stop thinking like that. I know you’re frightened. But even in the worst case scenario, we’re talking about a health condition that must be addressed. You can start a medication program immediately that would greatly extend your life expectancy. Yes, a decade ago it was different, but you’ve already met people on that ward who are in their tenth, twelfth, even fourteenth year. This is a life condition,” she stressed again.

“Maybe to you,” I said. I was sitting so still, a tin soldier with ice for eyes. Then, softly, “Let’s get it over with.”

There are some things I am not capable of forgetting. When I sat down at the table opposite the tiny Philippino lab technician, Louise gently tried to turn my head away. “Don’t look.”

But she didn’t exist anymore, nothing existed except the hard-core, slow-motion pornography. The exquisite pressure as the band was tightened around my arm and the blue vein rose up in throbbing expectation, the cool caress of the swab. The sight of the hypo gave me a shiver of unstoppable joy. For whole minutes it seemed to float above the vein in an undulating tease, then...sorrow blew a hole in my body the size of the city. I gasped and it felt like a sob. Louise reached over and gently stroked my neck.

I wandered out into the sunny street again like a drunk, vaguely surprised to find that it was still the same day. Louise had me by the elbow.

“Will someone come and get you?” she said.

“Who?”

“Jim. I think someone should come for you.”

A welt of horror. Oh, God, no. He couldn’t know about this. Not yet.

“I have a bus pass.”

“I’ll get you a cab,” Louise said, stepping onto the curb to flag one down. We watched its slow progress down the traffic-choked block. I was sobering, lead gathering in my stomach. “When?” I demanded.

“Carmela is going to rush this through. I’ll phone you Monday around noon with the results. Will you be at the same number?”

“No! I’ll call you, or...call me on my cell.”

We were standing very close, I could feel her little shoulder against my arm, but I couldn’t look at her. And she knew why. The cab pulled up and I opened the door before it stopped, the leap of a man for a foxhole. But she caught the top of the door with both hands and held it, forcing me to look into her face. This woman knew every atom of my body.

“Lee, don’t. I know you’re feeling anxious right now...”

“I’m scared shitless.”

Louise nodded. “But you’ve been scared before. You’ve gone seventy-two days, you can do these three. Go home and stay there. Please.”

She squeezed my hand and I got in the cab. Louise handed the driver a chit. We pulled into traffic and I gazed after her in the rearview mirror, standing at the curb in her white uniform and green coat, hands clasped.

Isn’t she precious. The Good Mother. Are we doing her fantasy or yours?

The Bitch was already in the cab, in a blue velvet dress and siren-red lipstick. She lit a cigarette, the plume of smoke rising up in mesmerizing undulation.

I’m going home, I told her.

Are you? With that needle track in your arm? It’s Friday. He expects you to take your clothes off.

I hadn’t thought of that.

Of course you didn’t. There’s not a lot of room for other thoughts, not once you open up the big one, IF...

Shut up! I could just tell him the truth. People get tested all the time.

He'd be so pleased to hear it, the Great Man who was afraid to take his gloves off on the ward. I'm sure he'd be especially grateful considering the happy coupling you engineered at his cabin. It looked so spontaneous, so Adam and Eve.

I took the risk!

All of it? Her ruby lips closed around the white filter and she sucked in a long drag. Then she opened her mouth and let the smoke hover in the little cavern, a solid, silky ball, before she blew it out.

I was sweating now, cold perspiration gathering at my temples, under my clothes. This wasn't just about me and my test, not anymore. She slid in close beside me, draped one arm on my shoulder and laid the other on my thigh.

You need to relax. You've had a shock. And you've done everything you could. It's going to be a loooong weekend. You deserve to relax.

The deep pile of her dress shimmered like the waves of the ocean.

Don't worry about money. You've got twenty in your pocket and another easy hundred on your back. You're so, so, so clean, love. All it will take is a whisper. It'll be like old times, like the first time. Just tell this nice man to let you out at the corner...

My phone rang suddenly in my pocket, startling me, shaking us apart.

"What?" I answered, instead of hello.

There was a pause at the other end. "Where are you?" Jim asked.

"I'm...on my way home."

"From where?"

I felt a jab of irritation. "I had lunch with someone."

"Well, you could have said something."

"Do you know what you say when you walk out the door, James? 'I'm on my cell.'"

There was a beat of silence. "I guess I'll see you when you get here," he said shortly, and hung up. I let go a breath, an unstoppable sigh. The Bitch leaned against the door, smirking.

Oh, that crazy romantic. He spoils you. What was it our dear Brother said he didn't do easily?

We'd stopped at a light and She slipped out of the car as effortlessly as her own smoke. But she spoke to me through the half-open window.

Do you know what you should be asking yourself? Is it still enough? Considering. IF.

She blew me a kiss. See you.

I watched her sashay away, the only blaze of color on the gray, gray street, both the devil and the deep blue sea.

I didn't go in the front door. To the delight of Sam and Inga I unlatched the back gate and for a half hour, all we did was play. No commands this time, I was content to tug and touch, to ruffle the fur on their necks, speaking to them in their own language. There was a moment when Sam looked over my shoulder at the house and froze, the kind of rapt attention he gave only one other human, but I didn't turn around. I waited until I was sure Jim was gone, then I went inside and up to the shower.

"Do you still want to have that party?" I asked Conlan. "At Sherry's?"

He laughed. "Tonight?"

"Why not?"

"It's already five o'clock. I can't just phone her -"

"Don't phone. We'll just show up. Women love spontaneity." He continued to sputter, but I turned to the man lying on the far bed. "Dave will come, won't you? Unless you're going to the club tonight," I added.

A grimace flitted across his face, like indigestion. "I'm not going to the club."

"Great," I said, digging into my pocket for his twenty. "Here's money for booze."

Conlan took it, his face lighting up. I hardly ever paid for anything.

With an impassive gaze, Jim watched us put on our shoes. "If you have more than one beer, please don't get back in the van," he told Conlan, who saluted him cheerfully. He gave me a private glance as I went out the door, full of puzzled dismay, even hurt. It felt like a kick in the back of the knees, but it didn't even slow me down.

By ten o'clock the small, two bedroom apartment of Conlan's girlfriend was filled to capacity, shoulder to shoulder in the kitchen and living room. I was introduced to the girl that Conlan thought was perfect for me, and I was charming for the three minutes it took to misplace her in the crowd. I wound up on the tiny balcony with the only other person drinking with as much intent as me.

"You know," Dave said, "when you first came I thought you were a real prick."

"I still am," I said, and took a swig.

Dave laughed. He was on his fourth beer and had loosened up considerably from the tense little student, or even the reigning Intelligence Officer. I was into my fifth, with number six waiting in the wings, by my foot.

"You didn't take it seriously," Dave continued. "We'd all been busting our asses for months, for a year, and you show up like you're going to work for 7-11. It was just a job."

"No, it was a place to sleep," I corrected him with a grin, "and I didn't have one."

That look, indigestion, crossed his face again. "Neither did I. Jim Rusk is a really decent human being."

It was a jab of pain to hear his name. “He’s all right.”

“He’s better than that,” Dave said, gathering steam. “He’s not just generous, he’s moral. He says what he believes and he’s got the balls to follow it through.” His voice lowered. “Like that thing with Knowle. Sure, I was shocked. But then I thought, What if he hadn’t? He’d be like any slimy politician who backs down the second the wind blows the wrong way. He’s got the courage of...of...” he groped drunkenly for the word.

“His convictions,” I said softly.

“How many men do you know like that? You turn your back on that and it’s just fucking...ungrateful.”

Even through the muffled quilt of five beers I caught the desperate note in his voice.

“You’re leaving,” I said.

Dave leaned into his hand. “And Delia, too. Oh, God. He’s going to think I’m such an asshole. He’s going to think I’m scum.”

I reached for the beer by my foot.

I waited until just after one a.m. to phone him. The party was still roaring along when I closed myself in the bathroom with my cell phone, and sat at the toilet seat lid, staring at the fluffy pink bathmat undulating at my feet. I thought I was sufficiently medicated for this.

He answered on the first ring.

“Where are you?” he asked, cautiously this time, as if he was afraid I’d hang up.

“At Sherry’s, Conlan’s girlfriend. We’re all still here.” I took a breath. “Jim, everybody’s loaded. Nobody can drive. We’re just going to crash here tonight.”

“You know I’ll pay for a cab.” His voice dropped to an intimate hush. “Lee, what’s the matter?”

His kindness undid me. The ground around my feet was crumbling, the dirt I’d packed so carefully to contain the demon IF. Now it was clawing to the surface and I was small and frightened and not drunk enough, not nearly. I longed to be home, I ached for it. I would have shed my secret like my clothes.

“Are you in trouble?” Jim asked, the gravity in his voice telling me he had a good idea what district of trouble that might be.

Get off the phone now. “No, I’m just old-fashioned pissed,” I said with as much indignation as I could muster. “The traditional method. I’ll be home tomorrow.” I pressed the ‘end’ button with a determined squeeze, and leaned into my arm that was resting on the sink, the bathroom beginning to sway as soon as I closed my eyes.

It was the middle of the afternoon when I got off the bus in Rosemont. Approaching the house I was struck by the ecclesiastical neatness of the whole property. Not a single stray flyer or even a corny gnome cheered up the pristine yard. I could feel myself gathering these details as if they were sticks and stones.



The door was unlocked. In a glance I saw that the study was empty, but there was a faint, unfamiliar clanking somewhere in the house. In a few seconds I realized Jim was lifting weights in the Pit. He'd never done that as long as I'd known him, never even talked about it. I was very tired, my temples thudding with alcohol's lingering whiplash, but I sat down at the kitchen table to wait.

Fifteen minutes, twenty. At last I heard the stairs creak as he came up, wiping himself with a towel. He was wearing gray shorts and t-shirt, stained in dark rings of sweat. How long had he been down there?

He glanced in my direction and walked to the sink, running the water with his back to me. I could almost see the gears of his mind turning -- how to start this? For some reason it galled me, the self-righteous tilt of his head, his hand on his hip.

"At least I called," I said. "That's more than I got the night it took you six hours to drive Tom home."

"So this is payback?" He turned. "What about yesterday afternoon, what was that cold shoulder about? Did I trample on your masculine pride again?"

"This may come as a shock, James, but my whole life doesn't revolve around you. In fact there are entire sections of it when I didn't even know you existed."

"And weren't they memorable," he muttered under his breath.

The fury came out of nowhere. "At least I lived them," I shot back. "I had the balls to do that -- take a drink, take a risk, take lots of them. I'd sooner regret the things I did, than the things I missed." I got to my feet. I was going to bed, but one last bit leapt out of my mouth. "You know, if you'd just let yourself be a teenager twenty years ago, you wouldn't have to fuck them now."

The movement was so abrupt I flinched - I thought he was going to knock me into the wall. The body that blocked the doorway was dangerous, brown eyes burning in his ashen face. He hung onto each side of the door frame, gripping the wood so I couldn't pass, or holding himself back. I realized it was the first time I was afraid.

"I'm feeling some of that regret right now," he said. "You can talk to me or you can leave here, but I will not be your whipping post."

This was not negotiable. He was looking right through me.

"I saw Louise," I blurted. "I got some bad news."

"Who's Louise? What news?"

"She runs Camp Detox. That's who took me to lunch. She saw me in the paper."

"What news?" he demanded again.

"Someone I know, a friend, has come up HIV positive."

His expression didn't change but something crackled over it, lightening striking stone.

"How well did you know him?"

“Your compassion is touching,” I snapped.

“Tell me, dammit!”

“I didn’t sleep with him, all right! I just knew him and liked him and I’m sorry for him. And you wonder why I didn’t run home and tell you? Because I knew you’d be like this.”

His arms lowered. “No one grows up this country, this continent, without knowing the risks, not anymore,” he said bitterly. “It’s taught in every school, on every channel, in every men’s room, for God’s sake.” He paused. “No. I don’t waste my compassion on fools.”

The pain was like being winded, the sudden, sharp blow that collapses your diaphragm, leaves you gasping for something that is no longer there.

“Well, he’s a better man than you, then,” I said, “because he always did.”

I went upstairs to my cot and burrowed under the blankets in my clothes, gave myself to the despair that was already reaching up for me.

I slept and slept, I don’t know if I dreamed. The room was dark when I awoke, a quiet, unreal place that was distant from any memory, just a vague uneasiness that groped along the walls. There was movement behind me and I recognized it as comforting even before I registered what it was. Jim had sat down on the bed behind me.

“What’s his name?” he asked quietly. “Your friend.”

I was facing the wall. It took a moment to clear the cobwebs, remember enough to lie.

“Musaphir,” I said.

“Does he need any help?” Jim asked. “Does he have family, a place to live? I could arrange...some help.”

He meant it. It didn’t change anything, but it softened me. He must have been thinking about this for hours.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I could check.”

He laid his hand tentatively on my side, as if testing whether I would allow it. When I didn’t pull away he slid until he was lying full length beside me, the two of us tucked in close. His arm went around me and I felt an unstoppable surge of relief. I’d needed this, desperately, for two days. Still, there was something I had to know.

“I thought you were going to hit me,” I said.

I felt him sigh against my hair. “You knock on all the wrong doors, and the worst part of me answers,” he said. Then, softly, “It did worry me, that I was so...drawn to you. If we were talking about two other people, I’d think, there’s something wrong with that man. Why doesn’t he find someone his own age? What’s he trying to recapture?” His voice dropped to a bare whisper behind my ear. “Maybe I worried about it even before I met you.”

It had the hushed, urgent sound of a confession, a terrified one, something I knew Brother Tom had

never heard. The revelation spread through me in a wave.

“The ones...at the apartment...?”

“No. They were all old enough.”

Except I knew something he didn't. Age was only a matter of money. I wouldn't grieve him with that, though. I saw plainly how hard he was trying, how difficult he'd made his own life. Consciously or not, he'd chosen one of the few domains where it still mattered who you slept with, where people still watched. I understood at last the white-knuckle rein he kept on himself, and the shadow of God's HIV sword he saw hanging over him, waiting for him to step over the line.

“And do I still worry you?” I said finally.

“Yes. Sometimes. But what you said our first night together helped a lot -- that you were an adult and you wanted me first. I think that makes it all right, at least to me.”

But not to the rest of the world. I wasn't just any secret, I was the secret. He would be afraid to walk beside me through any mall, in any city. I turned these strange new pieces over in my mind. What about when I was older? Would I still be as charming? What if I ...wasn't well? The rush of memory gave me a sickening sway, the cold shock of the demon crawling into the warm blankets. I laid my hand over Jim's and guided it under my shirt, a blind, unthinking movement so he would hold me closer.

He misunderstood. He began to stroke my bare stomach and the touch raised a second alarm, reignited my guilt. How could I do anything, not knowing? What if I'd already put him at risk that night at the cabin? I wasn't ready to make this decision right now. In fact, I wasn't ready for anything.

Jim was still stroking me, his forehead against the back of my neck, not begging, but needy. He wanted to make up, but more than that, he longed to be reassured that he wasn't a monster if I desired him, too.

I was older in that moment, stretched between his needs and my own fear. So seldom did he ask me for anything, and I wanted to make him feel better. But how? An idea occurred to me. I twisted around to face him, then eased him to lie on his back. Even in the dim light I could see his questioning gaze.

“Put your hands behind your head, James, and tell me a story.”

“A story?” he said.

“Tell me about the night you were shaving, and everyone was downstairs, watching TV...” I said, unzipping him.

# CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Monday I went out early and alone, just me and my phone, to walk the quay that bordered one tiny piece of Lake Ontario. There were shops and apartments between the docks, busy people brushing past me with clicking heels and shining hair, not even noticing the demon hanging on my shoulder.

The beeping of my phone went into my bones like a knife. I took it from my pocket, heart pounding.

“Lee?” Louise asked.

“Yes.”

“Lee.” She said my name more gently than a caress, more kindly than anyone had ever said it, a terrible, terrible intimacy. I began to fall.

She wanted to see me, she had a doctor to refer me to, a specialist. “He’ll want to start you on AZT right away. What you do now, and over the next few months, is critical.”

“Yes,” I said.

“And your partner should be tested, even if you haven’t had high risk situations. It’s just a good idea.”

“Yes.”

“Lee.” Louise hesitated. “Talk to me, dear. When will I see you?”

“Yes,” I said, and hung up.

I was lightheaded, the strange sensation of being suspended, as if something had caught me before I hit the ground and I was still hanging by a string. Sunlight glittering on the choppy waves of Lake Ontario dazzled me and I was dimly aware that the demon IF had let go and was gone. But I wasn’t alone.

Now, my True Love said, What was it I asked you to think about?

I don’t remember.

Enough. How much is enough? To be his cabin boy, his dirty secret? Is that enough of a life for you?

It was the happiest I’ve ever been.

Because it was a lark, because it wasn’t forever. Well, forever has become very, very finite, my darling.

A lurch, as if I’d been dropped a few more feet.

And you’ve graduated now. You’re not just a happy vice, you’re the sword of God, waiting to fall. What romantic times that will make for.

I don’t know what to do.

She wasn't wearing the blue dress today. She was Plain Jane in sensible shoes, the calm, irrefutable presence of Pure Logic, watching me dangle.

Of course you do. You'll phone him and tell him he has to get tested. That's your duty. That's all you owe him.

What if he tells me to come home?

She laughed, the terrible gust of Her breath blowing away my little triumphs -- dinner with Brother Tom, the weekend at the cabin, the promise of meeting Jack -- the painstaking pile I'd swept together and called love. Trembling, I dialed his cell phone number and waited through the eternity of three rings.

"Hi, this is Jim Rusk. I'm unable to come to the phone right now but if you leave a detailed message..."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But then I heard the beep and I was in the freefall horror of having to say something.

"James, it's me," I said. "I've had some more bad news. My bad news." I felt as if the string that held me was tied around my throat. "I'm sorry, but you need to get tested for HIV, right away. I think you'll be all right...we...you were so...there's just that one time I worry about. Please do this. You have to do this. God, I'm so sorry." Pure Logic was tapping her foot, but I didn't care. There were things I needed to tell him.

"I'm sorry I won't be there for the trial - I'm sure they'll get a conviction without me. You'll get them all." I hesitated. "I know this isn't the right way, James. I should have come home to face you. But even being in the same room with you has an effect on me. You made me think I could be...something more. And I'm not ready for that right now. Today I'm a coward."

I tried to toss that out lightly, but it was as though the word punctured me, my resolve bleeding out with frightening speed. My eyes had begun to burn dangerously.

"Please don't separate the dogs," I started again softly. "If you have to sell them, find someone who'll take them both. Phone Miss Marnie, she would do it. They've been together their whole lives, they'd never understand. Inga will die without Sam. I would never...do anything..."

End. She had pressed the button.

All right. You're crying. Let go.

I was. The boats and buildings and docks shimmered in front of me as if they were the lake itself.

It's like a thistle. It only hurts until you let go.

I nodded, but I was still gripping the phone.

"I'm so afraid." I whispered it out loud.

I'll catch you. Just let go.

I nodded again and sniffed. Then She took my hand and together we sent the phone hurtling out over the

lake, a dark bird skimming the waves, diving in without a splash.

If there's anything I learned from the pamphlets in Louise's office, it's that human beings like to number the layers of pain. The twelve steps of recovery, the five phases of withdrawal, the seven stages of grief. It makes the process tidy, if not quick; it makes it appear controllable. Pamphlets are advertising. Lies.

In the summer that followed that morning on the quay I learned that the HIV-positive community is divided into camps, long-feuding clans that never quite declare war on each other, but snipe viciously in passing, as if they didn't have a common ancestor.

The Survivors have taken their diagnosis like an invitation to a marathon. They read everything, try every program, hound their doctors. They obsess with their bodies the way athletes do, share way too much information about their physical processes with people who don't care. They bounce down the sidewalk like over-wound springs, defying every dangerous dust mote, every negative vibration with the hard glare of their good health. I found the Survivors unbearable.

The Plungers have grabbed life by the balls - and are swinging from them. They're first to the party and last to be carried out, the most brilliant flashes of light in any room, the highest, the drunkest, the randiest, the bitchiest. Circles gather around them - some admirers and some people taking bets on how long until they drop. I could never tell if the Plungers were laughing or shrieking.

The Hackers were the smallest, most troubling camp. They showed smooth faces to the world, sometimes wry, but always calm. For the most part they were tightly closed rooms, but if the door ever opened a crack, the glimpse of their dark power was frightening. The Hackers had found their weapon on the world, if not to infect, then to affect. They entered lives as quietly as a good deed and left them as razed battlefields, lovers, relatives and strangers all wounded and bleeding, yet paralyzed by guilt. How can you hate a terminal man? Hackers were as conscienceless as addicts. I could recognize their shark-grey gaze from across the room and stayed away.

Old-timers were only old in their diagnosis. They'd been going around the block five years, eight or even ten; they had been every number in the pamphlets. Now they reigned on their bar stools with gallows humor and gritty good advice -- they could make bodily functions entertaining. It was a desperate fuel that powered them, to be interesting and useful, to be anything but alone. The Old-timers touched me with sorrow and admiration, but I had nothing to give them. I had only one friend.

My True Love led me around the camps as carefully as a mine field. You will never have to go there, She said. Just hold onto my hand.

Musaphir was gone. The others who'd known me before knew me still, greeted me with the sly, mocking smile that said, "We knew you'd be back." But I wasn't the same man.

"Something's missing," Sherise said. "Where's your party spirit?" She didn't have her baby anymore; it had gone to live with her sister. Sherise needed to party.

I shrugged and smiled listlessly. "Are you buying?"

I allowed myself one worry and went for long walks with it, sometimes without ever leaving the sunny brick wall beside Papa Joe's café. Had Jim gotten tested, I wondered. Did he hate me? Every day I thought I would call him, and every day I chickened out. Wondering was terrible, but knowing had the potential to be far worse. I think, too, I was afraid of hearing his voice, that lion's purr I'd loved behind my ear.

I didn't have time for other thoughts; a junk day is a full day. But no matter where I went to sleep, on the grass, on the floor of someone's apartment, on a cot at the mission, I woke up on my right side, turned to face his side of the bed. And in the seconds before She had me, before She was moving my body and pointing my every thought, memory would slip in, like a beam of brilliant light under a closed door, and blind me.

Then my True Love would nudge me with her toe. Time to get up.

The reunion had been joyous, the honeymoon brief. We settled quickly into the old routines and I wasn't disappointed or even surprised. I'd come to Her for this, to hand myself over and be carried along in the stream like a piece of wood. What I didn't expect was how quickly I became stone.

You know, these are hard times. Pickings aren't what they used to be.

She was wearing sensible shoes today. Are we there already? I wondered.

You're not really much of a thief, not anymore. A few months in the straight lane did you in. You got everything you asked for -- it spoiled you. You forgot how to work.

It's too late, I'm too old. Fourteen, fifteen, that's where the money is.

So hustle in the bars! Be a different flavor -- hard candy. You're butch enough, and you still have your boots. It'll do.

I looked at this path I had found so abhorrent a few months ago, the thing I'd fought with ferocious pride no matter what, and all I could think was Damn, now I have to shower regularly.

Money changes everything. In May and June I watched myself from a flickering distance, a hardcore movie so bad it wasn't even satire. I knew the moves of the dance and I learned some new ones, but my cheerful wickedness vanished without an echo. I knew how to look, how to stand, even the little menaces to whisper before the event, to move the process along. And all the while I was simply determining, How fast could I do this? Was this A, B, or C? Did this man want to scuffle and win, or scuffle and lose - and then win?

But I didn't think much, I didn't have to. I'd handed my True Love the keys and She drove while I lay in the back seat, lulled to the edge of dreaming. If I didn't like the scenery, I could close my eyes.

At the beginning of July I got a tattoo, or rather, someone paid a lot of money to watch me get it. It was to be an angel at the base of my spine, in flight just above my buttocks.

"Avenging, guardian or fallen?" the tattoo artist asked in all seriousness. I started to laugh. "Ask the gentleman who's buying," I said.

It was enough money for a five day bender, that I woke from in pain, a throbbing blaze that spread outwards from the angel. This one was avenging, all right. I briefly thought of going to the walk-in clinic to get treatment for the infection I knew was there, then decided on the closest mission. They handed out bandages and Polysporin without lectures, and I could get something to eat, too. I didn't remember the last time I'd eaten. I limped down the sidewalk in sunlight that seemed blinding, pain booting me in the back with every step.

It was hardly nine a.m., too early for the street kids; I stood in the soup line with the old bums at the 29th street mission. I was wearing a t-shirt I'd bought for work, Does not play well with others, and a shirt over it, spotted with blood along the sleeves. The Bitch was behind me, already starting to dig her sharp knuckle into my side. She'd had her way for five days, unleashed and unfettered, and it made Her a tyrant. I knew I'd overdone it.

I have to be careful, I thought. I have to regulate this. It's too easy to go over the edge. It'll be all right if I just...

A hand seized my wrist, a policeman's determined grip that went through me like an electric shock. I looked up. Brother Tom had reached right over the steel serving trays to make contact.

"Lee, I'm so glad to see you. Go sit down -- I'll bring you some soup. It's time for my break, anyway."

His eyes said, If you run, I will chase you.

I wasn't capable of running. I limped to an empty spot at the end of a long table and sat down, twisting a napkin in my hand. In less than a minute Brother Tom came out from the kitchen, balancing two cups of coffee, a bowl of soup and a bagel. In a denim shirt and jeans, his lush white hair brushed back and curling at the nape of his neck, the full force of his physical presence struck me again. I was having breakfast with Abraham.

"Thank you," I said, when he set the food down. Hungry as I was, I sipped at it gingerly from the spoon, reacquainting my body with the process. I could feel him scanning me, taking in every detail with merciless clarity.

"I'd ask how you are but I have eyes," Tom said, not unkindly but without preliminaries.

"Well, then, tell me how you are," I snapped.

"Tired. I'm spending too much time counseling a distraught friend."

A bolt of fear and desperate yearning froze me. I had to know.

"How...is he?"

"How is who?" There was a hard glint in his eyes.

"You know who I mean."

"Say his name," the monk demanded.

"How is James?" I said, but the word automatically softened on my tongue. I'd thought it a thousand times, but saying it out loud brought a rush of life to him. He was suddenly real again.

"He's negative," Tom said, more gently.

The relief split me open. My spoon dropped into the bowl and I leaned into my trembling hand. My God, my God, thank you, God. I didn't even wonder that Jim had shared this secret with Tom -- I was too grateful.



“And he’s very angry,” The Franciscan continued. “We’re all angry.”

I looked up. “We?”

“Jim, Louise and I.”

Those three names strung together packed more punch than any one alone. I felt violated, my life stripped bare and handed around amongst them.

“If I thought you had the right to an opinion,” I said sharply, “I would resent you being in league against me.”

“Against you?” Tom leaned forward on the table. “Someone we care about seriously needs to take active treatment for a health condition, and he not only hides from that responsibility, he jeopardizes himself with a lifestyle that is dangerously unhealthy and immoral...”

“Immoral?” I bristled, defiant.

“A wasted life is a sacrilege,” Tom said simply. “It’s the worst immorality.”

“Maybe to your God.”

He let go a short sigh. “Well, I’ve been watching your god for thirty-five years, and I’ve never seen it do anything except consume lives. Sometimes fast and sometimes slow, but the result is always the same. Your god devours.”

He wasn’t wrong, I could feel Her now, a steady, petulant gnawing.

I was truly eating now, tearing off chunks of the bagel and dipping them into the broth. I felt so slight in front of Tom’s powerful, glowing health, a shadow at the table, my bad boy T-shirt a sorry joke.

“Did he sell the dogs?” I asked quietly.

Tom shook his head. “He takes them everywhere in the van, as if he’s afraid they won’t be there when he gets back.” He smiled ruefully. “That gorgeous little car of his sits in the garage, although I’ve tried to get him to donate it to Our Lady of Infinite Light.”

I smiled, too, thinking of Tom explaining the Mercedes to his Bishop.

“Lee, you don’t know how lost he is. The first month you were gone he phoned me every day. His...work is accelerating, the trial coming up this fall and there’s talk of starting a chapter in Alberta. But when I see him, he’s listless. You couldn’t have done this in a more hurtful way -- a message on his answering machine. It was cowardly and cruel.”

The rebuke stung me to my bones. “We’re always talking about him, concerned about him. Did any of you once think about me? Did it occur to you that I was in shock, that I was hurting? Maybe I was afraid to go to a place where I was no longer welcome. Maybe I couldn’t bear to face someone who’d suddenly consider me a leper.”

“That’s preposterous, a cheap excuse. I know Jim Rusk...”

“You’ve never slept with him.”

I saw the news register, the naked truth he couldn’t argue with.

“And suppose I had gone home, how would I talk to him?” I continued. “It was a weekday. We wouldn’t even sit in his study with the door closed. We had to leave the house to be alone, and he didn’t like to be seen with me out of doors, not in daylight. Did I seem excited the night the three of us went to dinner? Well, I was. It was the only time we ever ate a meal together in public. We’ve never been to a movie together, for God’s sake. Don’t talk to me about cowards.”

My temples were throbbing, the angel pounding a fiery back-beat at the base of my spine. I desperately needed to be well. I pushed myself shakily to my feet, but Tom stood up, too.

“I saw you limping. Are you injured?”

“I have to go.”

In an instant he was beside me, had me by the arm. His large, strong presence was a comfort I couldn’t stop myself from leaning against.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” he said in a kind voice.

“I got a tattoo. I think it’s infected.”

“I’ll take you to the clinic.”

“I won’t go.”

Without another word he swept me into a small room beside the mission office. There was an old examination table and shelves of medical supplies. I explained where the infection was and he told me to take off my shirt.

I hesitated. “Is there a nurse?”

He smiled faintly. “Nurse Tom.”

I wouldn’t have done it if I wasn’t desperate. To his credit, he turned discreetly away, pulling out latex gloves from a dispenser. When he looked at me again I was already huddled on the table, clutching my two shirts against my stomach.

He went behind me and I heard him take a breath. “Child, child,” he murmured to himself. Then, “The bandage has fused to the skin. I’m going to loosen it with an antiseptic wash, and then we’ll clean the wound.”

“Do you have any Tylenol 3’s?” I asked hopefully.

“I can give you an aspirin.” He opened a cupboard with a key, and carefully locked it afterwards. I took two without water, barely noticing the bitterness.

It was a slow and excruciating process to remove the old bandage. I would have wept, but I felt a strange call to pride just being with him. He’d seen me with my dogs at Queen’s Park.

Tom moved with deft confidence that put me at ease; he obviously had experience cleaning wounds. Yet he touched me with surprising gentleness, as if to balance the pain he knew he was causing, to reassure me he didn't mean it.

"You were right, Lee," he said after he'd been working a minute, "I wasn't thinking about your needs, not today or before. I apologize. I'm ashamed."

I was trying hard not to moan. But there was such genuine humility in his voice that I had to answer somehow. "It's all right," I whispered.

"You mentioned that night the three of us went to dinner. I had a good time, too. Do you know what I remember most about it? How proud you were of Sam and Inga, and what you'd trained them to do. You deserved to be proud, but I got the feeling there was more to it than you said, plans you didn't tell us. A dream."

I clutched my shirts, squeezing them harder to my chest. My tracking dogs, the lost children I would find. It was all salt.

"I thought to myself, he can do it," Tom continued. "He has heart. He could accomplish whatever he wanted, he just needs a place to stand."

I had begun to rock with the pain, twist away from it. Tom stopped and gently guided me back into position. "I'm going as fast as I can," he said. "I have to save as much skin surface as possible." He resumed the relentless wash and tearing. I put my shirt against my burning eyes.

"You know you need to begin AZT, Lee. It means years to HIV, years on the good side. But it has to begin now. Every day matters. I know it's frightening to think about, but if you don't decide, the decision will be made anyway. Not choosing is a choice, too."

Tom ripped off the last edge of the bandage, one more searing burst that wrenched a little moan out of me, but then it was over. He said he was going to swab me with a mild antibiotic and re-dress the wound.

"Please hurry. I need to go."

"Our parish supports a halfway house," he said, picking up his thread again. "People in all kinds of treatment live there. I could get you a place, a bed, as soon as you finished detox. No one...would have to know you were there."

I felt an unstoppable rise of horror, of resistance. No. No detox. Never again. But something made me wonder.

"You wouldn't tell Jim where I was?" I asked.

"Not if you didn't want it."

"What about today?"

He sighed. "He's worried sick about you, and I know he's...being hard on himself, punishing himself," he said softly.

My stomach fell. “Punishing, how?”

“Oh. Little things he doesn’t think I notice. He won’t drive his car, he won’t go to the lake. He bought himself one of those weight machines and God knows what he puts himself through on that. The last time I saw him he was as white as his own shirt. He’s going to be the fittest ghost who ever walked.”

Damn, damn, damn! I could see his mind from across the city. He didn’t think the sword of God had missed him, only that it had struck him on the other side. Damn him anyway!

“But,” Tom recalled himself with determination, “the decision is yours. If you don’t want him to know I saw you, he won’t. It’s in your hands alone.”

It was a thunderbolt -- my decision. Me, the man in the back seat. But now I was churning with anger and worry and frustration. I had to do something.

“Do you have a pen?” I said.

On the back of a telephone message sheet I wrote,

*James, stop. I know what you’re doing and I know why. This was my bad luck, nothing else. Please believe that. You’re the finest man I ever knew. You deserve to be happy. That would be the greatest thing you could do for me.*

I hesitated, trembling, the pen stuck to the paper like an arrow.

*All my love, Lee.*

I folded it into a little square, and handed it to Tom, who tucked it in his shirt pocket.

“I’m here every Tuesday and Thursday,” he said. “Whenever you’re ready, I’ll take you to detox. And afterwards I’ll get you that bed.”

I walked out into the day that became like every other -- I knew dealers who were glad to give me credit, at least until the next morning. But even as I fell into Her soft arms, even as I stood in the hard glare of the headlights that passed over me on the strip, I kept remembering the note I’d written and a rush ran through me, frightened and glad.

# CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

In the belly of August, the city simmered. I didn't see many daylight hours, but I knew the oppressive heat and humidity by the way it lingered into night. Concrete shimmered under neon and the muggy air weighed on my skin like wet cheesecloth, every smell of the day trapped in it. Exhaust and curry and sweat and cigarette smoke and urine and fresh bread all hung in the motionless air, hovered like disappointment, unable to move on.

I tried to believe I had no expectations, that I hoped for nothing following that morning at the shelter. But as July languished into August I felt the revelation peel painfully away, like the bandage that had been fused to my skin. Jim Rusk was not coming.

What did you expect? the Bitch said. That he would track you down with your own dogs? That he would lift you up and carry you away in his arms, his poor broken darling? Or were you hoping for a macho drama -- the tawdry bar hushing as he strode in, thrusting greasy johns aside, a tussle with you that overturned tables and chairs, finally besting you, pinning you to the floor with your arms above your head, leaning down to kiss your trembling lips in front of the awestruck crowd...

"Please stop," I whispered.

The Bitch laughed her terrible tinkling laugh, the sound of someone kicking through shards of broken glass.

She wasn't a comfort to me these days. She was still driving and I was in the back seat, but completely awake now, edging anxiously forward, reaching for charms that evaded my grasp like mist. We'd reached the first plateau. I could stay functional and stave off being sick, but if I wanted to get high, well, that was another matter. We'd begun the dance of More. I knew that road downward and for the very first time, I fought it.

In this strange new clarity, I discovered my terrible loneliness. Why was it so different this time? Because the memory of not being alone was so fresh? I maintained my smooth, hard surface, but it was a glazing of ice over water. When I saw people holding hands I looked away, when someone walked a dog along the quay, I wanted to weep. I hungered for companionship, longed for a voice, any voice, that wasn't Hers.

I would have loved to visit Tom. He beamed such good-natured strength that being in his presence was a tonic, even when he gave me hell. But I avoided the shelter, afraid of the topic we had in common. Not hearing about Jim nourished some tiny hope, one last coin I clutched in my hand and couldn't spend.

I found myself going to Papa Joe's Café in the hours before work, to sit on a stool at the counter, eat something and drink coffee, immersing myself in the sound of people, their conversations lapping at me like warm water. Papa Joe's was mostly a clean location, a few street kids and a great many more regular people -- as regular as any metropolis gets. No one hustled inside the café or in front of it. Papa Joe, who was actually a stern, graying east Indian in a turban, had been known to chase offenders away with a push broom.

It was there that I met Allan. He simply sat down on the stool beside me one evening, crossed one leg over the other and said, "Do you think I look like Diana Ross?"

He was black and had once been svelte, but now that edged over into gaunt. His diamond-shaped face had a marvelous structure and enormous brown eyes with long black lashes, that seemed even larger for the hollows around them. He wore a full, glossy 1960s Love Child wig in a bouffant, a green silk sleeveless dress, pale sweat stains under the arm holes, and matching high heels. But my eyes caught on his skin, the flesh already falling away from the little bones. Did I think he looked like Diana Ross?

“Only on her good days,” I said. The compliment lit him up.

“For that you can buy me a drink,” he said, and I did, a cola with a slice of lime, not lemon. He took a cigarette from a clutch handbag. Behind the counter, the jerk pouring the soda glared hard at him.

“Oh, I’m not going to light it,” Allan snapped. “Have you no sense of theater? Lout,” he finished. He turned to me and his countenance brightened again.

“I’ve seen you around -- and around and around,” he said, with a coy tilt of his head. “Sometimes you’re nasty and sometimes you’re nice, but it always looks like an enchanting show.” He paused delicately. “I’m afraid I don’t have the price of admission.”

He was letting me know he wasn’t a potential customer. I liked him even better in that moment.

“I come here only for the scenery,” I said, and both the gallantry and flattery won him over with a single sweep.

That was how it began. I saw him almost every evening before work, bought him a cola or even dinner, if I could afford it. He never ate the whole thing, but discreetly wrapped up half of it, a sandwich, a burger, and squeezed it into his handbag.

“My figure,” he said with an arch smile, and it was a dark joke we both understood.

Allan was twenty-eight and had been to Vegas, had done Vegas, with two other female impersonators.

“My Supremes,” he said affectionately. “Never mind that Billy was white and Jason weighed in at 285. We were a sensation in the second string clubs.”

Allan didn’t confine himself to the second string, however. His free time had been spent in the grand hotels, floating around, riding up and down escalators for effect.

“Not cruising,” he stressed, “just giving cupid a nice clear shot.”

One time an entire senior high school football team had followed him through three floors of Aladdin’s Palace.

“They were from Minnesota -- Minnesota! -- and had come for a tournament. Who holds a football tournament in Vegas! Oh, it was too perfect. They were walking hormones, hulking hormones with farm-fresh faces, trotting after me like puppies. They thought they’d found themselves a showgirl.” He twinkled. “And oh, what this girl could have shown them!”

In the end his finer sensibilities won out. He finally went into the casino because they were too young to follow, and lost them.

"When I said I wanted to have children, I didn't mean I wanted to have children," he said with a sardonic toss of his head. "And while we're on the subject, how many years did it take God to create your beautiful form, and the Devil to fill it with wickedness?"

I laughed. Allan had a way of spinning a story out in long, glittering strands, then hooking me into a question I never would have answered otherwise.

"Nineteen," I said.

"Not quite a scamp, but certainly young enough, stunning enough, to drive some rich, benevolent man mad with passion."

I felt a catch in my throat. "Well, if you find one, let me know."

"My dear pet," he said imperiously, "I most certainly will not. Finders, keepers!"

He wasn't joking. Allan would have taken a rich, benevolent kangaroo. His entire income came from doing tarot and palm readings in his apartment, which was difficult because his partner was so ill. Renaud was years ahead of Allan on the road and it was hard for him to leave the apartment, even on a good day.

"He was so beautiful, you see, and now he has lesions on his face," Allan said softly. "It destroys him. He looked like Frances Farmer. He won't go out, he doesn't want people to come in. When I do a reading for someone at the kitchen table, he goes into the bedroom and turns the television up loud," he continued with a sad smile, "just so I won't forget he's there. He's terrified of being alone. I think that's why he hates the hospital, although I'm there as much as I can be. He had pneumonia in January. The nurses let me do tarot readings in their lounge, God bless them, so I wouldn't lose my apartment. Doctors are assholes, but nurses are saints."

I looked across at the delicate, dark bird in front of me, wearing fuchsia today, a necklace made of beads the size of gum balls lying in the hollows around his neck.

"But you're not...really well yourself," I said.

You would have thought I'd asked him if he was Santa Claus, his smile was so benign. "No, but I'm well-er, and who else is there?"

The thought settled on me.

"The hardest part," Allan continued quietly, "is looking ahead all the time, trying to anticipate what he'll lose next, what he needs and can't ask me for. Like the cups. He began using the same cup all the time -- for milk, coffee, juice. I mean, the idiot would barely rinse it out. I was furious with him, it was so unsanitary! Then I realized he couldn't reach above his head anymore to get another one down from the cupboard, and he didn't want me to know. But I couldn't just move the cups, that would have upset him. I was stuck until my neighbor had a crisis with her boyfriend and needed an emergency reading, even though she was dead broke. So to pay for it she gave me a beautiful little tree of coffee mugs that sit on the counter." He smiled. "And wouldn't you know it, they were even yellow, Renaud's favorite color."

"What a coincidence," I said, a lump in my throat.

"Cups are easy," Allan said. "I just wish I knew someone with a car. Do you? Know anyone?"

“I...used to. Why?”

He looked wistfully away, gazing out the large front window of the café. “Oh. It would just be nice to go for a drive sometime. Get him out of the apartment, even a ride to the country to see the leaves changing color. He’d go if he thought no one would stare at him. I know we’ll be going into the hospital again this winter. When you’ve had pneumonia once, it becomes a member of the family.”

For a moment there was only the clinking of cutlery, the murmur of voices. Then he looked back at me and tilted his head coquettishly, making his bauble earrings swing. “So who’s the wonderful man with the car?”

I laughed nervously. “Oh, no one.”

“Liar. What’s his name?”

I didn’t know I was still capable of blushing, but I felt the crimson heat.

“James.”

Allan’s perfectly plucked eyebrows arched with delight. “Ah, now I see a torch the size of the Olympic flame. And where is this strapping example of manhood now?”

“Safe from me,” I said, tossing the words out cheerfully.

He took me in with those enormous eyes, reached over and laid a hand on my shoulder. He let it run down my arm in its long sleeve, a version of which I wore even in the hottest weather, and plucked the fabric at my elbow.

“I don’t think you’re safe from you, pet,” he said gently.

It was a strange parcel of thoughts I carried to work with me. Sitting atop the backrest of a bus bench, my black boots on the seat, automatically meeting the eye of every driver, I wondered where I could borrow a car. And leaning against a wall in a bar, with my leather belt wrapped around my knuckles, snapping it menacingly, I remembered the leap of joy I’d had -- beyond all reason or even hope -- to say Jim’s name out loud.

The next evening at dusk I was on my way to the café, when someone called to me.

“Hey!”

Twilight blurred the young man half a block away who whipped up his arm at me, pointing. I saw only that he had dark hair and a black t-shirt, and that he recognized me -- which wasn’t usually a good thing. I turned on a crack in the sidewalk and bolted. Never mind the persona I wore for work, running was far easier than fighting. And what if he had friends?

I dodged nimbly around the pedestrians, flying. I was fast in short bursts and I knew these streets so well. But the man on my heels was intent. He must have been blasting through people, or they were getting out of his way. I heard the steady thud of him gaining, and already my flush of adrenaline was ebbing. I ducked in beside a restaurant, a narrow passage I knew led to an alley, and couldn’t stop myself before I ran hands-first into a line of boards. God damn! Someone had put up a wall.



In the next second he rounded the corner and was on me.

“You shit!” He seized my shirt front and thrust me back into the boards. I thrust out wildly to break the hold and caught him on the cheek. It didn’t deflect him. He slammed me again, then dragged me down into a headlock.

“You little shit!”

Even in the bad light a familiarity had hooked me and pulled my panic askew. Trapped under his arm I blurted, “Conlan, it’s me!”

“I know who the fuck it is.” Yet he wasn’t squeezing me hard and the sound of my voice seemed to do something to him. I was able to wrest myself out of his grip. My ears were ringing, my body trembling with shock and memory as I leaned against the restaurant wall, panting.

He wasn’t winded at all. “I knew I would catch up to you. How could you walk out on us! You don’t give a reason, you don’t say goodbye, you don’t even come get your stuff.”

“I’m sorry, Con, I really am.”

“What the hell happened?”

I didn’t answer. The day was fading fast in that little shadowed inlet, but he could see me clearly anyway, as clearly as Louise or Tom.

“You’re bit,” he said.

“I’m bit,” I agreed softly.

“I knew it! That night Jim told us you were gone and he didn’t know when you were coming back, I thought, he’s in the God damned dope.” He was rocking restlessly, angrily. “Don’t tell me it’s a sickness, I’m not buying it. You know what my old man used to say? You think you’re sick now, just wait until I’m done with you!”

He whipped around and booted the fence, a violent wham that made me jump. I wondered if I should make a dash for the sidewalk, if there was a soul who would help me. But just then Conlan let go a deep sigh and ran his hand through his hair.

“Ah, what the hell do I know, anyway. I just miss you. I’m just sorry.”

He sounded at such a loss and suddenly so was I. I’d never thought that my leaving might affect Conlan or Dave; I hadn’t realized until this second how much I missed him, this straightforward lout who’d been my friend no matter how much I’d fought it.

“I’m sorry, Con,” I said again. Then, “I only ran because I didn’t recognize you. What’s with the hair?”

He touched it self-consciously. “Weird, eh? It’s women. They’re not happy unless they’re fixing you up a bit, you know?” There was a curl of affection in his voice. “I’m living with her. Sherry. I moved in at the beginning of July.”

“No kidding.” Hovering around the question, above it, heart fluttering. “How...is everything else?”

“Different. Strange.” He looked at me. “Hey, I need a beer. You want me to buy you a beer?”

I hesitated. The night was very young, it was barely ten o’clock, but bars were business for me, office hours eleven ‘til three. I would have died before he knew that.

“I’d go for a coffee,” I said.

I led him to Papa Joe’s because it was close and I was anxious for any crumb of news, as soon as possible. I was also on a tight schedule, the Bitch reminded me. From a back booth Allan watched us come in. He was slumming tonight, in a head scarf and sunglasses, simple yellow sundress and pastel 1960s lipstick, Peach Parade. He gave me the faintest amused wave, like Queen Elizabeth from the deck of the royal yacht, that both acknowledged and congratulated me. He thought Conlan was divine.

With two coffees and seats by the window, I turned a spoon over and over in my hand, trying to pretend I was equally interested in everyone. Dave had quit, Conlan said, and Delia, too, just a few days after me. Maybe it was the triple blow, the three of us leaving in such short order, that Jim took so hard.

“I mean, there was lots to do and he’d just sort of wander around. I’d see him sitting at his desk, staring out the window all afternoon. You know how he used to get on us all the time -- what’s the progress, what’s the progress? Imagine me having to say, What’s next, boss? What do you want me to do?”

Eventually someone was hired to help with the newsletter, but he handled most of it electronically, coming in only once a month for the actual printing and mail out. They were getting lots of new people at Patriot Nights, Conlan said gloomily, yet it wasn’t the same.

“When it was the four of us, we hustled all day long, we worked our asses off, but nobody did it alone, you know? Like all those days you and me pounded the streets, signing people up for Phillips. We were a team,” he said. “And at night, there was always somebody to shoot a game with, watch the tube with. Hell, you just had to get Dave wound up over something. That was entertainment for the whole fucking night!”

The memory buoyed him for a moment, then he sank softly again. “Jim’s a good guy, I really admire him, but it’s not like I’m his friend or anything. Maybe that’s why I moved out. It was kinda...eerie, the two of us in that big house. Like living with a ghost. But maybe it’s kind of expected, seeing that his mom just died.”

I felt as if I’d been yanked abruptly out of my body.

“What?”

Conlan nodded. “Yeah, I didn’t even know he had a mother -- well, living anyway.”

“When?” I blurted. “How?”

He seemed taken aback by the force of my interest, but I didn’t care.

“It was about the second week of July,” Conlan said. “I was already living at Sherry’s and coming over every day to work. One morning I show up and the doors are locked, and the dogs aren’t in the yard. Nobody answers the door or the phone and I start to freak out. I mean, he could be fucking shot for all I

know. But he phoned me later that day, and I found out his mom had a stroke and was in the hospital. Two days later she had another one, and it was over. I didn't see Jim for a week, and man, he was a wreck."

The words were carving themselves on my wooden skin.

Conlan leaned in closer, his voice lowering. "He's still kinda wrecked, you know? I didn't know it but I guess his family has some kind of business. He's had to step in and help look after that. He's on the phone all the time, or he's gone in the morning before I get there. I mean, now's the time when he needs four of us, but he won't hire anybody. And you wouldn't believe some of the other shit that's going on..."

He launched into a cavalcade of gossip: it was rumored Stuart Pope was going to skip bail, and that Hector was on the verge of resurfacing to kick serious ass for the desertion by his crew. Not only that, word had it that Knowle had joined up with the Hammerskins...

Conlan's voice was wind in the eaves. Jim had lost his mom, was all I could think, and God knew what kind of shape Jack was in. I saw him again in my mind's eye, lying on the couch in his soiled clothes, the jarring empty space where his foot should have been.

Jim needed me.

The Bitch screeched with laughter. For what? All that you have to offer he can buy somewhere else, dearie, and I'm sure he already has. There's a whole army of little studs to choose from, all of them younger and prettier than you.

I didn't realize that I'd gotten to my feet, Her hard-wired clock moving my body against thought and will. Time to get to work. Conlan looked up at me, faintly surprised, but in the next instant I inhaled a breath of perfume.

"I saw you leaving and just wanted to say hello before goodbye," Allan said, suddenly at my elbow. He was hovering expectantly and even behind the sunglasses I could sense him beaming at the table. He thought Conlan was my date and he'd come to give his blessing. But what could I do?

"This is my old friend, Conlan," I told Allan. Then, "Con, this is...Diana."

"Hi," Conlan nodded, but his glance took all of Allan in, right down to his gold lame sandals and painted toenails, more Peach Parade.

Allan slipped his arm through mine for a little squeeze. "I'm going to be at Le Beaujoulais later tonight, giving readings," he said to me. "You come by and see me when you get the chance." He turned back to Conlan. "And I want you to know Lee is my very special pet. You boys play nice," he admonished, wagging a manicured finger.

"Um, okay," Conlan shrugged, half amused and half befuddled. God bless him, I thought with a pulse of affection, he was so dim. We watched Allan sashay out the door, swinging his little handbag on a chain.

"Not bad," Conlan said. "Pretty skinny, though. Is she a hooker?"

"Yes," I lied.

Outside I realized that the air had actually cooled, the new season not yet arrived, but whispering its coming relief. Under the streetlights, Conlan clasped my hand and arm in a soldier's embrace. He was looking at me intently.

"What can I do?" he said. "What's it going to take? We need you, bud."

His strong grip and the revelation I could still feel growing under my ribs made me dizzy.

"I don't know," I said. "Soon."

"You know I'll come looking again." He was still holding me, reluctant to let go of my arm. I had a flash that he might try to take me by force, and had a horror of what he'd come up against, not just my fear but Her iron will. Just then a car slowed down, one of my regulars, the man who'd paid for the angel on my back and paid to visit it, too. He leaned across the seat and leered at both of us, his pasty white face lighting up with the thought of a double header.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" Conlan barked at him. "Get going, asshole!"

Nothing happened -- in tattoo man's mind this was foreplay. Conlan let go of me and strode over to boot the car door to help him along. And I was gone.

# CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

What time is it, Mrs. Wolf?

Twelve o'clock.

My life was highly structured, the timing of the day set down in stone: when to sleep, when to get up, when to eat, when to dose. I was on a twelve hour cycle, scheduled to run down at three p.m. and three a.m., the latter perfectly timed to coincide with the end of my working night.

I could do my job with my eyes closed, and I usually did, the familiar routine of cars, bars and backrooms a dark, indiscernible blur on the edge of dreaming. But that night I kept being wrenched awake, pulled out of my body by an overwhelming surge.

He needed me.

So he's having a life crisis, so what? So are you. And he has a lot more life left for it. Exactly what do you think you'll do for him, other than embarrass him?

I didn't know. But who else was there? Who else knew about Jack, could slip into his life and help hold up the secrets without questions or judgment? An image burned in my mind, yellow cups on the counter. I would find the things he needed me to do.

And what if he doesn't want you, leper?

That was a real possibility. I imagined it carefully, gingerly. I could always sleep down the hall, in my old cot. It would break my heart but I would do it. I could slip around his life like a phantom or the perfect butler.

The Bitch played her trump card. There isn't room for the three of us in that house, darling.

I had no answer to that, or only the one I couldn't bear to think about. But still it didn't stop the pulse, driving me forward.

I desperately wished I had Tom to talk to. I knew he wasn't there, but I slipped away from the strip and went to the shelter anyway, pounded my flat hand in frustration against the iron door, locked up tight since early evening. I needed to know, dammit!

What time is it, Mrs. Wolf?

One o'clock.

I could call Jim. The thought seized me with both terror and urgency. To hear his voice! But what if he told me to go to hell? I felt the decision settle down inside me, crystallize. Well, then at least I'd know for sure. I was ready to spend the last coin in my hand.

I found a payphone beside a convenience store, the unnatural glare from the windows turning every passing face into a ghoul. I leaned into shadow, huddled in tight to the little cubicle around the phone.

Trembling, I put in a quarter and dialed. One ring, two. Waves of hope and fear passed through me, lifted and dropped me dizzily like a man riding out a storm in a tiny boat.

“Jim here.”

“James,” I said.

For a moment there was silence, the full weight of his shock in it. “Oh,” he said softly. “My God. My God. Where are you?”

“At a payphone outside the scummiest 7-11 between here and Halifax,” I said.

“Did you get my letter?”

I was astonished. He’d written me?

“No...”

“I gave it to Tom after I got your note,” Jim said.

“I haven’t seen him since then.” Damn, damn! The cost of my cowardice struck me full in the face. I wanted to blurt out, ‘What did you say?’ But it was too late, and this call wasn’t about my needs.

“I saw Conlan tonight,” I continued. “I’m so sorry about your mom.”

I heard him take a ragged breath. “It was so fast, Lee. It came out of nowhere. Mom was one of those people who looked after everybody else -- my dad, Jack, me, the business. I can’t even remember her being sick. She didn’t have time to get a cold.”

I let him talk, listening patiently, savoring his voice like food and drink. Other people wanting to use the phone edged in occasionally like hopeful sharks, but I waved them all away. Nothing was going to interrupt this.

“There were over two hundred people at her funeral,” Jim said. “A convoy of twenty five rigs followed the hearse to the cemetery. I was overwhelmed. Mom would have fallen off her chair. She was the first one to call herself a cantankerous old bat, but somehow she touched all those people. And so quietly, I never knew.”

“How are you?” I said.

He took a breath. “Oh, I’m holding up.”

“That’s not what Conlan says. He’s worried, and so am I.”

“And I’ve been sick with it since the day you left,” Jim said.

I felt the abrupt turn into new territory, the place we’d been heading since hello. I was apprehensive, but determined. “Go ahead and give me shit, James. I’m ready. I know I did that badly. I’m still doing it badly.”

“My love,” Jim said softly. “You’ll never know the gift you gave me.”

I was thunderstruck, dumbfounded.

“I had to wait seven days for the results of the test, and all I did was think. What would I do if I knew, for certain, that my time was...finite? How would I spend it? I won't lie to you -- I was terrified. Some of the answers shocked me. I realized I'd leave what Tom calls my 'parade' in a minute. That's a hell of a revelation about the thing you thought you were building your life on.”

I was still back at 'gift.'

“When the results came in and I knew I was clear, I got the biggest shock of all: I still felt the same. My time was finite. Everybody's is. I wandered around in a daze for weeks, just staying in motion, not knowing how to go back. Then I got your note telling me to be happy.” His voice dropped, drawing me in like an arm around my shoulder. “It knocked me off my feet again. It forced me to think about it -- what made me happy? It was so simple and so hard. Because I realized the happiest day of my whole life was the one you and I spent at the cabin. And then I wrote the letter.”

“What did it say?”

“Please come home. I love you and I want to help you.”

I was reeling, the ground rushing under my feet. He was asking me this now.

“You're not going to believe this,” I said, “but I called to tell you the same thing.” I laughed stupidly, nervously. “I was ready to be your butler.”

He laughed, too, the same bluster of relief. “You'd be horrible! You hardly hang up your own coat. Hey, listen. Here's someone who wants to talk to you.”

I heard shuffling on the line, then a faint but distinct panting. In the background Jim coaxed, “Who's that? Who's on the phone? Say hello.”

Good God! Tears came to my eyes at the silliness, the raw gust of emotion. But it didn't stop me.

“Inga, Inga, is that my girl?” I said. “Where's my girl?”

I heard her panting accelerate, then a little whine in her throat. She knew me!

I was laughing and wiping my eyes when Jim came back on the line.

“Oh, this is bad,” I said. “I've become everything I hate. One of those pathetic gay men who talks on the phone to his dog.”

“Well, what about me? The pathetic gay man who held the receiver up to her muzzle?”

Our laughter wound itself down, to the fine, inescapable point at the end.

“James...I'm so scared.”

“I know. What can I do? What do you need?”

A dozen things flitted through my mind and of course they were all really the same, the one thing I couldn't have.

I took a breath. "I'm coming home tonight," I said with determination, "and you're going to drive me where I need to go. You're going to take my clothes and my shoes, and you won't give them back for five days, no matter what."

"No matter what." There was a crackle in the words.

"I'm warning you," I said, "it's going to be a shitty week. And after that, maybe more of them. A shitty road," I finished carefully. I kept my gaze resolutely turned away from that specter of the years ahead, but a painful flash burned my inner eye. He looked like Frances Farmer.

"If you can do these five days, I can do all the rest," Jim said simply.

I was touched. "That's a big promise. I'm going to live a long time."

"Yes, you are," he said firmly. "Now, I'm coming to get you."

No, I'll get a cab and come home. I've got the money.

"I've got money for a cab," I said.

"No, it'll be faster if I come to you. I can be there in twenty minutes, half an hour at the most. I'm getting my pants on right now."

I want to do this myself.

"I can do this, James. Really."

"I know you can. But this one time, I need to do it. I already have the keys in my hand, Lee. Promise me you'll just sit tight for twenty minutes."

I heard the exasperated breath escape me.

"Yes, my lord, I'll be here." I hung up with a clunk.

He's lying. He doesn't trust you.

I turned. She was standing on the sidewalk beyond the small parking lot, under the circle of a street lamp, wearing a tuxedo. It was a shock of allure, the crisp formal black fabric, a whisper of satin along the lapels, the starched white shirt and bow tie. The carnation was pink.

Do you like it? She tugged on the lapels. I got it from someone who had a big date, made a big promise, but chickened out in the end. He always chickens out in the end.

It was excruciating to look at that sleek black silhouette, and I was hopelessly mesmerized. The sexiest thing a man could wear.

What time is it, Mrs. Wolf?



She howled with laughter. As if you didn't know! It's twenty minutes to meltdown, little man. He's going to put you in that car and drive you straight to hell. And you're going to fry right there in front of him, he's going to watch it. It takes hours to get through admitting, and you're starting to cook already.

It was true. It wasn't yet three a.m., but I was rocking restlessly where I stood, nerves vibrating, chanting time, time, time.

And there you are with money in your pocket! You could nip out and get dosed up, just a little send off to carry you through the first hours. How else will you sleep? How will you get through the big reunion? One last time, you deserve that much.

I told him I'd be here.

And you will. You're fast enough for that. If he has to wait a few minutes, so what? He's a masochist, it turns him on to wait. To be stepped on a little. Put your hands behind your head, James...

I closed my eyes. Meltdown had started, all right. Whether it was fear accelerating the clock or simply the dance of More, I didn't know. But I could feel myself starting to dissolve, sweat trailing down from my armpits, gathering in a film on my face. My nose had started to run.

When I opened my eyes the Bitch had stepped from the sidewalk to the parking lot and was walking slowly toward me, a meandering stroll or the undulating movement of a serpent, her splendid black suit rustling the song of my deepest desire.

Is this your finest hour, hero? She asked with a mocking smile. Giving yourself over to the fuckers who are going to tie you down while a train runs over you? There's a bigger train than me coming, darling. Maybe not this year, but it's on its way. Can you feel it? The ground is shaking.

I was trembling. She was within a step of me and I was lost in her endless eyes. She was the whole world and the sky above it. She was the fiery molten core at the center.

God will give you the strength, the good Brother said. But it's funny, I don't see Him here, do you? Do you see him when you're sitting on the toilet, puking your whole soul into the little white bucket? Do you hear Him when you're curled up on the mattress pleading for an aspirin -- or to die? Because He sure as hell doesn't hear you.

She held out her hand. Come on, we can just make it. If you don't take this chance right now, you'll beg for it a thousand times...

"Lee!"

I turned to look, still blinking in the dream. A yellow sundress billowed as it strode toward me, Diana Ross was shaking her little clenched fist.

"You naughty boy. I waited and waited. As if you could get off the hook without telling me the details! Now I want -"

He stopped cold, two paces away from me. "What's the matter?" He lifted off his sunglasses to look at me more clearly. He didn't have false eyelashes today, in fact, he had no eyelashes at all. His brown eyes were large and profoundly naked, searching me with acute concern. "What happened? Tell me."

I knew his arrival at that moment was a godsend, a miracle; I was a lucky man. On a rush of courage I reached into my pocket and pulled out my whole wad of bills and thrust it toward him.

“Take it,” I said, “and don’t give it back. Take it and go.”

He scoured me for an instant, eyes darting between my face and the money. “Where are you going?”

“Detox. James is coming to get me right now...”

All the buttons clicked. Allan snapped the money out of my hand and shoved it down his tiny plunging neckline.

“Don’t you worry, it’s all taken care of. We’ll get you to the church on time. I’m staying with you until he comes.”

“You’d better leave.”

He slipped in beside me, linked his arm tightly through mine, and looked up at me with those bare eyes, startlingly real in the rest of his fantasy face. “My sweet pet,” he said with conviction, “there’s no where you can go that I haven’t already been. I know who’s talking to you right now. I know it on a first-name basis. Let it deal with me.”

I smiled in spite of myself. “Allan, you weigh a hundred pounds.”

“And all of it’s pure bitch, so don’t mess with me! Now, let’s talk about something important. Is James a hunk?”

My body was wavering, teetering beside the great gaping hole where the money had been, but I clung to Allan’s bony arm. “He looks like a young king,” I said.

Allan smiled wickedly. “A king is a ruler, a ruler is twelve inches. Is he still a king?”

I actually laughed, the relief like a cool breath of wind. He chattered on, involving me, distracting me, drowning out the voice of the chimera in a tuxedo on my other arm. When the conversation finally lulled, he began to sing.

“I started my life in an old, cold run down tenement slum...My father left, he never even married mom...Come on! Where’s my back up?”

I shook my head in disbelief. “Allan, I can’t sing.”

“Neither can Bob Dylan and he’s made a fortune at it. Together now! Love Child, never meant to be...Love Child, scorned by so-ci-etee...”

That’s how Jim found me, singing in the parking lot of a 7-11 with a black man in a dress. And he drove up anyway.

The Mercedes had hardly stopped when Allan hustled me over to it, wrenched the door open and pushed me down into the passenger seat. I seized his hand in a grateful, frightened squeeze.

“I’ll be back. Tell Renaud I’m going to take him for a drive.”

"I'll tell him. But you'll see me the day after tomorrow. We can do our show for the ward. Louise is one of my biggest fans."

It stunned me. Allan had been on a first-name basis, and knowing that somehow gave me a shot of hope.

"Jut hold tight, pet," he said, shutting the door.

Jim pulled out in a quick arc, not exactly a getaway car, but a man with a mission. He didn't look at me until we were on the main road, and when he did, that face -- with its straight, handsome lines and honest intentions and surprising vulnerabilities -- struck me full in the chest. Yes, I was willing to go into hell with this man.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I said.

He reached for me first, but I met him half way. We were clutched in an embrace while he drove, my forehead pressed against his collar, his arm around my shoulders, both of us hanging on tight.

"I'm so glad to see you," he said thickly.

"I'm so glad you can. I had some help waiting. A lot of help."

"I'll be very sure to thank him."

I sat up then, but kept hold of his hand and looked out the window. A city that large is never asleep, even in the stark, dry-eyed hours on the road to dawn, yet it was hushed, catching its breath. The Bitch hadn't left me, but I drowned her out by rolling an idea around and around, that seemed to gather momentum with every revolution. I was thinking of the place we both loved best in the world, the place God went for the weekends, the peaceful lake and swath of land too big for a single cabin, too much for one man, or even two.

"You said I gave you a gift, James. Would you give one to me?"

"Anything."

"Good." I smiled. "Because I'm going to relieve you of a lot of guilt and a whole truckload of money."

He laughed, surprised, and I squeezed my true love's hand.

END