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VENUS AND ORION

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

By Ellen Young

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ABSTRACT

VENUS AND ORION A NOVEL

By ELLEN YOUNG

Minneapolis, 1989. Twenty-eight year old radical lesbian Roxanne Connolly is in a quandary. She has just broken up with her long-time lover and now finds herself attracted to men. In her new vocation of massage therapist, she encounters a man who want her to get sexual, and while she refuses to do anything in the massage room, she makes a date for later that night. Her life turns upside down from then on. She begins an affair with him only to discover he's HIV positive, and then she moves back to California and brings him with her. They discover unknown inner strengths as they battle his drug addiction and her growing desire to give sexual massages to all kinds of men who come to her. She vacillates between her desire for respectability and the value of sexual freedom that she still holds dear.

Chapter One

For Roxanne's seventh birthday, her parents gave her a book called *Sixty Saints for Girls*, a thick book with yellow binding full of stories of heroic girls and women who sacrificed for Christ. Roxanne remembered clutching it in her pudgy hands, carrying it with her everywhere. The most inspiring story of all starred a little girl named Theresa, who set out to find infidels because she heard they cut off the heads of those who wouldn't renounce Jesus. Theresa's uncle stopped her. Brought her back home.

Roxanne had wanted to be that holy and noble. She imagined the thrill of that fateful confrontation. In her childish heart, her heroism had unfolded in brilliant clarity: Her arms bound, she held her head high and glared at a burly Roman soldier pointing a spear at her chest.

"Do you renounce Jesus, you ignorant girl?" he snarled.

Smiling bravely through her fear, she took strength from the power of Jesus flooding her heart, giving her the awesome power to resist anything. "No," was her simple answer, spoken with a quiver.

The soldier sneered and spit at her. "Jesus was no son of God, stupid girl. Admit he was just a man."

But the soldier saw something in her eyes he couldn't fathom, and he wavered, softening his tone. "For your own sake, girl, lay aside this dangerous belief, and we will have mercy on you. Don't you want to live? Renounce him then. Renounce Jesus!"

With each demand, young Roxanne grew stronger, her soul shining more and more radiantly with the power of God. The soldier couldn't comprehend faith such as hers, and her stubborn refusal to submit only made him angry, so that at last she was bent over the chopping block and removed of her head with one swift thwack of the axe. Straight to heaven she flew, finding herself at once clutched in the grateful arms of her heart's passion, Jesus.

But her mother said there were no such thing as infidels anymore, at least not anywhere nearby.

When Roxanne was a little older, perhaps nine or ten, before her mother died anyway, she came up with another ambition, this one more practical than martyr. She was standing at the kitchen table with one knee on a chair in her best artist's stance, most likely drawing her favorite character from her favorite book, a series centered on a young merchant marine named Tod Moran. She'd read three so far, starting with the exciting first adventure where Tod stowed away on an old tramp freighter out of San Francisco to search the ports of the Mediterranean for his brother, his only living relative, who'd mysteriously disappeared six months earlier. He found his brother held captive in Genoa, Italy, shot full of drugs to keep him docile and cooperative in a nefarious scheme involving cooked accounting. In each book that followed, the stakes were high but Tod

was always brave and noble, and his swearing sidekicks true and loyal even when drunk from shore leave.

Roxanne drew his figure with care. He had blond hair, or “sandy” as the author called it, which sounded more or less blond. He wore sailor pants that flared at the ankles. His eyes were gray, so the author said, which was good, since she was using a pencil. Next to him, she drew an anchor.

Her mother hauled a basket of clothes in from the laundry room, set them on the floor and began to fold. “Help me fold, Roxy.”

“In a minute.” Roxanne filled in the black of the anchor with hatch marks.

“Now.”

“I’m not done.”

“Roxanne Louise.” Her mother’s voice bellowed.

Roxanne threw down her pencil and scooted the chair back. “Okay.” She took a towel and began to fold.

“Thank you.” Her mother wiped sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. It was a hot summer day. “You’re good at drawing. You’re a smart girl too. What do you want to be when you grow up?”

Roxanne pursed her lips and frowned in concentration. “Truck driver,” she said at last. Her mother laughed, but Roxanne didn’t see what was so funny. Truck drivers drove all day from one place to another. And they never had to put on fancy clothes. And they always drove with their elbow sticking out the open window.

“I guess you could do that if you wanted to,” her mother said, but she sounded dubious. “Lottie Ulrich used to drive a truck.”

Now that was a surprise. Lottie Ulrich, who lived on the next corner, was an old woman with a bosom that hung down to her waist and gray hair pulled back into a messy ponytail.

“But you can be a truck driver if you want to,” her mother said. “I guess.”

Roxanne frowned.

“Perhaps you could be a teacher,” her mother said.

“No, thanks.” Roxanne lifted a pair of her father’s jeans and held it up by the waist, which reached almost to her shoulders. “I think I just want to be happy. That’s the best thing to be.” That was the perfect answer. She folded the jeans in two and then slung them over her arm and folded them again.

But her mother wasn’t pleased by that either. “We’re not here to be happy, Roxanne.”

“What’s so wrong about being happy?”

“That’s not our purpose,” her mother said. “Our purpose is to discover our talents and use them in the best possible way. It’s silly to just want to be happy.”

“But why can’t I want to be happy? You’re happy.”

“Don’t whine. I’m happy because I’m useful. You will find out what it is that you’re good at and give it to the world, and that will give you satisfaction. Now help me with this sheet.”

Roxanne strongly disagreed but kept her opinion to herself.

That summer, Roxanne fell in love with a carnie, a somber knight with curly brown hair and a noble forehead who held her hand as she alighted from the Scrambler and rested his quiet blue eyes on her with such seriousness she was sure he had a story to tell, and only to her. Stumbling, she felt caught in his eyes, her heart falling at his feet. Never had she looked into mysterious eyes like his. He had secrets, of that she was sure, as well as pure heart. For the next three days until the carnival packed up and left town, Roxanne risked punishment by sneaking under the back fence and spending her afternoons strolling up and down the midway past the dime toss and bottle throws and stopping for part of each hour to lean against the side of the cotton candy stand across from his ride and stare at him through the throngs of passing revelers.

On the first day of her watch, a tall, pretty lady with long black hair tied back with a purple scarf gave the man a Coke and leaned in to kiss him lightly on the lips. The man patted her on the behind, and she walked away, laughing. He happened to look over and see Roxanne, and he lifted his eyebrows. She looked down at the ground and pretended to be debating which ride to go on. On the second day, he began to frown at her. Horrified to realize he knew her feelings and disapproved of them, she moved her viewing post away from him where he couldn't see her. When the carnival left town, she knew she would never see him again. She wept herself to sleep, but told no one.

But she knew where her destiny lay now. Someday, she told everyone, she was going to join the carnival. No one believed her. They'd see.

Chapter Two

1974. On a bland summer evening, Roxanne strolled down Beacon Street through downtown with her best friend, Daisy, an imp of a woman with fine blond hair and a rough-tinged voice who made her laugh unexpectedly at the oddest things.

"Okay, I could try San Francisco, if you go with me," Daisy said. "We have to get out of this town."

"We will," Roxanne said. "San Francisco's cool."

"Let's move to Hawaii," Daisy said.

"How would we get there? It's pretty far."

"How far do you think it is?"

"I don't know." Daisy considered Roxanne to be very smart. "I'd say a few hundred miles."

Daisy whistled. "My sister said she'd sell me her car. It would probably make it."

"To where?"

"Hawaii. It's a Plymouth Fury. Rad car."

Roxanne bust out laughing. She couldn't help it. "Daisy, Hawaii's out in the middle of the ocean. It's an island!"

Daisy clapped her hand to her mouth. "For real?"

"Yes! You can't drive there!" She couldn't help it. She laughed so hard she had to reach out a hand to steady herself on the glass window of the drugstore.

Daisy cracked up too, which she always did when Roxanne got her going. They got each other going and could laugh for ten minutes straight at any old thing. The two of them bent over, clutching their stomachs. A passing car honked, and some boys leaned out the car door and shouted. "Lezzies!"

"Fuck you!" Daisy yelled, teetering across the sidewalk and giving them the finger. "Fuckers!"

Roxanne slid down to the sidewalk with her back against the wall, and with a great, exaggerated moan, pulled her pack of cigarettes out of her shirt pocket and put one to her lips. "Let's not move anywhere yet. Let's just stay here." She lit a match and sucked hard.

Daisy flopped down next to her. "Okay. For now." She fished a cigarette out of her own pack and borrowed Roxanne's matches. After a few minutes of quiet smoking punctuated by Daisy hiccupping, Daisy said, "What is so wrong about being a lezzie?"

"Like those guys ever met a lesbian," Roxanne said, although she'd never met one either, come to think of it.

"I've been thinking of being one," Daisy said, removing her cigarette from her lips and stretching her arm off to the side to flick it with a dramatic flourish..

“A lesbian?” Roxanne said, but the word came out of her mouth wrong, like “lehbean.” She didn’t think she’d ever said the word before.

“Why not?”

“Well, if you want to,” Roxanne said, shrugging philosophically, “I guess there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“You think so?” Daisy sat up straight and looked intently at Roxanne.

“Remember my friend, Patty? She’s a lesbian. She’s had two girlfriends and says it’s great, because you never have to put up with men.”

So she had met one. “You don’t put up with men, Daisy.” That was one of the things Roxanne liked about Daisy. Take their boss at the chicken joint. Ernest was a fat, old man, retired from the army, with a neatly dressed wife always standing guard at the cash register and looming over his side. Once, when the wife wasn’t there, he’d tried to hug Daisy out by the bathroom, but she’d laughed in his face and said, “Back off, old man.” Ever since, he’d looked a little scared around her.

“Patty, she’s the one with the curly hair, short? She’s kind of, uh—“

“She’s fat, has a loud voice. She came into work about a month ago, showed me her new car. A Chevy Duster.”

“Okay, yeah. I know who you mean.” Patty didn’t seem the type to always be putting up with men either.

“Patty says she’s a butch. You have to be a butch or a femme, she says. She told me all about it, says it’s rad. I think if I was a lesbian, I’d be a butch too.”

Roxanne wasn't so sure. Daisy, for all her tomboy looks and brash manner, was too childlike to be tough like Patty. Short, about five foot one, with dimples and blue eyes, Daisy seemed like a perpetual child, even if she could scream loud when she needed to. She had a delicate look to her most of the time and appeared lost when she ought to know where she was.

Daisy was always talking about wanting a mate. That was the word Daisy used. *Mate*. Roxanne thought things were just fine being on her own. Roxanne liked boys, sure. She'd had a couple of boyfriends, but she didn't see what the big deal was, except everyone thought you were supposed to have one.

"Patty says she doesn't know why anyone *wouldn't* be a lesbian," Daisy said.
"I've been thinking it might be the way to go."

"But what about Jerry?"

Daisy shrugged. Sore spot.

"Let's get Mike to take us up to the cemetery tomorrow night," Daisy said. "He'll do it if I ask. Want to?" Mike was in love with Daisy, but she didn't care. Too tall for his skinny frame, he slouched and hung his head down almost like he wanted people to feel sorry for him even though he insisted he was one happy man, cruising up and down Main Street on Thursday night with his eight track playing one oldies tape over and over just because Daisy loved it so much. *Sitting in Lala waiting for my yaya, uhuh, uhuh*. He didn't talk much though, so he was okay.

Guliani's cemetery lay at the end of a long, winding road up the western side of the valley right outside of Sonoma. Mike took the curves carefully.

"I came up here once," Roxanne said, "and we couldn't find it and had to turn back and go home."

"I know exactly where it is," Daisy said in a voice bursting with bravado. "I've been up here lots."

"If we get lost," Mike said, "it's pretty dark up here. Are you sure this is right? Seems like we've been driving and driving a long way."

"Are you scared, Mikey?"

"Of course not. I just don't want to put you girls in any danger."

Roxanne hooted.

"Hey, Mikey," Daisy said. "I think I'm gay." She watched him closely, and Roxanne watched Daisy from the back seat. Shut up, Daisy, she wanted to say. Be nice to the guy for a change.

He let out a loud guffaw. "Like shit you are!"

"I can be if I want to," Daisy said, huddling down into her seat and looking out the window at the dark forest passing by.

"Oh, sure. Like you can dye your hair red, right? Go to the store and ask for a can of gay, see how far you get. You're a card, Daisy girl."

Roxanne pressed herself against the door so she could get the wind blowing fully on her face from Daisy's open window. She sucked up the smells of the woods, the bay

trees, the mossy trunks of the oak trees, and wondered what it would be like to be a dog and smell things even better. Her mama had once told her that she lived in a beautiful place, and after her mama had died, she'd taken extra care to appreciate the sights and smells and wonders all around. She especially liked the curling madrones alongside the oak trees that grew along mountain roads like this and turned into goblins at night. So her mama had said.

"Here. Stop," Daisy said. "Mikey, stop!"

He braked and turned quickly into a clear spot with room for only a couple of cars. In front of them rose a cast iron arch that loomed like a monster out of the dark and made them gasp in unison.

"This is it," Daisy whispered. Mike dug a flashlight out of the glove compartment before the shutting off the car. With the headlights extinguished, the dark enclosed them completely except for the narrow beam of light from the flashlight. Giggling, they stepped out the car and shut the doors quietly, then stepped under the arch and fell silent. Not a sound escaped the graveyard, but over their heads, an owl called a greeting. Or a warning.

"I'm scared," Daisy whispered, clinging to Roxanne's shirt. There was no moon to cast a glow, only a few stars showing in a circle of space high above the trees.

"I'm not scared," Roxanne said right out loud, her words booming, then vanishing immediately, absorbed into the dark. Maybe she was scared, but only a little. As her eyes accustomed to the dark, she made out the vague shapes of gravestones and statues. She put her hand on a cold, granite headstone sticking out of the ground at a slight angle.

Her breath seemed to hang in the air. Daisy let go of her. She wandered between the graves, farther and farther on, stepping gingerly over low, dry weeds, her mouth pulled back in a silent and enormous grin.

Cemeteries were the only place where death didn't intrude. When her mother had died, the cemetery became the one place she knew her mother wasn't at. Their house, the car, her schoolyard where her mother had come to watch her play volleyball, the downtown streets where they shopped for school clothes, the library, the grocery store, the highway south where they'd driven to San Francisco every year to Christmas shop, the highway north where they'd gone to visit her cousins and go camping, on every road in and out of town, on every sidewalk, her mother materialized just out of the corner of her eye. She'd had to train herself to stop turning her head suddenly to see. She'd had to accept that her mother was everywhere except right in front of her, and to know that that's how things would always be.

The one place her mother never passed through was a cemetery. Standing between two tall headstones, she closed her eyes and tried to sense the presence of ghosts but only felt a cold and peaceful feeling. This place held bone and memories, nothing more.

She found herself at the iron railing that marked the far end of the cemetery. Alone. Perhaps she'd gone too far astray from the others. Weeds rustled. Something squealed nearby. Animals. They were watching her. She could still see almost nothing but light shapes of granite and the faint glint of the iron railings.

"Roxanne!"

Whipping her head around, she saw a black empty space off to her left, blacker than the dark on either side of it.

“Roxanne!”

Thrilled, she rushed toward the black space, leaping over graves, brushing past the tall weeds, keeping between the shapes of granite until she came upon the black space which now turned into a large tree, and as she drew close, a hand reached out and pulled her behind. The hand was Daisy’s. The arm wrapping around her body was Daisy’s. The lips that pressed on hers—Daisy’s!

It had been Daisy whispering. Daisy calling her. Daisy wanted her to come and be kissed. And she’d come without hesitation. Together, they leaned against the tree and into each other, hidden away by the spirit of night. No one could see. They held each other and kissed with new and immaculate desire, like fawns in the wood, or that’s how it felt to Roxanne, as if she’d never kissed a living soul before. Stunned, she reared back her head and stared at Daisy’s face, the face she thought she’d known but had never seen so close. Daisy’s eyes shone like a cat’s out of the dark shadow of her skin. How did Daisy know she would kiss her back? Roxanne would never have thought of this on her own.

They both brushed their hair from their eyes and laughed, and then they leaned in to kiss again. Daisy was so brave. When Mike cried out their names, they ignored him until his voice grew frantic. “We’re here,” Roxanne yelled, her voice cracking, shattering their solitude.

“Don’t wet your panties,” Daisy said.

On the drive home, Roxanne sat behind Daisy and wondered when she would get to kiss her again. She hadn't considered such a thing before, even if Daisy had been talking about being gay. She hadn't known she meant *this*.

But when they got back to town, Mike dropped Roxanne off at her house first, and Roxanne hesitated on the sidewalk, smiling dumbly at Daisy, who waved goodbye with her usual grin as the car pulled away from the curb.

At work, Roxanne waited for something else to happen. *Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do*. Her father used to sing that song when she little. But Daisy didn't let on that anything had happened. They bantered with Ernest and Allen, the other driver, a large, red-faced boy who also had a crush on Daisy. It was as if the kiss had been a dream. Sometimes while they sat on the stools at the counter waiting for more orders to come in, she saw Daisy looking soberly at her, her chin tucked and her eyes boring into hers, but when Roxanne looked back, even if only for a moment, Daisy would smile and turn away as if she meant nothing by her look. As for her part, Roxanne was stricken with intense shyness and could not come up with the right words to get Daisy to kiss her again.

Two weeks later, Roxanne got to use her cousin's apartment one night when her cousin went to L.A. to visit her boyfriend. Daisy accepted her invitation to spend the night. They sat on the couch and stared out the bay window at an old abandoned house

across the street. Roxanne gave Daisy a glass of Almaden wine and drank one herself, quickly, then put Aretha Franklin on the record player and turned the lights down. Roxanne tried to relax, and tried to make Daisy relax. Daisy usually talked all the time, but tonight she was strangely silent. After two glasses of wine, she began to talk.

“My mom made a u-turn on the freeway today.”

Roxanne spit out her wine laughing.

“Yeah, can you believe it?” Daisy said. “On the fucking freeway! I kept yelling at her, Ma, Ma, you can’t turn around here, but she kept saying it wasn’t the freeway, it’s just the frontage road, and she keeps making her u-turn. Nothing nobody can do about it. My little brother’s in the back seat, and I turn around to check on him, and his eyes are fucking huge. He told me later my eyes were fucking huge too.”

“Did you hit anyone?”

“No. There wasn’t anyone around. She figured it out quick.”

They grew quiet then. Roxanne poured more wine, and they sang along to *Do Right Woman* when it came on the record. Daisy was a little off key. When the next song came on, *The Night Time is the Right Time*, Roxanne swallowed her nervousness and moved over on the couch and began a series of actions that she knew were profoundly adult because they felt almost fake, as if she were directing herself in a movie. *Now place your arm on back of couch, gently, casually. Now lean your head back and gaze philosophically at the light fixture on the ceiling. If you have to swallow, do it quietly.*

Daisy turned her face toward Roxanne's. This was the right time. She gave herself the proper instructions. *Now lean your head down and place a kiss on her lips.* She did it. Daisy let her. *When your lips meet, leave them there for a moment. Now draw back and smile with satisfaction.*

Daisy blurted out, "So where's the bedroom in this place?"

Rise and lead her down the hallway, careful not to trip on the cord plugging in the fan that sits on the floor. Don't turn on the light even if the hall is dark. You don't want to ruin the mood.

"I have to use the bathroom," Daisy said. *Point toward the door on the right of the hallway and pause, then proceed to the bedroom and sit down and wait.* Roxanne sat on the edge of the bed and swallowed the saliva that had gathered so thick it was about to choke her.

When Daisy returned, Roxanne rose and went to the bathroom herself, avoiding the mirror for fear of what she'd see in her eyes. That night at the cemetery, they'd been happy. Now they would be happy again. Back in the bedroom, Daisy was already under the covers. *Slip out of your clothes. Underwear too? Leave it on.* Daisy was wearing blue pajamas with pink roses.

"Where'd you get those?" Roxanne asked as she slid under the covers.

"I brought my own pajamas. I never go to bed in the nude, do you?"

"No, of course not. I have a nightgown." Roxanne started to get up. "I'll put it on."

Daisy stopped her. “No,” she said in a whisper. “I’ll take mine off, if you’ll take your underwear off.”

“Okay.” Roxanne sat up and unhooked her bra and drew it down her arms and dropped it on the floor, then slipped out of her underpants and dropped them too. Having underwear strewn on the floor, that was like being in a movie too. She usually laid her clothes on a chair. When Daisy had removed her pajamas, the two of them lay under the covers, still and quiet. Now things should proceed.

After a while, Daisy whispered, “Aren’t you going to *do* something?”

Do something. Roxanne drew herself up on one elbow and, swallowing more saliva as quietly as she could, laid her hand on Daisy’s breast and rolled it under her palm in a loving fashion. *Now* things should just proceed. Daisy waited. Roxanne leaned in and kissed her again. Daisy opened her mouth and moved her tongue against Roxanne’s, but not with the wild abandon from the cemetery. Afraid that Daisy would ask her again if she wasn’t going to *do* something, Roxanne slid her hand down Daisy’s stomach, marveling at the smoothness of her naked body. When she reached her pubic hair, she let her palm hover over the fine tendrils, so different than a man’s. At last, Daisy moved, edging her thighs slightly apart, and Roxanne searched inside the downy cleft, only to find an unforeseen obstacle laying there—the string of a tampon. She froze.

Some more stage directions would help. Nothing occurred to her. She could not proceed. Even if she’d known what to do with Daisy’s body, which she didn’t, Roxanne was stymied by the tampon string. Daisy barely breathed. What now? At last Roxanne simply removed her fingers, brought her hands back to her side and lay back and looked

up at the ceiling, where the streetlight cast a white shadow. And together they lay like that, silent and defeated, the sides of their hands touching but neither of them moving, until they finally fell asleep.

Chapter Three

Daisy appeared at work two days later with a man she introduced as her boyfriend, Larry, who was dressed in a flowery shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest and bellbottoms flopping widely around his ankles. Ernest and Allen stared with envy at his arm lying protectively around Daisy's shoulder.

"I'm quitting next week," Daisy said. "Just want you all to know. Larry's moving in with me." Larry leaned back on his heels and grinned proudly.

"Supposed to give two weeks notice, kiddo," Ernest said.

"Yeah, well, you're supposed to pay minimum wage, old man."

"You get tips."

"Like hell we do. Anyway, you all are invited to a party," Daisy said, handing out small cards with ducks kissing on the front and the date and time and place written in block letter on the lines provided. When she handed one to Roxanne, she smiled smugly and a little cruelly, or so it seemed to Roxanne.

Roxanne drank way too much at the party. Larry drove off in a rage after arguing with Daisy for half an hour in the bathroom, and most everyone else left too when Daisy

turned down the stereo and said she wanted to go to drive up to see her sister in Chico and they'd all have to leave. Roxanne decided the time had come to make her stand. Weaving back and forth in front of the couch where Daisy sat glaring at her, she said, "You wait right there. I have to get my cigarettes. Don't go anywhere yet." Patting her jeans pockets, she looked from side to side. "Where's my cigarettes? Think I left them outside. Stay there." She pointed at Daisy's chest as if she could pin her down and make her stay. "Don't go anywhere yet."

Out on the front lawn, she found her cigarettes lying on the open tailgate of the truck some cool guy named Frank had driven up in a while back. He'd been refilling her drink for the last hour. Great guy. He grabbed her coat when she reached for her smokes, knocking them out of her hand. "You're a ripe tomato, you know that, Roxanne? Let me be your old man tonight."

"Okay. Just wait a minute." Old man! What a hoot. She surprised herself by staying on both her feet while bending over to pick up her cigarettes even though the ground swayed awfully close. "Don't go yet. Wait here." She pointed her finger at him too, then turned back to the front door. But it was locked.

"Hey!" Roxanne banged on the door loudly. "Daisy, open the door!" Not a sound came from inside. The knob didn't budge. She banged harder, then kicked. She leaned back and howled. The night sky was littered with stars.

"Come onnnnn!" Bang, bang, bang, bang! She was *so* drunk. Damn, 151 proof rum was *amazingly* powerful stuff. "Okay, Daisy! I'm coming in anyway!" With one punch, she knocked the pane out of the nearest window, smashing glass shards past the

curtain into the room, and stuck her head through, then dragged the rest of her body behind. Standing in the center of the living room with her coat on, Daisy flinched but didn't move, as if she was stuck, as Roxanne grabbed her blouse just under her neck with both hands, one of them bloody.

Yanking Daisy's face up close to her own, she said, "Why did you lock me out?"

Daisy turned white but didn't say a word.

"Why don't you say anything?" Roxanne yelled louder. Mute, Daisy hung limp in her grasp. She had big eyes, not blue like Roxanne had thought but gray and brown when you looked up close like this. Roxanne narrowed her eyes and stared and waited for Daisy to start talking back. But she didn't. Just stared with eyes that kept getting bigger. Roxanne let go, grabbed her sweater and walked back out the door to Frank.

"Let's go."

The next day. Roxanne squinted against the harsh sunlight streaming in the window behind the intake worker's head.

"When you feel like eating, the kitchen's over there," the woman said, her even gaze making Roxanne nervous. "You can make sandwiches any time, night or day. And we're here to talk twenty-four hours. There's a phone on the wall if you want to make a call. Would you like us to call someone for you?"

Her aunts would only worry. Lucky for her, her dad was out of town, because ever since he'd quit drinking, he looked down on people who drank too much. She shook her head. The woman nodded kindly and let Roxanne escape to the women's sleeping quarters. Curled under the covers, she couldn't stop shivering but at last fell into a restless sleep. When she woke, she knew where she was. Someone was rustling in some bags at another bed across the room, a woman with gray hair bent over and muttering to her. Closing her eyes, she lay comatose until her bladder forced her to get up.

There was an awful sound in the air. Something blaring far off. Each time a car passed, the swoosh of its tires through the window made Roxanne cringe, and the sunshine poking through the blinds was so bright she could hardly stand to keep her eyes open. But she had to pee. One foot ahead of the other. Nice and slow. The floor was made of alternating red and green linoleum squares which just fit her foot. She stepped inside a square with each step, making sure not to step on lines. But even so, she knew she'd broken a window the night before. And held her hands to Daisy's throat.

She hugged herself and pulled the sweater tighter. Why couldn't she stop shaking? It had to be eighty degrees, and this place didn't have air conditioning. There was something really wrong with her. She'd asked the intake lady if she was having a nervous breakdown, but the lady wouldn't say one way or the other.

A sandwich would be good. Making herself a cheese and baloney sandwich, she decided to call her aunts and tell them she'd be going up north with Daisy for a few days and would be back in time for work and not to worry. The call went easily. They didn't suspect a thing even though she could hear her voice shake, but just barely. Then she sat

on the red vinyl couch in the middle of a large common room and wrapped herself in a gray blanket that lay there. Deep in her anguish, she didn't notice the man sitting on the opposite couch. But he began to talk. Was he talking to her? She looked around. She was the only one sitting there. His eyes were wide open and flitted to her face and around the room in antic fashion, although his body sat uncomfortably still. A haggard, unshaven face and splotched white t-shirt made him look as bad as she felt.

“Hey, you all right? You're cold,” he said.

She shook her head.

“Okay,” he said. “I'm kind of hot. Wish I was cold.”

The squishy bread on the sandwich stuck to her teeth like glue.

“Name's Spencer.” He jumped up and thrust his hand out. “Pleased to meet you.”

She took his hand and shook it limply, even though she hated people who couldn't shake hands properly. His fingers were yellowed from cigarettes and the whites of his eyes were red with veins, but his posture was straight, and he grinned easily, and underneath his decay shone a kind face, almost handsome.

“So what's your name, babe?” He stood there until she finished chewing.

“Roxanne.”

“Ah.” He sat back down directly across from her. “I once knew a Roxanne.

Lived down the street. She was a Pentecostal. Always wore a dress, always had her hair tied back in a ponytail. The girls couldn't cut their hair in that religion, can you believe that? What could have happened with short hair? Never could understand that.” He shook his head and gave a bemused look to the general room, although the only audience was

herself. “She told me my first dirty joke. Wasn’t very dirty. Wasn’t very funny either. But we all have to start somewhere. Want a cigarette?”

She pointed to her own pack tucked between the seat cushions.

“I’m coming down off heroin,” he said matter-of-factly as he lit up. “What are you in for? Man trouble?” His smile was kind.

“No.”

“Don’t mean to pry,” he said. “Mind if I talk? It helps.”

“It’s okay.”

“Sorry?” he said. “I can’t hear you.”

“It’s okay.”

“Good. Because if I couldn’t talk, I’d have to shoot up or shoot myself. Just kidding.”

Roxanne wasn’t up to talking much above a whisper, but Spencer wasn’t really talking to her, so it didn’t matter. His voice served as background. She wasn’t thinking of much, tried to not think of Daisy, because every time she did, she shook harder, and nothing changed. She’d made a fool of herself. She seemed to have one power left, and that was to sit absolutely still, except for chewing, so she did that as much as she could and just drifted into listening. Spencer had a musical voice.

Every now and then one of them got up to use the bathroom or get a sandwich, then returned to their same spots and resumed their respective roles of talking or listening, she with the gray blanket wrapped tightly around her shoulders.

“So I went off the deep end. On account of my best friend overdosing. He’s dead.”

She heard that. His face had collapsed into a sagging shell of itself. But before she could think of what to say, which could take her a while, his face snapped back to life, and he began to search the room with his eyes again. “But I know he’s okay. Now I just have to get me okay.”

“How do you know?”

“What?” He looked startled to hear her speak.

“How do you know he’s okay?”

“He *told* me.”

She lifted her eyebrows and stared at him. Leaning slightly forward, she clutched the blanket tightly in her fist and said, “I know what you mean. My mother died.”

“Oh, baby, I didn’t know that. Man, I’m so sorry. No wonder you’re so down.”

“No, not now. A long time ago. But she told me the same thing. It wasn’t a dream. I heard her.”

“I believe you.”

Roxanne nodded solemnly, and he looked directly in her eyes in a sort of true meeting, more true than when he’d shaken her hand.

“You have special sight,” he said. “Me too. I can feel my friend around still. He could be sitting right next to me right now,” he said, and chuckled mischievously.

“You’d like him. His name is Charles. Say howdy.”

“Howdy,” she whispered to the spot next to Spencer. The red vinyl gleamed silently. She wanted to tell him how he was the first person she’d ever told. But she’d trained herself to not speak of her mother.

“Dead people are fine, most of them,” Spencer said.

What a strange guy. Spencer continued to talk off and on all day, switching topics like he was taking a Rorschach test. By the next day, they’d been through several sandwiches and had taken a break or two to sleep before returning to the couch, and they were becoming old pals. Roxanne even began to add to the conversation now and then.

“There’s little room in this world for a mystic,” Spencer said. He lay on his back and had one foot on the ground and the other pushing rhythmically against the armrest opposite his head. “It’s why we’re tempted by drugs and sex and all kinds of libidinous activities. The libido can take a fellow down deep into himself, but too far, and you’re lost. Oh, that’s not true. Too far? No, not far enough. You have to go all the way.” He sneered at the ceiling, bared his teeth and breathed like a monster spitting fire. “I’m afraid to live! What do you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I do. The only people for me are the mad ones! Know who said that?”

She cocked her head and smiled slowly. “Jack Kerouac?”

“Yesss.” He looked down the plane of his nose at her in approval. “And do you agree?”

“Yes. But—” She frowned. “Won’t it just lead to trouble?”

“So far, in my experience, that’s exactly what it leads to.” He laughed. “Hey, you have a gorgeous smile.”

She felt herself blush. Without thinking of the implications, she laid her hand on the vinyl cushion next to her, as if in invitation, which he took it to be, settling in next to her with his thigh up against hers. They each took out a cigarette, and he lit them both, cupping his hand around the flame. She noticed she’d stopped shaking. For the rest of the day, she asked him questions about her soul.

“Your soul is in charge,” he said. “Not you. Your soul never dies, and your soul has a craving for experience and expansion. Nothing you can do about it.”

“I’ve never heard of the soul talked about except in religious terms. *Et cum spiritu tuo.*”

He put his arm around her shoulder. “Now some people like to get their experiences in more normal ways, like raising kids and punching clocks and checking out right after they get their gold watch. Then there’s people like you and me. We’re the black sheep. We have to go check out the dive bar at the end of the street and fall in love with the tattooed lady.”

“The top of my head feels warm and tingly,” she said, smoothing her hand over her hair and down to the back of her neck.

“That’s your crown chakra. The Hindus have a system of chakras, six of them, I think. Or seven?” He waved his cigarette in the air. “Doesn’t matter. They’re energy centers. The one on top of your head is the one that connects you to the universe.”

“And what does that do?”

“Umm. Man, most people don’t ask all these questions. Okay, when you’re connected to the universe, which you always are, of course, but when you feel it, then you know you’re in a state of grace. You can feel yourself being guided.”

“By who?”

He waved his hand again and laughed. “The universe! It’s a force.”

That night, she slept ten hours, and the next day woke with no shakes, and they only reappeared intermittently all that next day. On the evening of her third day, they checked out of the crisis center and went to his place, a small apartment in a run-down Victorian near the center of town. Both of them felt better. He’d eaten so much his stomach stuck out like a melon, and he’d been bone skinny when she first met him.

“That’s good for you,” she said.

“It is, it is,” he said. She detected sorrow in his voice.

They had sex because they had to, not because of a raging desire. They simply had to. Fucking was the appropriate end to their strange days of communion. She felt only a little uncomfortable afterwards. When she asked if she could stay with him, he said nope.

“Why not?”

He leaned his head back on his pillow and crossed his arms. “Because. Besides, you’re a baby still.”

“I am not.”

“Not in body. Hoho, not in body, no ma’am.” He winked at her. “But you’re still a baby in the world. You think I’m grown up and wise? That shows how young you are.”

He held his thumb and finger a half inch apart. "I know this much about the great, wide universe of the soul, and I've told you all about it."

"Just a couple days."

"I'm a heroin addict!" He threw up his hands. "As far as either of us knows, I'm going out right after you leave to hit up again. I'm a wreck of a human being right now." When she reached for him, he leaned back and laughed. "You're so easy, it's like taking candy from a baby. No, you better leave. In the morning."

They slept holding each other. She woke at dawn, just in time to see her mother walk past the bed and into the hallway, striding in a straight line as if she knew exactly where she was going and didn't need to stop. Even so, when she saw Roxanne looking at her, she slowed for a moment and looked back with some surprise in the same way Roxanne looked at her. She had no feet that Roxanne could see, and her body was transparent. After their one glance of acknowledgement, her mother passed through the doorway to the kitchen and disappeared from sight as if she had other things to take care of and hadn't meant to stay.

Spencer was excited about her sighting. "You saw her!" Spencer cried, clutching her wrist. "You saw your dead mother."

At first, Roxanne was strangely calm, although the more she talked about it, the more excited she became. "Now I'm sure she does this all the time. She keeps an eye on me. I think I even knew. That's why it felt so normal, as if I *know* she does this but I pretend not to."

"Why show herself now?"

“She didn’t. I’m open to seeing her now. That’s what’s different.” She leaned her head to one side and looked at him from an angle. “My crown chakra is open. Like you said.”

Dust motes swirling slowly in the light through the window sent shocks of electricity through her body. Spencer’s words tasted like butter. Oh, did she truly have to leave his company? They could get together the next day perhaps. Or the following week after they’d recovered more. She stood awkwardly at the door when it was time to go.

“No,” he said, smoothing her hair from her eyes, his hand sounding like rain. “Don’t worry about me. Maybe your mama will drop in on me from time to time. She can watch over my derelict ass.” He let go and gave her a light shove. A bird took flight and sent leaves fluttering above her head. “Now you git.”

Chapter Four

Without Daisy to pal around with, Sonoma really began to pall. The whole state, in fact, began to depress Roxanne’s spirits. She was at a friend’s house for a backyard picnic when it hit her. Jake lived next to a vineyard in a perfectly lovely spot shaded by oak trees. A creek ran nearby, and his house was not too far from town but far enough to not have traffic or close neighbors. He passed around a joint made from the finest Jamaican and served premium wine. Jake always had the best of everything.

After dinner, when everyone sat digesting in lawn chairs and talking past each other, too stoned to notice they were only speaking to themselves, Jake brought out his saxophone and began to play jazzy slow tunes as the sun set. A person couldn't have asked for a more perfect setting. But all Roxanne could think of was how decadent it all was and how much she wanted to get away from this sort of thing. Her jaw tightened, and her shoulders stiffened as the evening wore on, even with the wine and the sweet music.

It took her a while to figure out why the scene had unnerved her so. She realized she was the sort of person who needed to live in a place where people made more of an effort and had a sense of purpose. She had a lot of growing up to do, and maybe California wasn't the place to do it.

So she'd driven with her friend Jean across the country and ended up in Minneapolis when their van broke down. Jean had relatives in town, and Roxanne still had a few dollars from her last job to tide her over until she landed on her feet somewhere, so why not here? She got a job and a room and bided her time. Minnesota scared her at first. She was shocked by the interminable flatness of the land, inconceivable to eyes used to mountain ranges and ocean cliffs. The empty horizon disoriented her, and soon she felt almost gruesomely homesick and only stayed because she hadn't yet figured out what she wanted to be. Going home wouldn't help. Minneapolis felt like an enclave on the moon, but maybe that's where she needed to be, or that's what she told herself. Perhaps an unseen hand had placed her there and wanted her to stay.

And without planning for it to happen, she began to like Minnesota very much. She began to notice curves that weren't mountains or even hills as she knew them but softly undulating contours that gave the eye rest, comforting rather than grand like the vistas back home. When the first winter snows fell, she was startled by the tender way snowflakes had of falling on her eyelashes and cheeks, their touch making her deliriously happy. On long walks through falling snow, she fell in love with how it overtook all the noise of modern life and turned the clamor of her loneliness into a soft murmur.

When she went home for a visit in the dead of winter, the environment in her native state seemed too lavish, almost baroque, with flowers blooming in January and the hills in every direction rising and falling so flagrantly they made her claustrophobic. Back in Minnesota, she was thrilled when the tiny purple crocuses of spring popped out of the wet ground, followed by the fast growing grasses and the abundance of leaves bursting out from every dark branch and tiny twig that had seemed dead and lifeless but had only been sleeping. Warm summer rains and wild thunderstorms convinced her of the superiority of the Midwest, for they didn't get such things back home.

And Minnesota gave her a sense of action. People had to rely on their neighbors in the winter, and they formed coops and worked together for the common good. Even the politics was different. The Democratic Party in Minnesota was called the Democratic Farmer Labor party. A true coalition working together to bring about a positive and liberal society. When Ronald Reagan was elected president of the US and the only state to vote against him was Minnesota, Roxanne decided she could stay right where she was and leave California behind.

Chapter Five

“We must all be prepared when the time comes,” the woman with bright yellow hair said, eyeing the group of women soberly. Roxanne leaned over to see past Lisa’s head. Lisa’s living room was almost empty now except for a few boxes and one large couch, the rest of her stuff packed onto the back of a pickup truck downstairs, and her friends were tired. Lisa had broken open a six-pack of Pepsi and handed them around.

“And it’s coming soon,” the woman continued. “Are you strong? Do you know how to grow your own food and preserve fruits and vegetables? Can you all sew? This is no joke. We can’t just read *The Wanderground* and agree with it. We have to be ready to live it.”

Roxanne nodded earnestly. Yellow Hair was fantastic. With searing green eyes and a stern but kind face, she stood out from the rest of them. Everyone listened to her. Roxanne was new in this crowd and didn’t know this woman, not yet, but she hoped to in the future. Fortunately, she’d just finished reading *The Wanderground*, the book the woman was talking about. Roxanne had been struck dumb. Talk about a manifesto for a new world. A new world made by and for women, based on the highest values of non-monogamy and justice and psychic communication. Where women’s simple but profound love for each other conquered the hard world of patriarchy and rendered it powerless. Where babies, girl babies, were born of parthenogenesis. Where no sperm

was needed, and no man had a place. Men had lost the battle because they deserved to lose. Making love to each other without jealousy, teaching the girls their true power, women grew in strength to such a powerful height they zapped the men into oblivion, or to the other side of the boundary of the Wandergound. Women's land. Their land. At last.

"How about self-defense?" Lisa asked.

"Yes!" The woman with the white-blond hair nodded approvingly. "It's time to fight back!" She had a high forehead and wore large black-rimmed glasses. Roxanne couldn't remember her name, but they were all listening as if she had the score. What an exciting time to be alive. Roxanne had shown up today just to help her friend move, and now she was in the midst of a crucial discussion directly impacting her future.

"Go for the eyes," the yellow-haired woman said. Who on earth was she? She was fantastic. "I know, you get squeamish thinking about it. That's because it's effective. Put your fingers and thumb together like this." She squished them together so they formed a battering ram at the tips. "And jab hard. That will stop them fast, and you can run away."

"Man, I'm getting a gun," a lesbian named Dana said. Dana had long legs, reddish hair and tomboy freckles and might look pretty good in a shootout, Roxanne thought.

"No way," said White Hair, throwing up her arms. "We don't want to stoop to a man's level. A women's revolution is going to be peaceful. Let the men try violence.

Like Dorothy Gearheart says in the book, we have *spiritual* power. No contest. We'll win."

Yes. We'll win. Roxanne had come out just in time. Things were heating up. "What's that woman's name?" she asked Dana as the conversation shifted to other matters. "Do you know her?"

"I think that's Dorothy Swarden. She teaches self-defense for woman down at the Y. Man, I'd hate to run into her in a dark alley if I was the wrong sex."

Roxanne glared at her for using such slang as "man." She wasn't evolved. Dana walked downstairs with her. "So how long have you been out, Roxanne?"

"Oh, not long." It had been three and a half weeks, almost.

"Say, you want to go to the Cris Williamson concert with me next week? I have an extra ticket." Dana was mumbling, but Roxanne heard her.

"Oh, I'd *love* to see Cris Williamson. She's my absolutely favorite singer. Yeah, let's do it." She had a date! With a woman!

Roxanne had decided as soon as she came out that she wasn't going to be just a lesbian but a lesbian separatist. Separatists were the badasses of radical feminism. They did not like men, neither gay nor straight, not at all, nor women who had anything to do with men, nor their male children, no matter how young. Not even baby boys. Roxanne fully expected the nation and even the whole world to go through cataclysmic changes, and quickly. Revolution simmered.

Sure, the vision in *The Wanderground* was a bit fantastic, perhaps. But women were rising from their dreary oppression, leaving the kitchens and babies so far behind

that *anything* might happen. Women didn't yet know their strength. Men had always determined what was possible. But women might be in tune with nature in ways men couldn't fathom, might be so intuitively wise when they put their minds together that the usual forces used to keep them in control—fists, fear, and misguided womanly loyalty—were rendered useless. These women Roxanne was beginning to hang out with had no loyalty to the diseased patriarchy.

And her new identity wasn't all about sex. It was about justice.

Alone in her bed that night, she masturbated. Not to Dana. Not to the woman with yellow hair. Not to any woman. She masturbated to disgusting pictures in her mind. With her eyes closed, and her arm rigid, she dug her finger into her clitoris while conjuring a man with rough hands lift her skirt, bend her over a barrel in some back alley and fuck her from behind. Under her fingers, her clitoris convulsed, spiking a wave of electricity down to her toes and out her fingers. But soon she would be free of these thoughts at last. What a mistake it had been to ever let these thoughts into her head. She never even wore skirts. She wasn't that woman.

Dana placed a pillow under Roxanne's hips and set to licking her clitoris well and properly. Roxanne waited. Nothing. She never had liked men sticking their heads down their either. But she'd hoped a woman would feel different.

Sheila, a skinny dyke with a goofy, wide smile took to her next. Sheila had never had an orgasm at all, not even from her own fingers. Lying under several blankets on Roxanne's narrow futon on a cold winter night, Sheila urged Roxanne to make herself come and watched in envy, peeking under the covers.

"Maybe you could fantasize," Roxanne said when they lay curled in each other's arms after she'd come.

"About what?" Sheila said. "You're right here. You're my lover."

"When you're by yourself. I don't know, maybe just think of sexy scenes."

Roxanne didn't want to go into detail.

"This is a sexy scene," Sheila said, kissing her chastely on the lips.

Roxanne agreed. "Sure is."

They broke up after a potluck in which the meat lasagna had everyone in an uproar. Roxanne wouldn't agree to never eat meat again. Sheila called her bourgeois. Roxanne wept to Lisa, who reminded her of how she'd been so tired of Sheila only the day before. "You two weren't exactly a love match."

Chapter Six

Ah, the nakedness! The Michigan Women's Music Festival screamed freedom for women loud and clear. Roxanne passed two women wearing only baggy shorts sitting on tree stumps as she walked through the campsite looking for an empty site. She didn't know if she'd be that brave, but she hoped so. She pitched her two-person tent in a site next to Lisa's and laid out her sleeping bag, stowed her pack and headed to lunch. Food was provided with the price of the ticket—vegetarian fare for dinner, sandwiches for lunch, and granola for breakfast. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were also available all day long at long tables set up at the feeding area for those who wanted more freeform eating schedules and didn't want to stand in the long meal lines.

Showers were set up outdoors too. Everything was outdoors. Roxanne had never seen so many naked women: Fat, skinny, buck-toothed, beautiful, big-breasted, fat-legged, hairy-legged, long-legged, white as potatoes, golden-tanned, a few as dark as coffee. Most had short hair, some so short they looked shorn to the nubs, but a few sported long hair that flung water with the shake of a head. Standing under the streams of water along a row of showers, the women spread their thighs and soaped their crotches, lifted their arms and washed their pits, and shampooed their hair and brushed their teeth.

All day long under the hot Midwestern sun, thousands of women sat in on guitar workshops, wandered through craft tables piled high with homemade soaps and cotton drawstring pants and listened to the day concerts of lesser-known singers, or they hiked through the woods, made love in their tents, or sat around their camps in folding chairs eating peanut butter sandwiches and talking their hearts out. Half naked, some of them. No men around!

Roxanne got a haircut. She asked the woman who set up shop with a pair of scissors next to the craft tables to please “Cut it as short as possible!” It was time to look like a dyke all the way. She pulled her shirt off and sat on a stool and turned her head this way and that as the woman snipped away, each snick of the scissors giving Roxanne a delicious tingle, each shorn lock tumbling over her shoulders making her deliriously happy. When the woman brushed the bits of dark hair that clung to her arms and breasts and told her she was all done, Roxanne stood up and felt herself naked and strong and reborn.

She walked into Lisa’s campsite and said, “Look at me!”

The woman with the white-blond hair was sitting on a campstool near the fire pit. She took one gander at Roxanne and began to weep, rising from her seat as if confronted by a horror. “I—I liked your hair!” she cried, then turned and ran into the woods.

Shocked silent, Roxanne looked to Lisa, who said, with a laugh, “She’s got a crush on you, you know.”

“No. I didn’t.” Now *that* was a delight to hear. Roxanne sat by the fire and set to musing under Lisa’s maternal gaze.

“Do you like her?” Lisa asked. “She’s very intelligent. She’s a painter.”

Roxanne caught her breath. “An artist?” Ah, no wonder she had such intense emotions!

“No. She paints houses.”

Ah. Well, she was tough as well as intensely emotional. “Yes, I like her. Well, I don’t know her. Yet. But yes.” What an embrace that would be, from a woman who

cried over a haircut, who shed tears at the loss of her locks. She'd be an ardent lover. Roxanne had just failed to entice her latest crush, a dreamy woman named Ann with a gap between her teeth, to be her lover. She'd been moping.

That evening, she met Dorothy's eyes several times through dinner—bean stew with vegetables—and Dorothy's pupils seemed to shine with exaggerated feeling. Roxanne felt enormously proud. Dorothy wasn't a lightweight dyke. She was serious. Didn't talk much, but what she said was meaningful. She thought about things. That evening, Roxanne sought her out in the field where the women were laying out their blankets in preparation for the night's concert and asked her with a coquettish smile if she could join her.

Sitting cross-legged on Dorothy's blanket, their knees almost touching, Roxanne drew a bag of pistachios from her pocket and asked if Dorothy would like some. Together, they cracked open the nuts and munched in companionable silence, now and then speaking in friendly tones, remarking on the size of the crowd, which they both agreed was quite simply huge, and the developing sunburn they were both beginning to feel under their clothes (with evening, clothes had come back into use) and finally discussing the evening's main performer, Holly Near.

"I have one Holly Near record that I kind of like, I guess," Roxanne said. "But something about her just rubs me wrong. I guess she can have long hair if she wants to. But is she even a lesbian? Really?" She shivered in disgust. She had a feeling Dorothy might like this line of criticism.

Dorothy raised her head and threw it all the way back with a loud laugh that made all the other lesbians sitting around them turn and look. “Nearly Hollow?” she bellowed. “I can’t stand her!”

Roxanne directed a defiant stare at the disapproving looks turned their way.

“She’s a lightweight feminist,” Dorothy said, rolling her eyes. “Look at her hair, almost down to her butt. Not like Alix Dobkin.”

“I’m so looking forward to hearing Alix tomorrow,” Roxanne said. “She’s so great. She actually uses the word ‘lesbian’ in her songs.”

“Well, why not?” Dorothy said. “I hate all this ‘women’ stuff. It’s ‘lesbian music,’ not ‘women’s music.’ Just come out and say it. Quit trying to get by.”

“Yeah. I totally agree!”

Dorothy sneered. “I don’t even want to hear Holly Near, but everyone else wanted to come, and there was nothing else to do.”

Roxanne nodded. Might as well go along with the crowd, which was all gathered here over this hillside, women filling in every bare spot on the ground with their blankets and chairs, the growing murmur of thousands. Lisa had a new lover and was busily occupied stroking her cheek and laughing too loudly on the blanket next to them.

Sitting next to Dorothy felt natural already, their bodies the same size and shape, a shape her Aunt Maggie had always called “pleasantly plump.” Even their manner of dress was identical down to the jeans faded the same pale blue and the wool cardigans they wore unbuttoned over dark t-shirts. Dorothy’s hair was the kind of fine blond hair Roxanne had always envied. It reminded her of Daisy.

“So you go around being enamored of women’s hair?” Roxanne teased her.

“No. Your hair. You have, or you *had*, wonderful curls.”

“I will again.”

Dorothy beamed at her with eyes bright and hopeful. Roxanne felt a power she’d rarely felt, the power of being admired by one she admired in return. For she did admire Dorothy, more and more each second. Dorothy had an open, honest face, with somber eyes that flashed with emotion in a way Roxanne found quite irresistible.

“How about we ditch this concert?” Roxanne said. “We could take a walk in the woods while these poor souls suffer.”

The moon hadn’t risen, and the path leading through the woods became visible in bits as they walked deeper through the thick canopy of pines. Campsites dotted the land under trees, visible by the glint of kerosene lanterns and tent poles. Everyone had left their camps behind to see Holly. The two of them were renegades.

“She has men in her band,” Dorothy said. “I can’t forgive that.”

“Here?” Roxanne spoke with an anger that delighted her.

“No. Men can’t come on the land here.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“But when she plays other places, she brings men to play with her. To women’s music concerts. As if we shouldn’t care! As if a man can say he’s a feminist and we’re just not supposed to care he has a prick.” Dorothy’s voice rose as she became more agitated.

“I was never a feminist. It never suited me.” Roxanne sighed, not sure how to explain herself.

“I know what you mean,” Dorothy said. “It’s half an answer. And that’s nothing.”

“Now being a separatist, that’s another matter.”

“You’re a separatist then? I wasn’t sure.”

“Oh yes. As much as I can, I have nothing to do with men. I work at a place that’s all women. I help manage the food co-op down on Lyndale. Yeah, you probably know that one.” Help manage? That sounded weak, as if she stood around and ran errands. “I’m sort of the manager, or one of them.” Talking loudly, feeling a rush of confidence, she added, “I figured you were a separatist, since you’re friends with Lisa and Paula.”

“Lisa’s just barely a separatist.” Dorothy sniffed in mild disdain. “Paula is. I’ve known Paula for a couple of years. Of course. I prefer non-feminist women, if they’re straight. Feminists think you can work with men. Straight women who aren’t feminists know how fucked up men are, and they don’t kid themselves.”

They sighed in harmony, which made Roxanne reach out from habit and slap Dorothy lightly on the arm while saying, “Coke!”

“Why did you do that?”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. Did I hurt you? It’s a joke. My cousin and I used to do that when we said the same thing at the same time.” She pointed to Dorothy and

herself and repeated it just to make her meaning clear. “You and I, we both sighed at once.” God, how idiotic that sounded.

“Okay.” Dorothy’s laugh was perhaps forced, Roxanne thought, but she had laughed, and that was good enough. Nervousness was to be expected. “Why Coke?” Dorothy asked.

“The first one to hit the other got a free Coke. Of course, we never paid off. We just said it.”

“How sad you hit each other.”

“No, no, we didn’t *really* hit each other. Just lightly.”

Dorothy nodded but seemed unsatisfied. Her pace of walking was almost agonizing to Roxanne, so slow she felt her feet were dragging through the pine needles, but she forced herself to enjoy the pace rather than fight it. What a solemn person Dorothy could be. Perhaps Roxanne could be good for her. Lighten her up.

“Even play violence is violence,” Dorothy said. “It condones the actual thing.” She shrugged sadly and said in a more upbeat tone, “But we all come from dysfunctional families. It’s the norm. You probably know that by now.”

Did she? Her childhood had been mostly happy before her mother had died, and then she was unhappy for a long while. Death had made it hard to tell what was normal and what wasn’t. Did darkness lie at her own roots? It must. She was female, after all, and females had it rough.

They fell silent, surrounded by the sounds of the forest, the small whisperings of the animals and the quiet rush of wind through the upper branches. Roxanne felt torn

between admiring Dorothy and being afraid of her, but she felt compelled to stay at her side as long as she could. It was as if she was living out a dream of great import, a dream of meeting an important person in the woods, where their actual words were secondary to the meaning of being together in this place—women’s land—at this time.

“Are you from Minnesota?”

“No. I grew up in California,” Roxanne said, embarrassed as usual by the admission, for it always made the questioner balk. What an eccentric thing to do, to move from the golden state to the frozen hinterlands. No matter their pride, which was perfectly justified, Minnesotans still looked at her funny for giving up California. They all had relatives out there. People left. They didn’t come back.

Dorothy beamed at her, her eyes glinting bright in the moonlight. “And you’ve stayed. Do you like your work?”

“It’s okay. I have to deal with too many men, though, and that’s amazingly stressful. I went to college for a semester, but I couldn’t get into it. I mean, I didn’t want to end up in some corporate job. I don’t want my life to revolve around work, you know? I don’t need much money. Still, college was kind of fun. I learned how to knit from some women in my lit class. One of them taught me how to knit gloves.” She giggled, too loudly, and stole a sidelong glance to see if Dorothy thought she was idiotic. “Now I’m working on a sweater.”

“Could you make me some gloves?”

“Gladly. Let me see your hand.”

Dorothy stopped and turned to Roxanne, lifting her hand, which Roxanne took, bending her head. “Your hand is about my size.”

They held their palms together, and their eyes met over them. “Perfect fit,” Dorothy said, causing Roxanne to blush.

In a low voice that sounded hoarse to her own ears, she asked, “What color yarn do you want me to use?”

“You choose.”

“All right.” She couldn’t see the color of Dorothy’s eyes, but she felt Dorothy belonged in these woods and loved how she stood rooted and unbending like the pines. “Green,” she decreed. “You would look good in green. I have some leftover yarn, just enough.”

Dorothy kept her palm up against Roxanne’s. “I like you, Roxanne.”

Such simple words.

“You’re very sensual,” Dorothy said.

Roxanne had been told that before but was afraid to say it of herself. The word conjured up a plump smiling face and a body ripe for touching. Could that be her?

Dorothy clasped her hand, drew it to her breast and leaned in and kissed her. It was a perfect kiss, warm and curious, a kiss that drowned her thoughts. Secret, alone in the woods, they heard the roar of applause from the concert behind them and laughed, which made their bodies shake against each other. “Yay us,” Roxanne whispered in Dorothy’s ear.

Dorothy shook harder. “Yay us!”

They decided to spend the night together in Roxanne's tent, set up by itself in her own campground away from the others. They carefully arranged their two sleeping bags, unzipped, one laid down as bed, one laid over as cover.

"I want to make love to you, Roxanne," Dorothy said when they'd slid under their cover and held each other close in their first naked embrace, "but I want to take it slow. I always rush, and I don't want to do that with you. Let's keep that for later, and tonight let's just... let's just do everything *but* that."

Roxanne readily agreed. She knew what she meant. They studied each other's eyes and kissed each other and caressed each other in slowly growing familiarity. For an eon, Dorothy circled Roxanne's tit with her finger and made feathery trails up and down the mountain of her breast while never directly touching her erect nipple at all, giving Roxanne a slow tingle that spread over her torso and grew in intensity with each minute. And then she did it some more, making Roxanne weak with the feeling of being somehow transported from her own body into Dorothy's, or into a new body that belonged to both of them at once. Their touches likewise had no familiar boundary, weren't heading anywhere in particular and had no end. This was sex unlike Roxanne had known. Her arms, her legs, even her hair came alive, its soft nubs lain onto Dorothy's shoulder in gratitude. In turn, she rose on her knees and smoothed tenderly the landscape of Dorothy's body, sweet like warm bread, her fingertips tracing every toe and finger and along the soft down of her thighs, staying bare inches away from her cunt, leaving only that for a later feast.

That was the word Dorothy used. Cunt. “It’s the right word,” she said. “I looked into it. It’s an old word that’s always meant exactly what it is and nothing more. Your cunt isn’t a pussy. It doesn’t meow. And I won’t call it a vagina. Men made cunt sound bad. It’s not.” She kissed Roxanne’s eyelid in punctuation.

And Dorothy had called *her* sensual!

For the next few days, they were never apart, sitting close together at the concerts, always enveloped in each other’s arms, one cradling the other and then changing positions so the other could be held. Roxanne felt she finally understood why people sought lovers so eagerly. This was the natural state all people should exist in all the time.

There was one minor distressing incident on their third day together. They had become friendly with some neighboring campers, and after the evening concert, when they stood happily chatting as a group around the campfire, one of the lesbians in that camp put her arms around Roxanne and told her how beautiful she looked. She was a tall woman with strong arms and tan weathered skin, her black hair highlighted with gray streaks at her temples, a robust woman who could easily use the term “butch” to describe herself, a term they all coveted. Roxanne let her wrap her up in her arms and felt herself glowing and knew that her glow came from her love of Dorothy.

And then she saw Dorothy’s face glowering angrily, and she drew back hurriedly. “What are you doing?” Dorothy said, hot rage flashing in her eyes.

“Just hugging, don’t freak out,” Roxanne’s admirer said, stepping away and retreating quickly to the other side of the fire.

“I was just hugging her, that’s all,” Roxanne said. She hadn’t meant to do any more than hug her, certainly Dorothy knew that. Roxanne hugged women all the time.

“You’re my lover,” Dorothy said.

Roxanne clasped her hand tightly and told her she understood and would be more careful from then on. She didn’t want Dorothy to feel she loved anyone but her.

Chapter Seven

They set up housekeeping in Dorothy’s modest rental house a few blocks west of the Mississippi. Almost as soon as Roxanne’s bags were unpacked and her quilt spread over the bed in the loft, they set to fighting too.

“I don’t put that there.”

“Well, where am I to put it? You keep criticizing me. Dorothy, I live here now. I gave you two hundred dollars, my share of the rent on this place. If you don’t put the cheese grater here, you can’t expect me to know that. Besides, don’t I get a say now? Am I to just be your servant, obeying your commands?” And Roxanne started crying, and Dorothy set her jaw and glared. Angry words were flung at each other through the kitchen and into the living room and out into the yard. Roxanne couldn’t stand being separate from Dorothy’s embrace, couldn’t bear this gulf that stretched wider and wider.

How could she be so unfeeling? A whole hour torn from each other! Whatever bothered her wasn't worth this. She collapsed at Dorothy's feet and begged her to love her again. Dorothy softened. Roxanne wiped her tears.

It was to be expected, that they would fight, Dorothy said. They'd rushed things. They would have to learn to trust each other. All their lives, they'd been at odds with themselves for simply being female in a male-dominated world.

"Love between women isn't easy," Dorothy said, clasping Roxanne's hand tightly over the dinner table. "We have to do the hard work of healing our wounds and refusing to inflict new ones on each other. We *have* to. Don't you see?"

Dorothy had confidence, conviction. She knew she was right. She'd been burnished by her struggles into a shining sword of truth. Her own truth. Roxanne increasingly envied her that certainty, that rage against the half-life others lived. Dorothy was free of having to obey. Free of having to care for those who didn't respect her. Free of the prevailing ideology of the times, that soul-crushing conformity where all lived happily ever after as long as they lived like everyone else. She and Dorothy had chosen the harder but nobler path. Roxanne believed they were up to it.

Their hands conveyed the kind of tenderness Roxanne had thought only existed in novels. She'd thought herself immune from fantasy now that she was grown up, but Dorothy's strong, sturdy thighs commanded her adoration, and Dorothy's brilliant blond hair insisted on being admired. Even Dorothy's stature, the way she held her chin up and tilted her eyes downward in wise comprehension of all she surveyed, forced an abject devotion from Roxanne that she could not avoid giving. She was driven mad with desire

simply by being near Dorothy and couldn't bear to not have some part of her body always touching Dorothy's—a hand on Dorothy's thigh, an arm against Dorothy's arm, her leg laid over Dorothy's leg in bed each night. Dorothy babied her, took her in her arms and made her melt with delight. There was a red velvet couch where they spent hours, dawdling over each other's toes and talking about their most intimate thoughts. Once Dorothy put Roxanne in the bathtub and washed her like a child from head to toe.

But the seeds of their discontent sprouted quickly. Roxanne did her best to reciprocate in the same way, because they'd agreed to always be equal in all things. They'd agreed to never lord anything over the other and to share everything, work and money and love, straight down the middle. So she took Dorothy to the bathtub and did her best to duplicate her lover's ministrations. But Dorothy didn't take to being made love to in the bathtub quite as well as Roxanne had. Dorothy suffered through the soaping and hair washing but lifted Roxanne's hand away when she got close to her crotch. After that, they stayed away from the bathtub. Roxanne was afraid to ask what she'd done wrong.

Love became more awkward. Dorothy wanted Roxanne to have orgasms more *easily*. Why didn't she? Well, she'd never much liked having people's heads down there. Coming out should have made that more comfortable, because the head down there was a woman's head, but Roxanne felt herself getting less relaxed as those first months passed, not more. Even worse, to her deep dismay, she still had thoughts of men in her head when her clitoris was stimulated, a horrible situation. Penises were tools of rape. Women couldn't possibly want them.

She finally worked up her courage and told Dorothy.

“Oh, that’s normal,” Dorothy said. “A lot of lesbians fantasize about men.”

“They *do*?”

“How could we not, when we’re given images of the powerful, virile male from childhood? Prince Charming. Knight in shining armor. The handsome groom on our wedding day. That old Mr. Right. The tall, dark and handsome *man* who will rescue us and make everything right.”

“But that’s not sexual,” Roxanne said. “It’s myth.”

“Myth is what society feeds on. You didn’t make up those fantasies on your own. Don’t feel bad. My own have faded with time.”

“You had them?”

“Still do, sometimes.” She grabbed Roxanne by the shoulders and stared intensely into her eyes. “What matters is the love between women. Only that. Be strong in that, and the rest will fall away in time.”

When that woman got righteous, she vibrated, her face turned magenta, and her pupils turned obsidian. Roxanne had never known that anyone could get *that passionate*. Her bursts of anger at those who dared to disagree with her politics made Roxanne downright giddy. Everyone was scared of her lover. She was so lucky.

But sex became infrequent. They would have to deal with some of their problems. Yes. Roxanne felt herself dumb with anxiety, crazy to get healed and be someone Dorothy could rely on again, could trust, could make love to more than once or twice a month. Roxanne made an appointment with a counselor. Dorothy was pleased.

Domestically, they thrived. The house needed attention, the floors needed waxing and the rugs needed vacuuming, the groceries had to be put away and dinner made and dishes washed. In the spring, they planted tidy rows of tomatoes and zucchini in the backyard and tended the beds of colorful annuals. They cuddled in bed together on cold nights, although after the first year, Dorothy suggested they have separate bedrooms and that Roxanne should move into the spare room.

On a hot Saturday afternoon, she and Dorothy sat on the couch, each at her own end with bare feet resting on the coffee table next to two glasses of ice cold soda, and turned the remote to the sports channel to watch the coverage of the *Tour de France*. They'd read in the paper about an American named Greg *LeMond* winning a tortuous three-week bicycle race. Imagine, three weeks! And they'd begun to watch the coverage, increasingly fascinated by the sight of exhausted racers pumping their legs in agony to overtake each other climbing up the Alps.

"I can't believe people willingly do this," Dorothy said, shaking her head in admiration.

"They must love it intensely," Roxanne said. What drive, what focus, what relentless eager love for the sport made them push so hard for hours and days in all kinds of weather from blazing sun to blowing storms?

Roxanne found herself musing about what other people really did live for, especially, perhaps, what drove the few out of the hundreds to reach for extreme and arduous heights. She knew she and Dorothy were drifting without saying so, watching the passing scenes of the world outside their window and wondering where they fit in now that the world had not changed, now that their separatist vision, the peaceful world where women could be safe, had disappeared, its brave words echoed in lesbian storybooks no longer read and righteous songs that grew fainter day by day. They cheered *LeMond* on with fervor.

But suddenly a face appeared in their window. It was a neighbor kid. Their window opened onto a front yard hedged by tall boxwood, so no one could see in unless trespassing on their lawn. As soon as they saw his face, he ran away, laughing.

Horrified and angry, Roxanne marched down the street to the boy's house, where she knocked smartly on the front door, a proper white door with a carved brass knocker and a pot of half-dead geraniums, scarlet petals crushed under her feet. This boy had once shouted at Roxanne when she was getting in her car, yelled that he knew she and her "sister" liked to "ream each other out," a comment which so startled and amused her she could only respond by telling him, quite truthfully, that she didn't even know what "reaming" was. By the look of sudden blankness on his face, she could tell he didn't know either.

She left that out when confronting his mother, a woman younger than herself, slight with messy brown hair and distracted eyes, who readily apologized for her son and looked quite guilty, even meek, as if she knew the boy was out of control but wasn't sure

what she could do about it. Roxanne felt sorry for her but told her in no uncertain terms that any more of that behavior and the police would be called. She reported back to Dorothy that the mother had promised to punish the boy, but from then on, they kept their clothes on when in their own house.

Greg *LeMond* won the race that year.

Sometimes Roxanne knew that she and Dorothy were no different than the miserable heterosexual couple across the street who screamed at each other on Saturdays nights. Sometimes she ached with loneliness so bad she cried in her bed at night. They slept in separate bedrooms. They never touched while naked anymore.

One evening in their third year, they had a terrible fight, and after Dorothy stomped out and slammed the back gate behind her, Roxanne washed the dishes, furiously scrubbing a blackened pot while her tears mingled with the steam from the hot dishwater. When Dorothy returned an hour later, Roxanne was calm again, although they did not speak. She took the garbage out and was astounded to see the northern half of the sky on fire. The Aurora Borealis had come! Roxanne ran back inside to tell Dorothy.

“It’s the Northern Lights, Dorothy! Come look! I’ve always wanted to see them, and here they are. They must have just come up this instant, because you didn’t—“

Dorothy didn’t look up from her book. “I know. I saw them.”

Roxanne felt she’d been kicked in the stomach. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“It’s not my job to take care of you,” Dorothy said.

No. It wasn't. Stunned, Roxanne stepped out the back door alone and beheld the magical sky above her head. Colors dripped like candle wax, but how much was due to her tears? She was on her own.

Chapter Eight

Therapy had helped her for a while, or she'd thought. But sometimes she wondered if the therapist just repeated what she thought Roxanne wanted to hear: She was *sensitive*. She was *special*. She only had to learn to trust herself.

Well, didn't everyone? She stopped going. And she joined the women's chorus. Music would be the balm for her soul.

Singing in her chorus had Roxanne dancing around the house again, and Dorothy kind of liked it, or acted like she did. They started grabbing each other when a certain song came on the radio and waltzing across the living room floor, awkwardly but with zeal. She and Dorothy always went to the state fair, every year, strolled down the wide boulevard between the exhibition halls, just one happy couple amid the throngs of other couples, families, groups of teenagers and excited children dripping snow cones. Decadence was hard to come by in Minnesota but in some evidence at the fair, when the citizens shook their sun-soaked booties at the banished tyrant of winter. They wore shorts, every last one of them, no matter how old or fat, and flip-flops on their feet. They laughed too loud and drank too much beer and spent too much money on a favorite

treat—cheese curds, a delectable concoction freighted with fat and calories only available once a year at the fair. Dorothy and Roxanne didn't drink beer but they did wear shorts, and they ingested their share of cheese curds and corndogs and bottomless cups of milk from the dairy barn.

This was their fourth year together and third visit to the fair. What always struck them as odd was that so many fair-going women looked like them but weren't lesbian, just farm wives who kept their hair short because it was practical and didn't give a hoot for dressing up. They had husbands by their side and a child or two in hand. Roxanne and Dorothy could get by from a distance, but up close, they didn't pass. They stuck too close to each other for women, their arms brushing in obvious familiarity, but what of it? What if someone figured it out? They weren't ashamed.

They browsed the art displays, snickered at the portraits inventively designed from colored seeds, and sat through the amateur acts on the talent stage populated by girls in fluffy tutus and child sopranos and gymnasts. They surveyed the booths that sold peelers and knives, admired the radishes and potatoes carved into roses, and bought a jar of golden honey. They checked out the giant pumpkins and stood silently watching a brood of baby pigs suckle at their mother's teats, and sat in the bleachers under the rafters of the cow barn and watched 4-H kids show their lambs, running them through their paces, holding their heads up and ears out in front of the judges wearing cowboy hats. In the dusky evening, as carnival music plinked from the midway, as children laughed and babies cried, and firecrackers exploded in the stadium, they wandered slowly toward the gate to go home at last.

On their way out, they happened to pass a jewelry display set up on a patch of grass alongside the wide boulevard where hordes of fairgoers still passed in each direction. And it was here that Roxanne made a momentous decision. She stopped to admire. Nothing too daring in that, except that she hadn't worn jewelry in years, hadn't even considered it, and she couldn't say what prompted her to stop and look. And yet, she had to admit she'd always loved jewelry. Before coming out, she'd worn earrings every day, and rings too, and beaded necklaces and bracelets of silver, purchased from artisan's tables such as this. She fingered some necklaces, aware of Dorothy standing a few feet behind her, watching warily, or perhaps with amusement, she wasn't sure. She felt Dorothy's eyes upon her though, as she held up to her ear an earring made of an unusual black stone, highly polished, in a silver setting.

"Take a look, miss," the pudgy mustached vendor said, holding out a hand mirror, which she took. Beholding herself, and the gleaming stone at her earlobe, she saw a woman staring back at her she recognized from long ago: round-faced, red-cheeked, with long lashes, prettier than she'd remembered. Smiling tenderly at herself, she decided she could be a lesbian and wear earrings too. Others did these days. Times had changed. She set them down and opened her wallet and paid for them, and then slipped them, wrapped in tissue paper, into her pocket.

"You look good in them," Dorothy said on the drive home, smiling warily but tenderly too. "I'm glad you can think for yourself. You don't have to follow any lesbian protocol if you don't want to. Shoot, they're just earrings."

But a week later, as Roxanne put them on to go out to the coffeehouse with Lisa, she saw Dorothy glancing at her. Her eyes were dark, and she was not smiling.

Chapter Nine

Roxanne plucked her chin hairs. Things began to escalate. She bought a silky blouse at an upscale department store, the kind of place she'd avoided for the last few years in favor of the men's department at Sears. The new blouse was fuchsia and had a wide collar that framed her face gracefully. She'd always liked how she looked in a v-neck.

Perhaps she might have noticed what was happening to her, but it was no longer unusual to see a lesbian at the coffeehouse wearing femme-type blouses, sometimes even a dress. One flirtatious young woman who'd been showing up a lot lately wore makeup. The regular dykes called such women "lipstick lesbians" and made fun of them behind their backs, but not with as much rancor as they once would have. The plaid work shirts and regulation short haircuts seemed drab instead of powerful. A cute woman dancing in a skirt, well, who could really object too strongly to that? They were supposed to be attracted to women's bodies, after all.

Dorothy was angry. Dorothy had lost her keys the day before and had reminded Roxanne to not deadbolt the door. And she'd gone ahead and done it, forgetting. Dorothy had to cut the screen on Roxanne's bedroom window to get in. Such a tornado of invective flew through the house that Dorothy at last retreated to her room, weary as she'd ever been. Apology upon apology, no good. Maybe Dorothy was right and she really was trying to lock her out of her heart. Maybe Roxanne was right and they should break up. Dorothy freaked out when she said that.

"But I don't really mean it," Roxanne had said, sagging onto the couch and holding her head in her hands. "I love you, Dorothy. I truly, truly, truly forgot. Just forgot. Maybe we should put a key under a rock out in the front yard."

Dorothy stomped out the room and into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Roxanne stared out the window for a while and then went to own room. Dorothy would give her the silent treatment for at least two days for this one.

Lying absolutely still on her bed, she sought solace in the gathering storm outside, which gradually awakened a familiar sort of energy in her body and mind that she rarely felt anymore. It was the dead of summer. Perhaps it was the ozone in the air, or the way the sky took on a strange gray-green tinge, but Roxanne's emotions turned excited rather than morose the longer she lay there without moving.

A clap of thunder sent shivers down her spine. Lightning flashed outside her window, brightening the darkness behind her eyelids for a split second, followed by another crash of thunder. The storm built intensely minute by minute, and with each

increase in sound and fury, Roxanne sank deeper into its swirling maelstrom and let the thunder's booms and shaking limbs rattling against her window carry her away.

This was what healed her after her mother died. The sky. Lying on her back on the grass in the back yard, she'd talked to her mother as if she was alive, told her mother about her friends and her teachers and debated the merits of each of her aunts. The sky became her mother. Its clouds were her mother's moods, and its storms her mother's stories. She was never afraid of storms. When wind blew branches down all over the yard, or when rains fell so hard they backed up the storm drains and flooded the street down by the corner, she felt the happiest.

And now, with the sky cracking open, she was thrilled. Something would happen, and it would be good.

Chapter Ten

They made up—bear hugs all around—just in time for their fifth anniversary. This one was the clincher: A milestone by any accounting. Any couple who could make it to five years *had to be* devoted to each other.

“You don’t go through what we’ve gone through without having something real. Look at that garden.” Dorothy stood with hands on hips in the middle of the back door, with Roxanne peering over her shoulder. “I’ve never had such a good crop of tomatoes.

You didn't even know how to take care of them when I met you. Way over watered them. Practically killed them off. Remember?"

"Well, you thought California poppies wouldn't grow here," Roxanne said. "And I proved you wrong."

"I didn't say they wouldn't. I said I didn't think they would. I never said it was impossibility."

"Okay. Never mind," Roxanne said, rolling her eyes.

Roxanne gazed happily at the abundant produce peeking out from the leaves of the vegetable rows—zucchini, cantaloupe, brussel sprouts, tomatoes big and little—and yards of spinach, lettuce and chard. Along the sides of the yard bloomed a great variety of dahlias, roses, daisies, bachelor buttons and petunias, proof of a long season of hard work.

"Hey, I've been thinking," Roxanne said. "Let's go camping for our anniversary. Let's find a lake and swim. We haven't gone camping in a couple years. What do you say?"

They packed up for a long weekend and drove north up Highway 35. Deep in the north woods, they meandered down roads until they found an isolated campground and set up their tent at its farthest reaches, right at the end of a spit of land surrounded on all sides by the lake. The only other campers were far away.

"Sorry, forgot to give you this one," Roxanne said, apologizing while tossing a tent stake toward her. Dorothy scowled at her in her habitual way but grabbed it and hammered it in. Roxanne unrolled the tarp and began to tie one corner to the trunk of the

pine behind the tent while ignoring her scowl. She'd finally learned a thing or two: carry on with your happy mood and don't get sucked in.

"I forgive ya," Dorothy said cheerily. Roxanne beamed back at her, happy to see her good mood holding up.

"I love going camping with you," Dorothy said, ducking her chin shyly. "It's been so long since we've done anything relaxing."

Roxanne smiled gratefully at her. Tying the last ends of the tarp in place, they laughed for no reason, and when they stood in front of the risen tent so artfully held in place under a canopy of pines, they hugged from the side, Dorothy's chin perched on Roxanne's curly head, one of Roxanne's arms sliding under hers and the other sliding over so that they held each other in the exact same way.

All afternoon of that first day camping, they lounged on air mattresses and drifted on the soft rolls of the lake current, the water green and warm, and talked intimately of what they wanted in the future. Lakes surrounded by birch trees dotted the geography of northern Minnesota like puddles after a rainfall, making Roxanne think of "the world between the worlds" of C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* stories, a forested place with an endless number of lakes, a place that was nowhere itself and had no name and no residents and where nothing ever happened. But if you jumped into a lake, you came out into a new world, a unique world. And you never knew what it would be until you jumped in.

"I knew we could be happy if we worked hard enough," Roxanne told her, beaming. "I knew we could get to this point of peace with each other. I don't want to leave you, Dorothy."

Dorothy's face stiffened. Roxanne feared she'd blown the mood wide open. Be positive, she told herself. Don't talk about leaving. She quickly said, "Nothing means more to me than my relationship with you." Did she mean this? She wanted to.

Dorothy smiled. Roxanne's air mattress drifted over to hers and bumped her with a light bounce, after which it seemed natural when Dorothy took Roxanne's hand, something she hadn't done in a long time. Fingers clasped, they drifted lazily, happily. Dribbling her toes in the water, Roxanne felt sure that a corner had been turned. She felt marvelously content. The lake shimmered sweetly, the water washed softly onto shore. So far, the weather had been kind, sparing them an impending storm that had passed by to the north. Mild breezes waved through the trees like gentle hellos.

"Happy almost anniversary, babe," Dorothy said, clasping Roxanne's hand tightly. Tomorrow was the day.

"Happy almost anniversary to you, too." They looked cautiously into each other's eyes, and then Dorothy let go.

That night, their bodies naked and face-to-face, Roxanne turned toward Dorothy in the dark of the tent and felt her skin flush with expectation. *I'm here with my lover*, she chanted silently to herself. She couldn't see much of Dorothy, but enough—the shape of her ghostly white body, a wintry face reflecting the dim light from outside. Roxanne pledged to move slowly and approach Dorothy's body respectfully, as if they were of different species, her fingers like feelers testing the skin of the other. When Roxanne laid one hand on Dorothy's hip and left it there, Dorothy tensed ever so slightly, and Roxanne moved her hand back up to her waist. Dorothy relaxed and scooted closer.

Roxanne caressed her hair. Every move was a risk. Did she like touching her this way anymore? Did Dorothy like it? They had to find out.

If they took things very slowly, the feelings they used to have would come back. The feelings lay waiting. *Maryann knew*. They'd waited a long time for them to come back. Crickets chirped on the other side of the tent wall but the two women didn't so much as sigh. Roxanne's eyes grew accustomed to the dark, and for a moment she saw Dorothy's face as the frozen mask of a ghoul, with shadows hollowing her eyes and sharpening her cheeks. Roxanne gasped.

Dorothy frowned, turning her eyebrows down in disapproval. "*What?*"

"Nothing," Roxanne said.

Dorothy took her hand in hers, which Roxanne took as a cue to lean in and kiss her on the lips. It must be normal to kiss her, Roxanne told herself, because it was once normal. Roxanne remembered how Dorothy's lips became curved and full during a kiss, as if the love that hid on the inside could only come out if coaxed. She moved her hand to Dorothy's breast, and Dorothy flinched.

"Did that tickle?" Roxanne asked.

"A little," Dorothy said. "It's okay though."

Better to go slow. Roxanne had wanted this for so long. Hadn't she? They'd both wanted this. A mosquito buzzed past her ear and landed on her face.

"Ack!" Roxanne whacked at her cheek. "Missed!" The mosquito buzzed toward Dorothy, who pulled her unzipped sleeping bag up over her body in a flash. Both of

them laughed, but in an embarrassed way, not playfully. The mosquito landed on Roxanne's arm again, and this time, she smashed it.

"There. Got it. All gone."

Dorothy poked her head out. "Remember the mosquitoes at that one place we camped that time, when you freaked out?"

"I cried, they were so bad."

Dorothy laughed, not in a kindly way. She started talking about other times with other mosquitoes.

Roxanne reclined and let her eyes follow the double seams of the tent up to the apex. The moment seemed too awkward to continue. She'd once felt such ease with Dorothy. Long, long ago. Why did she do everything wrong with her, no matter what? She told herself to stay in a peaceful mood and to understand that important things take time to develop. They probably couldn't go any further tonight. Why not? She didn't know. There was no telling why.

But this was a start.

In the morning, a shy hug next to the cook stove was all that showed of their aborted night of passion. Even so, Roxanne felt very optimistic. Slow and steady wins the race. There was no hurry. They took a hike down a shaded path to look at the lupine growing lushly in a meadow nearby, after which Dorothy said she wanted to stay at the campsite and read in the shade of the pines. Roxanne headed down to the beach alone with her air mattress and paddled lazily back and forth in front of their beach, watching a rambunctious group of people, mostly children, who jumped off a dock over and over on

the opposite side of the lake and occasionally screamed loud enough to reach Roxanne's ears. She didn't mind. The commotion was distant enough to be like a scene from a dream, reminiscent of childhood vacations at other lakes, too many to remember, days when she'd splash and shove and scream all day long and never tire.

A moss-covered log lolled back and forth against the rocks at one end of the small beach. Once, she'd imagined her life with women would be like those playful days of childhood. Around and around, her mattress swirled in slow circles from Dorothy to the children, over and over again and again.

When the children across the lake grew quiet, Roxanne slipped off her mattress and walked back to camp. Dorothy nodded to her as she approached, a sober look in her eyes, a bit too sober, Roxanne thought, for being on such a carefree vacation, leading Roxanne to wonder if another night of intimacy might be long in coming. Building up to that one kiss had taken months.

"I made sandwiches," Dorothy said. "Figured you'd be up soon."

"Thanks." Roxanne ate slowly, as if drugged from all that sunshine. When she was done, she went into the tent to lie down for a while. She felt a bit sulky. Dorothy and she had no reason to go to any trouble to stay together, not one. They had no children, no communal property, no marriage certificate binding them together. She had to either love the woman wholeheartedly, or leave. Simple! The problem was, she had no idea *how* to leave. She couldn't just say cheerio, I'm off now. The more times she pledged eternal devotion, the harder it was to imagine telling her goodbye.

Oh, but why think about all this now? Things had been better lately. Okay, they fought that one time. Roxanne was certainly more assertive than she used to be, and Dorothy was less liable to break out in rages for no apparent reason. And here they were, vacationing happily together. In fact, no one could say this trip wasn't going exceptionally well. They'd kissed!

"Roxanne?" Dorothy yanked back the tent flap and yelled, "Are you going to do the dishes, or do I have still have to do everything?"

"I'll be up in a minute. I'm just taking a rest. You don't have to do it."

"Yes, I do," Dorothy said, her voice climbing. "I always do. I always end up doing everything. One little set of lunch dishes, and it's too much for you to bear, you have to go lie down."

Roxanne jumped up and rushed at her, her fury rising fast like a horse taking off in a race. "Enough, enough, enough! You do *not* always do everything. It's not a big deal for a person to let dishes sit and take a little nap when a person is camping."

Eyes ablaze, Dorothy leapt back and stood with her arms tense at her sides. "And how do I know you'll do them? You could have done them first and then gone and taken a nap. I want to take a nap too, but *someone* has to do the dishes. I won't be taken advantage of on my vacation."

"Some goddamn vacation!" Roxanne yelled, and grabbed the two plates and two cups and the knife they'd used to smear they mayonnaise and flung them into the woods. "They're *done*. Happy?"

She had never thrown anything! She had never yelled so loudly! “And you know what?” she cried, taking a step toward her enemy, which Dorothy surely was now, “*I’m* done too! Damn you, Dorothy. All you care about are two fucking plates and two stupid cups and a fucking goddamn knife. This is vacation to you? One big job? Fuck you!”

She hadn’t said *fuck* in years! She’d never so much as told Dorothy to go to hell before. Standing face to face, Roxanne glared in fury and outrage at her *lover*. She wanted to spit the word.

“Don’t start trying to explain away your laziness!” Dorothy screamed at a high pitch. “You always do that, leave things for me to pick up after. I know you were going to let *me* make dinner tonight. You always think I’ll just take care of you!”

“No, I don’t! Like you would take care of me if I were dying of the plague!” Here they were, their relationship having reached the grand age of five, and they couldn’t have a decent disagreement that didn’t descend into the bickering of kindergartners. “Look, we’re on *vacation*. We can lie around and let plates sit on tables for half a day without freaking out about them.”

“Don’t patronize me!” Red-faced, Dorothy waved her arms stiffly up in the air like she was at a revival meeting. “I’m sick of this! I’m sick of this!”

“You’re sick of this?” Roxanne cried. “Me too!” And Roxanne took things as far as she could: She balled up her fist and smacked Dorothy on her arm. It was the first time she’d hit anyone since childhood, and it felt the same—weak, glancing off Dorothy’s bicep, a wild punch born of frustration. She didn’t think she’d hurt Dorothy, but what if she had? She stood right in front of her, her face pushed up close to

Dorothy's, waiting to be hit back, or kicked, anything but yelled at one more time.

Dorothy did open her mouth, but only in shock. Goosebumps rose on Roxanne's arms, and she felt the air chill. She knew that in that moment, they were over, she and Dorothy. Dorothy could never forgive domestic violence. This was the end! How sordid. What a relief, though!

And yet, not a second later, Roxanne was appalled to find herself imagining how maybe they could recover, could even build anew from the ashes of what had only just breathed its last. Worse, she saw the same thought go through Dorothy's head. Were they crazy? What a couple of incorrigible romantics! It was as if their impossible relationship was a mysterious mission that had to be completed even if it killed them. Oh, really. This had to end, and it had to end now. And it was up to Roxanne to end it. If she could.

But even now, she didn't know how. She slumped onto the bench of the picnic table and stared at her hands. "Why can't we just be kind and affectionate with each other?"

Dorothy huffed, like a headmistress faced with an incorrigible girl.

"All I want is to be your lover again," Roxanne said. "Last night, today, I just want to touch you, that's all." In truth, Roxanne wasn't the least bit sure she wanted that at all, but she had to play this out as if she did. She'd been telling herself that was what she wanted for the longest time.

“No, that’s not all you want.” Dorothy glared, her eyes flashing fire like a cornered wolf. “You *hit* me. You’ve been *wanting* to hit me for a long time, I could feel it. I don’t even feel safe with you anymore!”

“I’m sorry.” As soon as she said it, she knew she wasn’t, a fact that surprised and pleased her, since being sorry had become such a habit. “I just want...” She searched for the words. “...someone I can touch, hold, be close to.” Yes, this was exactly what she wanted. How strange she’d never said just that before.

Dorothy shuddered.

Well, if Dorothy didn’t want the same, she’d have to make it clear. They had to make themselves *clear*.

“How about I touch you gently, like this?” Roxanne said, reaching out and laying the tip of her fingers on Dorothy’s knee. Dorothy shoved her and screamed, “Get away from me!”

“I’m your lover!” Roxanne cried, throwing up her hands and yelling to the tree branches overhead. “I’m the one you say *I love you* to. That’s me! I *have* to be able to touch you freely again someday, to slide my arm around your shoulder whenever I feel affectionate, to wrap myself around your body in bed. It has to happen. Why can’t it happen?”

“Don’t start blaming me!”

“Why not? It’s your fault!”

Roxanne was never supposed to say that. Dorothy sucked in air in a long hiss through her teeth.

“What, am I *imagining* that you don’t let me get near you?” Roxanne heard her voice take on a tyrannical edge that she’d never used with Dorothy before. She liked it.

“Stop it!”

“Stop what? This?” Roxanne reached out and touched Dorothy’s knee again, whereupon Dorothy leaped backwards, ran to the other side of the picnic table and turned to face her, her shoulders hunched like a football player on the line of scrimmage.

“Stop it, Roxanne!” she screamed. “I mean it!”

“Why can’t I touch you, Dorothy? Why can’t I just touch you *sweetly* on your knee? My one little finger”—she waved it at her—“on your one little knee.”

“Get back!” Her eyes almost popping out of her face, her chest heaving, Dorothy looked like a cat trying to avoid being thrown in a bathtub full of water.

Slowly, they paced around the table, facing each other. Roxanne felt cruel but insistent. They would settle this. “I have to feel loved,” she said. “Maybe that seems incredibly outrageous to you, but it’s the way I am. Don’t you need that? You know, I’ve been afraid I’d never again have sex in my entire life if I stayed with you, so last night made me *hopeful* again. But that was stupid of me, wasn’t it?”

Was Dorothy growling? Her teeth were bared. Roxanne ran around the table with her finger out. “Just let me touch your knee! If you love me like you say you do, you’ll let me touch your knee!”

On the second go round, Roxanne almost caught her, being younger and more nimble, but Dorothy grabbed the flashlight off the table, raised it over her head and screamed a warning. “Don’t come any closer!”

“Ah, I can hear your love speaking! My darling Dorothy!” Roxanne yelled at the top of her lungs. “We are two people in love! Isn’t it fucking *great*?”

The flashlight whizzed past her head and crashed onto the trunk of a pine behind her. Dorothy ran off into the woods. With a loud sigh, Roxanne picked up the flashlight and took some brief delight in standing it on the table next to the kerosene lantern where Dorothy had decreed it belonged. But then she plunged into despair. While they’d been fighting, clouds had crept over the sun. Sad and at a loss, she walked back down to the beach where she’d been so happy earlier and threw herself face down onto the sand.

Stupid, how stupid she was, to believe she could ever be happy with Dorothy. With her face turned into the crook of her arm, she wept the tears of five failed years and chastised herself for wasting so much time trying to please an impossible woman. When her sobs ceased, she turned to wishing like a child for a sign that would tell her what exactly she ought to do next. She was obviously unfit to decide for herself. But someone must know. Or something. The universe?

This was no good. She sat up and stared at the gray sand on her toes. The sun had disappeared completely. The universe had lost interest in her long ago. She was much too boring. And now she’d sunk to domestic violence. One of them could get killed if things continued on. Neither Dorothy or Roxanne even drank, and they’d still managed to reach dramatic heights worthy of Tennessee Williams.

The only responsible thing to do was to tell Dorothy she was breaking up with her. Worse things could happen if she didn’t. Back home, she would have to open the classifieds, call about an apartment, pack her stuff, haul it to a new place and be done

with the whole thing for good. Dorothy wouldn't want her to leave, although why not, Roxanne couldn't fathom. That was just how Dorothy was. To the bitter end! Dorothy would make her stay. And she would. And one day they would kill each other. Maybe they already had.

Oh, this was horrible, horrible! She fixed her gaze on a point across the lake, where one yellow porch light peered back through the dark from the cabin where the children had been frolicking all day. There was a whole passel of happy people over there—kids playing, grownups laughing, every joyful human feeling running through their veins. Not over here. Feeling as morose as Elizabeth Taylor in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Roxanne spoke to the yellow porch light.

"Please light my way," she whispered to it, the only thing that seemed alive around her. "Dorothy's way too. Who will ever love her again? She's too ornery for love. And who will ever love me again? Please shine your light on me." She spoke dramatically, exaggerating her words as if to dispel the emotions by making them ridiculously immense. Like fireflies, the words flew from her fevered lips. "Give me a sign. Tell me what to do."

Oh, how silly, asking for occult signs from a porch light. Use human means, she told herself sternly. Say to Dorothy plainly, "I'm leaving." Oh, bother. All right. The porch light gleamed steadily on, and she kept staring long and hard at it across the blackness of the water until at last she fell back exhausted onto the sand and closed her eyes.

She began to shiver. It was getting cold, and soon she would have to go back to the campsite, where Dorothy had probably begun to make dinner in that obstinate way she had of forging ahead through unabated misery. Roxanne laid her hands over her eyes to keep from accidentally opening them and having to see the dark world again. Nothing was different. One day soon she would just tell Dorothy she was leaving, and then she'd gather up all her possessions from every part of the house, all the closets, and the basement, where her bicycle and old photo albums and college papers were stored, and pack them into boxes. Then she'd go somewhere. One day soon.

When she could stand the cold no longer, she sat up and opened her eyes, and there above the lake, her answer shimmered gloriously. The aurora borealis, the northern lights, shimmered across half the sky in brilliant waves. She'd seen them twice before but never on such a breathtakingly scale. White sheets of light tinged with green and pink skimmed one on top of the other in a fantastic display, pulsing and flashing slowly over her head like the ghostly silk gown of a goddess stepping lightly across the heavens. Roxanne's mouth dropped open. Her palms tingled. A sign had been given to her. Someone, some thing, somehow—was listening!

Now she could proceed, for she was not alone. A spirit was afoot, and it was on her side. In a brilliant flash, her mind plunged forward without panic. She *would* go home and open the paper. She would call landlords, make appointments, sign a contract, find a new home, and it would all happen that easily. She knew that now. The lights danced and danced as she planned and planned. The breaking up would be *simple*, something that she'd never before understood, even though now it was clear as day.

Where would she live? Perhaps she'd get an apartment downtown, near Loring Park, or maybe something along the Mississippi. Minneapolis could be a great place for a single woman.

Back at the campsite, Dorothy had gone to bed. Roxanne climbed into her sleeping bag without eating dinner and fell right asleep.

On her last night in the house she shared with Dorothy, Roxanne walked sadly through her neighborhood late at night and saw her street as if she was already a stranger. In the moonlight, the familiar lawns looked black and the white houses gray, and all the potted geraniums on every doorstep blood red. Cats peered out from under cars as she passed. Between worlds, nowhere, she searched the night sky. Three telephone wires slice the moon into four pieces. She stood still and watched until the moon slid behind the telephone pole and came out whole again. Taking off her ring, she held it up against the moon, which glimmered inside its perimeter like a silver lake.

Chapter Eleven

"Congratulations then." Lisa raised her bottle of raspberry juice high.

"Thank you, thank you," Roxanne said, tapping her bottle on Lisa's with a clink.

“Here’s to your new life!” Lisa said. They each tipped their heads back and drank.

“It’s kind of rough, but it’s home,” Roxanne said

“But I see the potential,” Lisa said. “Look at these windows! Celestial!”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” Roxanne said. In fact, she was nursing a bit of buyer’s remorse under her cheer. Tall bay windows were wonderful, and the ceilings were high, but the place was a dump. Water stains covered one wall, and the painted woodwork was chipped, showing at least four different paint colors underneath, one of them pink. This was one of those old houses cut up into apartments and neglected for years, the kind of place single people with little money moved in and out of, each one leaving it a little more used.

Even the wood floor they sat on had seen such better days that Roxanne felt she’d made a mistake to put cushions down and have them sit on the cruddy thing. She had to get a couch soon.

“I love those crown moldings,” Lisa said, peering upwards as if surveying a pastoral landscape painted by an old master. Good old Lisa.

“The guy who lived here when I came to look at it with the landlord, he was a bit of a drinker, I think. Sweet guy, but he had empty beer bottles lining the floor next to his bed, which was just a mattress on the floor in here. I don’t know if he even used the bedroom at all. It’s like moving into an opium den.”

“Oh, no,” Lisa said, shaking her head sadly “Don’t think of it that way.”

“Okay. But I hope there are no bugs”

“I wonder what sort of neighbors you have here,” Lisa said.

“All men, from what I’ve seen so far.”

“Well, a bit of dyke flavor never hurt anyone. You can open their minds.”

“Or vice versa. Shoot, I haven’t been around men in years. Maybe I’ll like them.

I just hope the landlord meant it when he said he’d paint these walls for me. I wonder if he’d put up some mini-blinds too.” The yellowed window shades were broken and didn’t rise, so they couldn’t actually see out the beautiful windows. Which were probably covered in the grime of years.

“And you can find rugs to cover these floors. This place has distinct possibilities. It’s like a garden gone to seed. Needs some pruning, a little planting. You have an eye for decorating.” Setting her juice down, Lisa spoke in a serious tone. “I hate to break this to you now, but you should know. We’re moving to California. The Bay Area. Donna is being transferred.”

“Oh. But that’s good. But not yet. Don’t go yet.”

“First of November, or thereabouts. I know, seems fast.” Her hands flew up like birds taking off.

Someone above them thumped about as if moving furniture. “I’ll miss you, Lisa. I just got free and have this big old place to have you visit me at. Who will I go eat egg rolls with? Oh, but you’re going to love California.” She sighed like she was already missing her friend. “I should move out there too.”

“I thought you’d had enough of California. That’s how you always talk.”

“Not anymore. I kind of miss it.”

A door slammed over their heads, and footsteps clumped noisily down the stairs. “Last night I dreamed you were showing me around Paris. A man wearing a bird on his shoulder kept jumping over canals.”

Lisa laughed. “Sounds like my hyperactive little brother.”

Roxanne tapped Lisa on the knee. “Hey, thanks for tolerating my weepiness these last couple weeks. I was a bit of a mess.”

“Of course I tolerate you,” Lisa said, warding off further apologies with her hand. “Don’t be silly.”

“I do seem to be coming around. Truthfully, I feel stronger than I used to be, as if my time with Dorothy served as a sledgehammer hitting me on the head until I got the message.”

Lisa leaned back on her hands and studied her friend. “You look more animated than I’ve seen you in years. Glowing. I’d say you were five years younger.”

The thumping above had stopped and been replaced by bass tones from a stereo. Someone outside was yelling, “Mike! Hey, Mike!”

“And now you’re leaving. I’ll come and visit you in California, and we’ll go wine-tasting and hang out under an oak tree on a sunny afternoon. We’ll indulge in pleasure up to our necks. Heck, maybe I’ll join you out there for good.”

“I think you’ve always been a California girl.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You have that touch of eccentricity.”

“Oh, more than a touch, I fear. In fact, I feel a whole new rash of eccentricity coming on. For one thing, I’m tired of not liking people. What a bore. Who wants to go around being mad at people all the time?” She crossed her ankles and cocked her head. By “people,” she meant “men,” but she didn’t want to spell it out. “I’m thinking it’s time to live and let live and concentrate on making myself a grand new life.”

“Hey, you can do whatever you want now,” Lisa said. “Move anywhere you feel like. Do anything you want to do. What do you want to do?”

“Be a country western singer.”

“Oh. I always thought that stuff was crap.”

“Patsy Cline isn’t.” Roxanne launched into a chorus of *Crazy*. “Crazy for feeling... so lonesome.”

“Why don’t you go into computers?”

“How about I become an artist?”

“There you go. Create your own reality, woman! And move back to your homeland. Let’s conquer California and be dykes on the town in San Francisco.”

Roxanne sighed. “Maybe.”

First, she had to get some alcohol and porn. Roxanne’s lesbian life thus far had been sober and ascetic—no alcohol, no smoking. No drugs, certainly. Not much sex. Not much cursing. She didn’t even say *goddamn* or *fuck*. Two days after moving into

her own apartment, she bought a six-pack of Budweiser and slowly sipped a cold can of beer while lying on her bed in the dark and listening to “Hearts of Space” radio show. The ambient tones of the music and the alcohol buzz made her horny. Hell, she lived alone now. She could go rent a pornographic movie. Dorothy had been right: without her, she was going to go sliding down a slippery slope.

On her third evening at her new abode, she drank another bottle of Budweiser and munched on slices of cheddar cheese for dinner, then set out for an evening walk around her new neighborhood. Her street was crowded with huge old houses, slightly seedy but not gone to ruin, shoved against each other and lined with low wrought iron fencing at the edges of abbreviated front yards. Blocks of mailboxes on most of the front porches marked houses that had been turned into apartment buildings like her own.

Over on Lyndale Avenue, she strode past the vegetarian café where she and Lisa liked to meet for lunch and past an open-doored tavern with laughter pouring onto the street. A young woman ran out screaming and laughing, followed by a young man who grabbed her around the waist and held her tight from behind. Roxanne watched how easily she leaned back into him and let him lift her slightly off her heels and rock the both of them back and forth, and for the first time in years, she saw such a scene without political considerations of who had more power and who was giving up what in exchange for something else. She didn’t care if the man was acting out his privileged role of male chauvinist or the woman subsumed in unconscious internalized self-negation, or whatever political-sociological commentary she’d spouted in the past. Screw that!

The streetlights were dazzling, ricocheting off windows and bouncing off cars under the neon violet sky of early evening. She felt released from a dark hole, a worm just emerging from under the earth.

Everyone was getting VCRs and renting porn, or so she read in the paper. It was almost a social revolution. Not only men but women were breaking down the barriers and running pell mell to their local video rental store just to get those titillating videos. What was to stop *her* from doing it too? No one would have to know. That was the whole idea. One's private video renting was one's private business.

Morning would be best, if she wanted to avoid running into other people, especially people she might know. She didn't really expect lesbians to be shopping for porn any time of day, but they might be picking up some regular movie and she'd be too embarrassed to proceed. Tuesday morning, she didn't have to get to work until elevenish, so she drove to a store a couple miles out of the way that stood beyond the usual haunts of lesbians and checked up and down the sidewalk before moseying through the front door in her most casual strut.

An intense throbbing coursed through her genitals before she even spied one single porn video. Simply walking in the door with the intent to rent porn was turning out to be highly arousing. She felt like a pervert, walking into a movie store with her crotch dripping wet. The mere act of *driving* to the video store had set her body off. She

probably gave off a scent of sex so strong anyone could pick up on it. She'd had no idea such fever had been simmering inside her, of all people, who hadn't even had sex with another human being in over four years. How *patiently* she'd waited to resume a sex life with Dorothy.

At the far end of the store, she spied the porn section right away, past a set of swinging doors at the far end, just like in an old western saloon except for the large sign that read, "Must be over eighteen to enter." Like a hunter, she strode forward with thumping heart, a wild grit in her loins pulling her onward.

But alas, next to those doors and behind a sales counter sat a young man slouched over a book. She stopped cold. If she took another step toward those doors, that young man would look up and see her, and what would he see? A dyke heading for the porno section. She couldn't take another step but turned to face the rack of movies on her left as if deeply interested in them even though embarrassment had blurred her eyes so much she couldn't see the titles. This was going to take more courage than she had. Her feet wouldn't budge. The system was still stacked against women. Annoyed and defeated, she moseyed in as casual a manner as she could muster out of the store and hurriedly drove away, still reeking of sex.

This was the world that men lived in! How did they stand it? She would try again. She had to.

Chapter Twelve

As autumn leaves began to fall, Roxanne acclimated to her new home, coming and going like she lived there, getting used to the feel of the key in the lock, carrying her mail in from the box on the porch with her name on it. She felt newly arrived in town, as if she'd left the convent, thrown off her habit and come to mingle with the profane world again. The weather remained hot long into autumn, and the whole town was randy with the lingering heat, trying to get as much warmth into their bones as possible before winter hit. Clothes on people walking down the sidewalk seemed brighter than they used to. She had favored navy blue and forest green for the longest time, and now she saw the people about her on the street wearing lime green and aqua. More women seemed to be wearing makeup than she remembered, and hairdos seemed more artfully constructed.

"I think I know what you mean," Lisa said when she mentioned it over the phone. Lisa now lived in Oakland, right across the Bay Bridge from San Francisco. "It's like you've taken off a dark lens. I feel the same way."

"I bought a t-shirt today colored orange sherbet," Roxanne said, "and another one kind of neon green. And a pair of rubber sandals with bumps on the soles to massage my feet as I walk."

"Get this," Lisa said. "Just outside our door, there's a plant that looks like a tropical bird, weird and orange with spikes that look like beaks. We're not in Kansas anymore. This is a hothouse of eccentricity, at least for a little old Midwesterner like me."

“Don’t tempt me. Winter’s coming, and I have to get through it with aplomb. Besides, I can’t move. The landlord’s ordered blinds for me. They have to be custom-made because the windows are so high.”

“There are tons of lesbians out here.”

“I’m even getting tired of hanging around lesbians,” Roxanne said. “Some baby dyke cornered me last week at the coffeehouse and kept talking about lesbian this and lesbian that and how great it was that we all have this supportive community and all. All I could think about was how grating her voice was and how I wished she’d quit talking.”

One afternoon, she was out walking and ran into a dyke named Hope who’d only recently joined the chorus. She sang soprano with a clear tone. In the midst of their conversation about this and that, Roxanne asked her if she knew anyone who had a cat that needed a home.

“No. Sorry. I hate cats.”

“You can’t be a lesbian and hate cats.”

“I’m *allergic*.”

“Oh, then you’re allowed.”

“And the good ladies of lesbianism pat me on the head again. I’m so humbled.”

Well, I just thought I’d ask. I want a pet.”

“Wait.” Hope’s face lit up, and she tapped Roxanne on the shoulder and signaled her to follow. “Come with me. Just come, don’t ask.” She led Roxanne back the other way from where she’d come and then around a corner and down another block until they found themselves in an alley at the back door of an antique store.

“What’s this all about?” Roxanne was slightly annoyed.

Hope knocked with three loud raps. “My aunt Alice lives here.” The door opened, and an old woman poked her head out, followed by a scruffy head of a dog. The old woman grabbed the dog’s collar before it escaped and held tight while the dog danced in place, trying to get close to the legs of the visitors to get a good sniff.

“This is Gustave,” Hope said, pointing at the dog.

“Hello, Gustave.” Roxanne rubbed the dog’s ears.

“I know he’s not a cat.”

“Well, no,” Roxanne said. “You brought me here to look at a dog?”

“He *badly* needs a home.”

Alice held on tight to Gustave’s collar and smiled eagerly at Roxanne.

“Gustave’s owner died. Old man next door. I can’t keep him much longer, poor thing, poor, poor thing. Oh, look at that face.” Gustave had a black and white face divided down the middle between big brown eyes that didn’t look too miserable to Roxanne.

“I—“

“It’ll have to be the pound next! My cats are hiding their poor selves in the basement. We can’t hold on much longer. I’m a good-hearted person when it comes to animals, but I know what happens to the unwanted. You could save him. He’s a good

dog. Good Gustave, there, there.” Readjusting her hold on his collar, she accidentally let him loose, and he went right for Roxanne, jumping up and plopping his paws on her thighs.

“He loves you already.” Alice clapped her hands and looked on the verge of tears. “Did you ever see such sweet eyes? If I didn’t have all these cats, I’d surely keep him.”

“But I’m looking for a cat. My landlord had said I could have a cat. A grey tabby was what I had in mind.” Roxanne’s voice trailed off as Gustave poked his nose in her crotch and waved his tail wildly. “I love dogs, but there’s really no way I can have one.”

“Just take him for a while then. My cats hate me. Someone has to help!” Alice raised a fist and shook it. “We’re going insane in here. I swear, I’ve asked everyone I know.” She handed Roxanne the leash, who took it, not knowing what else to do.

“Here. Just a sec.” Alice took a piece of Wrigley’s spearmint out of her pocket and held it up over Gustave at the level of Roxanne’s head, which caused Gustave to leap in a light, graceful bound and picked the gum easily from Alice’s hand, causing them all to laugh.

Roxanne clapped her hands. “He’s a circus dog!”

“Does your landlord come around much?” Hope asked.

“I don’t know. I just moved in.”

Gustave’s tail wagged like a windshield wiper.

“What kind of dog is he anyway?”

“Purebred mutt,” Alice said. “If I had to guess, I’d say he’s part beagle, part cocker spaniel.”

“Kind of small.”

“And part Chihuahua. They say mutts have the best temperaments.”

“Oh, all right. I guess I’ll take him.”

“I knew you had heart.” Alice slapped Roxanne on the back and then grabbed her shoulders and faced her eye-to-eye. In a low voice, she said solemnly, “May the goddess bless your home forevermore. And keep you and yours safe and happy.”

All around her, men lived. A guy named Jeff lived in a little cabin up against the back fence. Long red hair, freckled, always had a bottle of beer in his hand if he was out on his little porch. He thought Gustave was a great addition to the estate and said not to worry about the landlord. “He doesn’t care.”

Jeff didn't work, was waiting for his full time disability to kick in so he could go live in the country. He had a bad back, so he said, and he did walk stiffly and give off the aura of one in pain, his face smiling but slightly frozen, and his forehead semi-creased. When he talked out back with the other guys, or even with Roxanne after he'd got comfortable, he'd sound off on something or other and end up making what seemed to her a fantastic motion with his hands, a jacking off motion, thrusting out his hips, encircling the fingers of one hand like a tube and bouncing it up and down on the air above his crotch. She supposed he thought her good-natured because she laughed when he did that, although her laughter was more shocked than anything else. But after a while, she

just smiled. The motion was so... male. She kind of liked it, at least as a bit of contrast to the female world she'd lived in so exclusively for so long.

In the hallway of her building, Tony from upstairs stopped to pet Gustave, who jumped up and put his paws on his thighs and wagged his tail. She was growing increasingly fond of these men, not as objects of potential romance but as a communal presence. Men stomped up and down the stairs and laughed in the backyard and played music above her head. Men holding hands with their girlfriends nodded politely as they walked down the sidewalk.

Her apartment blossomed into its potential. She put up a Georgia O'Keefe print of a luscious red flower on her newly painted living room wall and laid a blood red rug over the scuffed wood floor in the living room. As her surroundings relaxed into a light loveliness, so did her mind. Every morning she raised the blinds and thrilled as the sunshine swarmed in. Sometimes the moon shone through her bedroom window at night, and she lay awake for hours reading or just watching the breeze blow lightly at her gauze curtains. She placed a big mirror over a small table in her bedroom and took to sitting there in the evenings for small chats with the image she saw. The eyes that looked back seemed increasingly luminous, and the soul burning behind them more awesome in intensity. Candlelight illuminated her skin and led her to see vague glimpses of other faces in the glass. Holding her head high, she stared solemnly at eyes that changed color from green to gray to black. The top of her head tingled during these gazings. Her crown chakra was opening again.

Chapter Thirteen

The damn puddle of slush at every corner where the snow banks were melting drenched Roxanne's boots and set her brainstorming how and when she could move back to California. March was the godawful worst time of year in the most godawful winter-bound state in the nation. Next week, the temperature would most likely drop again and the remaining slush turn to treacherous sheets of ice. And all people wanted was a little warmth like the people on the coasts were already bragging about when they called up on Sunday afternoons.

Like Lisa, who was happy as a newly-transplanted Minnesotan could be in sunny California in March. Ecstatically so. She said she missed Minneapolis, a little. "But we went to a barbecue in someone's back yard yesterday. A friend of Donna's from work. And it was warm!"

Gustave didn't mind the weather. He never minded a thing. He'd hop through drifts of snow with the same carefree canine joy as when he chased squirrels through a city park in July. "Let's go for a walk, Tavo," she said, and the dog sprung up from his spot on the rug where he'd been contemplating, as far as Roxanne could tell, the variable warmth of this spot compared to the spot on the other side of the chair, and ran to the front door in full wiggling enthusiasm. Roxanne resolved once again to be the person her dog believed her to be. She'd read that on a bumper sticker and believed it to be a great way to live her life. It was harder than it seemed.

Halfway around the block, she encountered Tony from upstairs, who stopped in his tracks when she and Gustave came abreast of him. "Hello!" he said in sincere and heartfelt greeting. The cap of a bottle poked out of the paper bag he held at his side. He beamed with that perennial goodwill Roxanne had come to expect from him, and a sad look in his eye that only made him the sweeter. They chatted mildly about the weather while Gustave sniffed the yellow pee on the softening snow bank and added some of his own.

Leaning back on his heels and puffing out his chest, Tony said, "Roxanne, I want to tell you something. I would marry you." He grinned proudly. "If you lost, oh, thirty, forty pounds."

Her mouth dropped open. "No *thank* you!" She glared in indignation. "I don't want to get *married*." She certainly didn't, and even if she did, not to him. What a bizarre idea!

Tony carried on anyway. Softly admiring her face, he told her how wonderful she was in most respects. "You're a nice girl. So easy to talk to. I think we'd get along great. If you lost some weight, you'd be beautiful."

"How *kind* of you to say so," she sneered. "But no. I don't want to marry you."

"All right. How you doing, Gustave?" Tony squatted down and, as if he had merely been talking about the weather, rubbed Gustave's ears before bidding her a cheery but sad goodbye.

He was rather handsome, about six feet tall, lean, with a nice jaw. But he stunk like a distillery and thought she was fat. How was that supposed to win her over? Did

men think women were just waiting around for one of them, no matter how decrepit, to propose marriage? Did Tony really expect her to fall into his arms, diet for three months and walk down the aisle in a white gown while all their relatives threw rice? They'd never so much as flirted. How ridiculous.

But the conversation was enlightening. In the lesbian community, she was on the large size. In a man's world, she was fat. She joined the YMCA and began to swim laps, and cut back on ice cream.

One day she turned on Phil Donahue at work. She was really ready to kill herself over her job by now. She'd cleaned this same condo once a week for four years and was afraid she was going to start hallucinating out of boredom. The sameness of the beige carpet and the off-white walls and the matching furniture that was almost tan but not quite dark enough drove her bananas. The man who lived here, Sam Olson, had enough money to live here but not enough taste to pick some good paintings for the wall or buy a more interesting sofa. A hotel room had more personality.

She'd begun to fixate on Sam Olson's enormous mirrors in his bathrooms. Two bathrooms, one person. He used both bathrooms even though they were right next to each other. She cleaned both even though neither was ever dirty, not to speak of. A fleeting event kept appearing in her mind's eye, an event she hoped had never happened but was beginning to wonder if maybe this was a warning that it might. The scene had

her going into a trance and picking up one of the lipsticks his lady friend left behind and writing “Fuck you” on one of those stupid huge mirrors. Then forgetting she’d done it.

She recognized this was a sign of imminent burnout and that the time had come to find a new career. Something interesting. Not lucrative. She didn’t care about money. Just interesting. Lisa worked on road construction, and that wasn’t bad pay but she hated it and had to put up with rude cracks all the time, and only worked half the year anyway. Dorothy ran a gardening business and did okay but nothing to write home about. Hope worked at the library. She had a steady paycheck and benefits but had to wear certain clothes and had to present a proper appearance and keep her opinions to herself.

Yeah, yeah, housecleaning had its perks. Independence, check. No time clock, check. She could arrive whenever she wanted to as long as she got the job done. Decent pay, check. Not spectacular, but fifteen dollars an hour wasn’t bad for 1989, and it allowed her to work only part-time and still get by. Best of all, there was no one to bother her. A new client interviewed her, hired her, then gave her the key to their house and never saw her again, usually. She got to take over their dwelling as if she was the owner, and in a sense, her cleaning was a sort of ownership. She wiped down their stovetops and scrubbed their shower walls, keeping the daily accumulations of grease and scum from piling up. She vacuumed under the bed and up in the corners where cobwebs would develop and dust would take over if not for her.

But she’d been cleaning the same houses with little variety for years. It was always fun to start with a new client because she got to satisfy her curiosity about what people were like behind closed doors. Walking into a new house and being shown each

room and being allowed to open closets and cupboards was like being a voyeur and having someone take off their clothes for her. And some houses were quite pretty inside. But she was so tired of the work that the thought of a new client now made her queasy. No more.

Phil Donahue said something that made her turn from her dusting and stare, then lay down her vacuum cleaner and sat on a footstool pulled close to the TV. Five women with close-cropped hair, their bodies shapeless under loose work shirts and pants, spoke in strangely strangled tones, shy but earnest, about the necessity for women-only spaces and the power of women's solidarity to overturn patriarchy and set the world free. Roxanne was somewhat familiar with one of them who'd written articles in separatist papers. All five women looked strange and out of place on the well-lit set, sitting uncomfortably on shiny chrome chairs, like old country grandmothers testifying under the curious eye of sophisticated city folk. Roxanne put her hand to her mouth, horrified. These women looked like nuts, like adherents of some whacky fringe group.

Once, separatists were the vanguards of a new world of peace and justice. Overthrown by women's obvious moral power and spiritual strength, men would lose their potency and wither away as a force. That had been clear. But while Roxanne and her revolutionary friends plotted and danced and planted their vegetables and worked on their own cars, the modern world had paid no attention to them at all, had been marching on, clamoring with change, tossing her kind off like fleas.

Roxanne took stock. She was twenty-nine years old, plump and a bit shy about her body and not at all sure if she was pretty, although she thought she might be. Overall, her look pleased her—clear complexion, unlined face, and loosely curled hair that now hung down around her shoulders and framed her face in a manner that made her think of classical paintings. In the mirror, she gave herself smoldering looks and decided she had potential as a sexual creature, even if her sexuality was still largely unformed. She walked Gustave through the midst of the city, past the good-looking young people overflowing from nightclubs and strolling arm-in-arm down sidewalks, curious as to how they went about mingling so easily.

She felt she was not normal in many ways when it came to sex but wondered how many truly were. Maybe most people just let things slide.

Drama, *pizzazz*, that's what she wanted. Not quite romance, no. That sounded a bit mealy and tame. Passion, yes! As for *whom*, surely someone would come along now that she was out in the world with a lovely smile.

She resolved to make no decisions yet. One thing though—no politics would intrude on her sex life ever again. Desire would lead her. If it led down dark paths, she could always turn back. Maybe that was the key.

On the first cold day of November, Roxanne returned to the video store dressed in heavy winter clothing—thick dark coat over sweater and jeans, a navy blue watch cap pulled down over her forehead. She didn't look so much like a dyke anymore, although under all this padding she hoped to pass for a man if no one looked too closely. She stood in the foreign movie section located directly in front of the swinging doors and studied the backs of all the films of Ingmar Bergman while standing in a casual slouch. Heart beating fast, she casually turned toward the saloon doors, gave them a push and stepped inside.

Every inch of shelf space in this room, about the size of her bedroom, displayed a full-color lurid box cover depicting graphic carnal acts. *Wow*. Yards of very attractive flesh confronted her—white flesh, black flesh, bodies spread out showing it all, or contorted in all manner of uncomfortable positions, grinning, naked, conjoined in all possible ways. Every box cover shouted like a billboard, blaring naked crotches of either sex, or both, often three or four crotches crowded into one picture. This was way more flesh than she'd expected. Stunned, she tried to act nonchalant, as if she came in here all the time, and tried to breathe slowly even while her crotch grew hot with the kind of lust she didn't know how to handle, heavy and loud, pounding through her veins and demanding attention. She didn't linger long on any cover. They were all astonishing, especially displayed as they were under overhead lights of high wattage that left no shadows to lurk in.

A man in heavy winter coat but no hat, his head held high in the normal fashion, a guy who looked more or less like a construction worker, came in and stepped past

Roxanne as if she were just another customer. Outside the swinging doors, she heard the cash register ring and the chirp of pleasant banter. All she had to do was pick a movie and walk back through the doors. She picked *Nurses in Heat*.

The clerk was blowing his nose when she set her video on the counter. He did give her an extra glance, but she wasn't sure if it was because she was a woman buying porn or if he wasn't sure which she was, man or woman. Handing over her cash, she congratulated herself. With one quick insertion of the box into a plastic bag, her conquest was at last complete.

It took her all three days on the rental to get through the movie. She lay on her bed with her hands down her jeans while one nurse got it from two doctors in the first fifteen minutes. Intoxicated, she came and then rewound those fifteen minutes to watch again. The high-pitched "ooh oh ooh" soundtrack got in the way, so she turned it down and watched in complete silence, awed. Drunk on extra-large genitals filling her TV screen, swooning over swollen labia sucking up purple-veined cocks, she went to work in a daze as if she'd drunk a bottle of gin.

Chapter Fourteen

She had choral practice that night. It was her saving grace and always cheered her up no matter what, but tonight she felt strange in the midst of her sister dykes. The word "lesbian" should mean something. She didn't like messing around with the definition.

There was a rock-hard honesty in saying she was a dyke, she was queer, she was a woman-loving-woman. If this identity wasn't as clear cut as she'd told herself, and told everyone else, then she was in trouble with herself.

After practice ended, while they all put on their coats and stuffed their song sheets into bags, Roxanne made a casual comment to Hope that she'd seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and really liked it..

With a bright gleam in her eye, Hope answered. "Harrison Ford, isn't he to die for?"

"Yeah, sexy as hell." Roxanne waited for the next beat where one or the other would wax even more euphoric over his female costar, or laugh over the ridiculousness of a lesbian drooling over a male movie star. That didn't happen.

"He's nice and tall," Roxanne said with a sly grin, although she'd never really thought before about whether Harrison Ford was tall or not. He was taller than she was, that much she knew, and probably taller yet. And she suddenly knew that a tall man like him appealed to her very much.

"I love a tall man," Hope said, sighing and looking at Roxanne with eyes that seemed to have brightened even more.

"Me too." What a strange conversation this was.

"Are you bisexual?" Hope asked, leaning in a bit closer and lowering her voice, although no one was paying them any attention.

"Well..." They both broke into a laugh.

"Sorry, I didn't mean..." Hope said.

“No, it’s okay. Maybe. A little.” Hope nodded, satisfied with that answer, as far as Roxanne could tell.

“Hey, call me sometime. Here.” Hope tore a piece of paper off one of the song sheets in her folder and wrote her number down. “We can talk more.”

Roxanne dialed her that night and told her about Spencer and Dorothy and the porn movies. They spoke for two hours. Hope’s story was similar: she’d had a few women lovers and identified with lesbianism but fantasized about men and had recently gone quite bonkers over the idea of them.

“Is it our age? They say women reach their sexual prime in their thirties.”

“I don’t know.”

Hope had a crush on a guy named John. She thought John was a very good name for a partner. “But he doesn’t seem to want to make any moves, although I’m sure he likes me. I think I’m putting out nervous vibes that are messing up our psychic communication. I need to clear them up.”

Roxanne felt enormously moved by the conversation, talking more and more excitedly about the desires she’d held in check by simply pretending she didn’t have them. To open her mouth and say such things to another person made her feelings real. At last. She was coming out to Hope. Coming out as a heterosexual.

“So do you want to be in love with a man?” Hope said.

“I don’t think I could go that far. But I don’t know.”

Hope did. Hope wanted a grand passion, wanted to marry and have babies with a soul mate. “I want a lover who I abandon all rational thought to.”

Both of them turned silent. Roxanne wanted a cigarette but didn't have any matches, so she told Hope she had to go to the bathroom and then ran through the apartment looking. She found some on her beside table and came back to the phone but kept pacing because the movement up her body from the bottom of her heels up through her head felt too wonderful to dampen by sitting.

"Can you be a bisexual dyke?" she said. This was her real fear, now that her secret had been revealed and she had admitted she was not what she'd said she was for all these years. Would she still be able to go dancing at the coffeehouse? Would she still belong?

"Can you keep everything the same but have sex with men? Do you know anyone like that?"

"No." Hope sounded sad.

The next evening, Roxanne's phone rang in the middle of her second orgasm, pitching her into a mad scramble to find the remote somewhere in the heap of blankets so she could turn the sound all the way off. It was already down, but she better turn it totally to nothing. One high-pitched squeal could sneak through. God, those women could squeal. She never squealed like that.

She picked up the phone, and with a carefully modulated tone, said, "Hello."

"Roxanne? This is Dorothy."

Of course it was. She knew Dorothy's voice. "How are you?" she asked.

"Doing okay." Dorothy sounded upbeat.

But then silence descended. The usual. Roxanne would have to say something to break the tension. Well, screw that. Let Dorothy say something if she wanted a damn conversation.

But Roxanne gave in. "I'm okay too," she said. "Been settling in."

"How's your new place going?" Dorothy said. "Get it painted?"

"Yeah. Oh, and I got a dog." Damn, why did she have to go and tell her that?

"You can have dogs there?" Dorothy sounded surprised.

"Sure." The truth was, she didn't know. The landlord was still in the dark.

"Well, that's great," Dorothy said. "Say, I've been thinking about things, and I agree with what you said last time we talked. We should try to be friends."

"Oh, I want to! Thank you, Dorothy."

"We've been through so much together. I don't want to lose you totally."

"I'd like to talk," Roxanne said. "That would be good."

Roxanne would tell her about the dog, the neighborhood, and her new view of things. She'd wear her neon green shirt. They made a date for noon at the Seward Café.

"Gustave," she said as she was leaving. "I'll come back and take you for a nice long walk."

Gustave cocked his head and looked worried. "I'm going to see my old lover. Don't look so unhappy. It will be fine."

She zipped through her morning job, using all the tricks she had to get the job done fast: Feather duster on the lamps and windowsills and up and down corners to grab cobwebs before they settled in, a push of the dust rag over the furniture surfaces, a quick scrub of the shower followed by a sloshing rinse. She had this job down so well she sometimes thought she could clean a house in thirty minutes if she really pulled her throttle wide open. Grabbing the check off the kitchen counter, she hauled her stuff out the door and hopped in her car to meet Dorothy. Clouds had gathered, and the air felt full of electricity. She was in such a good mood she could almost smell the grass growing.

Dorothy waited at a table near the window, sitting stiffly and holding the menu in front of her like a shield. Roxanne shouted out hello as she got close, expecting her to rise and hug her like a long lost friend. True to form, Dorothy stayed in her seat and smiled tightly, so Roxanne plopped into the seat across from her and smiled placidly. They must remember their places. They were ex-lovers, not lovers.

Roxanne picked up the menu and sighed loudly. "I have to find another line of work."

"You've been saying that for the last year."

"It's still true. So what's up? How's the house?"

"Peaceful. How's your new dog working out?"

"Fine."

"You can have a dog where you live? That's cool."

"I think he'll be okay with it. The landlord." Why did Roxanne say that?

“Ah. I see.” Dorothy frowned and resumed pouring over her menu. After they placed their orders, rain began to fall with big heavy drops hitting the roof. They talked about details of their ordinary existence, the work, the transmission trouble Roxanne was having on her truck, and the worry she had about money, that she had to find some more work pretty fast or she’d have to start charging her groceries.

“Lisa’s moving to California,” she said.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Roxanne. I know you rely on her.”

Roxanne bristled.

“Don’t get all resentful,” Dorothy said. “I’m just saying she’s been a support for you. You need that.”

“We all need that.”

Their sandwiches came. Dorothy had the veggie burger; Roxanne had the Jack cheese with avocado. This was going well. Roxanne felt pleased they could be so decent with each other.

“You know, I’ve thought of moving back to California,” Roxanne said.

Dorothy snorted derisively.

“No, really,” Roxanne said. “I miss it sometimes. The beach, the mountains. The kind of work I do I could do anywhere.”

“Roxanne.” Dorothy put down her sandwich and stared at her until Roxanne raised her eyes. “You’re thinking crazy. That’s a crazy idea.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Lisa wants you to move to California, and so you just say okay and move to California. You’re such a pushover. You can’t even say no to a dog. What are you going to do if you bring your dog to California and can’t find a place that will take dogs, huh?”

“I won’t rent that place,” Roxanne’s voice rose.

“And how are you going to take the dog to California?” Dorothy said, lowering her voice to a hissing whisper. “What, are you going to *drive*?”

“What is so weird about driving?” Roxanne thumped her fist on the table. “A dog can ride in a car.”

Dorothy shook her head in disgust. “You need to talk to a therapist about this before you make any decision.”

“I’m not making any decisions at all. I’m just thinking.”

“Are you seeing your therapist?”

“No.” Roxanne spoke in a level tone of voice for fear she’d start yelling. “And I’m not going to. I’m going to just live. That’s all.”

“*Just live.*” Dorothy mimicked her. “Good luck with that.”

“Dorothy was good for me in a lot of ways.” Roxanne was sitting at her kitchen table talking to Hope on the phone, a cigarette in hand. “I’m different than I used to be. I can garden, I can paint walls, I can cook stew and bake bread. Make fudge.”

“Susie Homemaker.”

“I should make you my favorite dessert some day,” Roxanne said. “You boil a can of sweetened condensed milk until it turns into caramel, and serve it warm topped with whipped cream. Deathly delicious.”

“Bleah,” Hope said. “I don’t do dairy, dearie. It induces phlegm. Soymilk is better. I cringe to think of what your lymph nodes have to deal with. Why doesn’t anyone believe me when I tell them these things? It’s all very simple.”

“We’re all dysfunctional.”

“You were going to stop using ammonia,” Hope said, warming up to her second favorite topic. “Have you? I have plenty of Amway products over here. Excellent people, Amway No toxins, artificial ingredients, ammonia, or coloring. Think of your brain cells.”

“I’ll consider it,” Roxanne said. “Not today.”

“It’s all very simple.”

“So how’s your crush on that guy at the gardening store going?” Roxanne asked, changing the subject.

“Who?”

“The *guy*.” She’d talked about him almost nonstop for two weeks. “Darrel or something.”

“Oh, Donald! Already forgot him. Turns out he has a girlfriend!” Hope giggled hilariously.

“You’re taking it well.”

“I’d decided against him anyway,” Hope said in a carefree voice. “I saw him smoking out in the back one day. He *said* it’s only two or three a day all rolled himself with additive-free tobacco. But I could never kiss a smoker. Who wants to lick an ashtray? No, he’s not the one.”

Roxanne took a very quiet hit off her cigarette. Hope would die if she knew she had taken up the habit. “Who needs a ‘one’ anyway? I say, have many!”

“You don’t want a soul mate?”

“That’s crap,” Roxanne said. “No different than the notion of being swept of one’s feet by a prince.”

In a low voice, almost a whisper, Hope said, “I’m going to get a dildo and practice.” Roxanne could almost see her cupping her hand over her mouth, even though she lived alone.

Chapter Fifteen

To start the new year right, she decided to give her body a treat. She called the number listed in the small ad in the Gayborhood and made an appointment with Allen, massage therapist. When she arrived, she became shy, for he was much better looking

than she had imagined, and for a moment, she wondered if she'd gotten the wrong idea from the ad and maybe this was not the right service for her. He was tall, blonde with a firm jaw and well-muscled arms. A pin-up.

Then he smiled, and she relaxed. "Good to meet you, Roxanne," he said in a gentle voice, taking her hand in a warm grip and holding it in a brief embrace before letting go. "Step in here and lay your clothes on the chair there, and I'll come back in when you're ready." In a narrow room stood a massage table laid out with sheets, and a wooden chair against a tall window covered with thick drapes. Roxanne hesitated.

"You can leave your underwear on if you want to," he said. "And I'll try not to get any oil on it."

Not wanting to be prudish, she obliged and took everything off. He may be gorgeous, but he was also gay. Her nudity was no big deal to him. But she hadn't had her clothes off around a man in many years. Naked, she slid between the sheets and waited giddily, as if she were a cosmopolitan sort of woman who ran around taking off her clothes any old time, any old place, for a good rub. Taking a good deep breath, she let her arms flop off the table's sides and her cheek settle onto the table.

Entering with a polite greeting, Allen oiled up his hands, turned back the sheet to bare her back, and laid his hands on Roxanne. As soon as he pushed his palms down onto either side of her spine, she felt herself pushed aside, replaced by a meek, simple hunk of flesh. He owned her. She moaned without meaning to. He was so tender, his hands so kind and confident as they smoothed the tension from her back. She'd never had a massage that wasn't foreplay to sex. As the minutes passed, time dissolved, and

she let herself drift to a mindless state as if bobbing on a warm sea. Debris floated away, knots appeared and were smoothed, and her body was rocked into wakeful slumber.

Under his care, she fell into a physical contentment she hadn't felt in a long, long time.

All those years with Dorothy, so cold and lonely. Separate bedrooms. Listening to Dorothy use the bathroom in the middle of the night. Her naked body kept hidden. A chasm between them opening up wider with each passing year. They'd sat on separate couches, peach and blue, their feet curled under, taking turns petting the cat with starving fingers. Passing through the public space of the dining room, their bodies met like diplomats, exchanged greetings and occasional hugs that mimicked their absent ardor.

And now, right here, a man, a man who wasn't even interested in her body except to give it peace, was touching her gently. Lovingly. When he told her, in a quiet voice, to turn over, she resisted at first. Her own power was drained. But she roused enough to push up on her elbows and flop onto her back. When he laid his hands on her sternum, covered with the sheet, she burst into tears.

"It's all right to cry," he murmured. "It's all right."

A cascade of relief mixed with sorrow, happiness, despair and a myriad of conflicting emotions rushed out of her. She cried because he was a kind man who touched her without reservation, and with such soft sweetness he might be a woman. She cried because she'd disdained this sort of connection between sexes, had roped it off bounds, and how wrong she'd been. When the massage ended, she clasped his hands in solemn thanks and left the room in a daze.

“Massage the ears, and don’t be shy,” Mrs. Baumgarten said. “The ears love a good rub. You can see that in a dog, how they love to have their ears rubbed.”

Mrs. Baumgarten, a tiny woman with a sharp voice, taught ten students at a time the gentle art of massage therapy. Effleurage and petrissage on the latissimus dorsi, triceps brachii, and the wonderful gastrocnemius, otherwise known as the calf muscle.

For the neck, she taught them how to reach down under the bottom of the scalp with the client face up, and pull the fingers upwards, letting the weight of the head act as resistance. “Enclose your hands around the neck on either side,” she said in a voice high and fluttery like an opera singer, “and grasp and pull like a wringer, squeezing first one side then the other. Proceed to the arms, squeezing the upper arm, kneading the triceps, the biceps, milking the lower arm, giving it a good kneading. Squeeze, knead, milk, smooth.”

If the teacher’s looks of approval were any measure, Roxanne believed herself to be Mrs. Baumgarten’s best student. She beamed at Roxanne when she executed a new stroke successfully and nodded with great enthusiasm when she mastered it. “Yes, that’s right. Everyone, watch Roxanne. See how she leans in and uses her weight to add pressure. I don’t want any of you relying strictly on the strength in your thumbs and fingers, or you’ll wear yourselves out quicker than dishwater.”

She taught them to drape the private parts, to lay a towel over the breasts while simultaneously drawing back the sheet so they could work on the stomach without offending the client's modesty.

"Stay well above the pubic hair," she said. "In California, sometimes they give massages without a sheet!" The class tittered and raised their eyebrows at each other in mock horror. "But most of your clients won't want that."

Roxanne tittered with the rest of the class but wasn't so quick to dismiss the idea, seeing as how she might end up working in California, and she sure wasn't going to tell a naked man to cover himself up.

"So. When you want your client to turn over, use the sheet as a curtain and hold it up between you so their bare body is hidden from your eyes. Lay the sheet over them when they have completed the turn. Now you will work on their back, and the back of their thighs, and just remember that as you move your hand up the thigh, you will encounter an area of heat just *before* you make contact with the genital area. Stop. Go back down. I know I don't have to say this, but never, never let anything sexual happen in the massage room. Roxanne, let me see you practice the draping now."

Chapter Sixteen

Roxanne settled into a comfortable phone routine with Hope, exchanging calls every other day or so to report on each other's thoughts and feelings regarding the state of

their sexual identity and their need for something to happen. “The paper says the sexual revolution might be ending,” Roxanne said to Hope one evening. “Did you read that?”

“AIDS, right?” Hope said. “AIDS is not caused by sex. This is scandalous. They won’t even listen to the real evidence.”

Roxanne laughed in astonishment. “It isn’t? I thought they figured out a virus—“

“They’re wrong. The scientific community thinks they can sell drugs to ‘cure’ this supposed virus. It’s all about greed.”

“But Hope, they sound reasonable.”

“I thought you were so into natural health,” Hope said. “There’s this doctor in, uh, Holland or something, and he’s found patients who have full-blown AIDS and not a sign of HIV. And no one wants to listen. Where’s the money in it? That’s all they care about.”

“Well,” said Roxanne. “I care that the sexual revolution is doomed. Anyone can get infected, they say, not just gay people or Haitians. I’m doubtful about women infecting other women though. That sounds far-fetched. I think we’re safe.”

“Oh, because we’re so *lesbian*. Right.”

“I keep forgetting.” Roxanne laughed. “Hey, have you ever heard about these gay bathhouses? Are men really fucking each other with wild abandon in these places? I’m kind of envious, I have to admit.”

“Yeah, how come women don’t have bathhouses?”

“The lesbian tendency toward sexual Puritanism? I’m certainly sorry about any part I played in that, but it’s too late for us all to go gang-banging our way to anonymous orgasms.”

“Too bad,” Hope said, “although women don’t seem to go for that sort of thing anyway.”

“Yeah, what would you do in a roomful of horny, naked women?”

“You know what we’d do?” Hope said. “We’d talk. We would sit and talk on and on about, perhaps, our early sexual experiences and how they’d shaped us, or our body images and what we were doing to counteract society’s negative messages, or perhaps we’d comfort a woman hurt that another had rejected her.”

“Ha ha! You’re right,” Roxanne said. “I wish I was a gay man. Of course, their fun looks to be coming to an end.”

Hope and Roxanne went to see the AIDS quilt when it came to town. The thing was huge, covering the floor of the downtown arena. Laid out in squares of four sewn together with borders, the quilt had room for people to walk through and look closely at each section. Volunteers kept an eye on the visitors and provided small boxes of tissues for those overcome with emotion.

Roxanne felt impressed by the scope of the project but otherwise unmoved, and guiltily so. Maybe it was because she didn’t know anyone being commemorated on the

quilt, and so felt no personal loss. Death comes to everyone, after all. The death of someone with AIDS was no worse, no sadder, than the thousands of daily deaths across the world that went un-noted.

Still, she wished she could better understand the phenomena of young men in their sexual prime withering and dying away, and the anguish of their friends watching, fearing, and waiting for their own doom to come creeping next. It seemed a drama worthy of the Greek gods, a plague so cruel it destroyed the fun-loving ones, the ones who cast off ordinary mores and plunged into a pool of decadence the likes of which others only craved in secret. As if society was culling them out of revenge.

“Look at this, Roxanne,” Hope said, drawing her to one of the tables set up around the perimeter of the quilt and handing her a flyer from a local AIDS support organization. “Seeking volunteer massage therapists to give massages to HIV+ people in the Twin Cities.”

“Huh.”

“You could get hands-on experience. So to speak.”

Two weeks later, Roxanne’s first client at the HIV+ center looked at her nervously but with a subtly defiant demeanor. With loudly beating heart, she smiled defensively and placed her hands on his shoulders and casually began her massage. She

didn't feel brave, felt rather childish really, to have even the slightest hesitation. She felt that she was infected herself with a low-level dread of the sick and had to shake it off.

This man would probably be dead within two or three years even though he looked perfectly healthy, still had round cheeks and thick biceps. She gave him the best massage she knew how to give. Her hands felt sure of themselves and moved rhythmically over his body. She kneaded the muscle on the side of his calf bone, worked it deep like a rope being smoothed out. She grabbed either side of his thigh and pulled back and forth like a wringer. She pressed deep into the space between his shoulder blades and felt his body release its defenses and slip into ease.

And when she was done, she placed her hands on his back in silent benediction, bowed her head and said a silent *Namaste* as her teacher had taught her to do. Go in peace, dear man. He sat up, still bound in his sheet, his legs dangling, and his face soft and bleary. The music had stopped, but the room still resonated with the spell of the flute and the guitar. He looked at her with a satisfied smile, but something more, a curiosity, as if a wall between them had fallen.

"You have really warm hands," he said.

Roxanne grew shy and felt herself blush. "Thank you. You can get dressed now," she said, and turned and left the room.

Summer was in full bloom. Thunderstorms broke every week, feeding the gardens, keeping the lawns green and enlivening the air. It seemed to Roxanne, now that she'd lived in Minnesota long enough to have a philosophical opinion on its ways, that winter and summer existed independently, not just because they were extremely opposite but because when one ended, it disappeared entirely. The other opened up and claimed the world, top to bottom, as its own. Summer ran on summer. Summer didn't remember winter, didn't talk to winter, didn't acknowledge it in any shape or form and acted as if such a season were impossible. Summer came upon summer upon summer. Lakes were warm and legs were bare, and that was how life was. There was no connection between the two seasons, which were ideas when absent, not actual things. Winter could be read about in a book or looked at in pictures. While it was true that in the steel gray buildings where men and women engaged in civic preparedness, the fiction of winter lived on, they thought about it so much. But they were alone in their fantasies. The citizens believed only in the hard facts of heat, humidity and mosquitoes.

When winter came, it continued on from the previous one, winter running upon winter. Not as much snow this winter, no sirree! Last winter was a bear, pipes froze, but this year's only middling frigid so far, eh? Coats existed only in winter, worn as second skin, kept handy on chair backs and hooks by the back door in the same way that cigarettes stuck close to addicts. Everyone's feet crunched over new snow, slipped on icy snow, and sloshed through melting snow, but no one ever blinked in shock that there *was* snow. The world was a snowy one. So the gods decreed it. So people lived it, day in and day out, their breath steaming when they talked, their cheeks burning when the wind

rose. So the gods decreed it, and so it was. Winter came upon winter. Summer was a dream.

Roxanne had entered a new world as drastically unconnected to her previous one as summer to winter. She'd loved women, and now she loved men, and so she decreed it, and so it was. The love of women slipped out of her consciousness, left behind in books and record albums, a stalled car abandoned by a snow bank. She'd hitched her way out and hopped a ride to men town, men city, a whole teeming countryside of men and nothing but. Men hills, men valleys, men sunshine burning her face, men making her sweat and men warming her as she lay on her back. Men world. And so she decreed it.

Chapter Seventeen

He looked different from the other guys she'd massaged at the center, and not just because of the cowboy boots. From her seat on the ratty green couch in the front bay window, she turned the page of the paper and spied him talking to Paul, at his desk near the stairs. He must be her next client. But Paul didn't look at her or point her out to the stranger, so she went back to reading but peered over the paper to examine him further.

He had on a white singlet and faded blue jeans. His skin shone light brown and smooth, and his hair was also light brown, with bleached highlights. Paul looked wary but conducted himself politely, if a little more blandly than usual. The cowboy seemed to be insisting on something, standing over Paul with his head bobbing, causing a little tail

of hair to ride up and down his neck. She could almost smell the pasture on him. The way he stood, his whole body leaning aggressively towards Paul even while bowing his head as if in supplication, made her think of a cowboy wanting to get on his horse but having to wait until this dude would let him.

Then Paul perked up like a light bulb went off and asked the cowboy if he wanted a massage. That she heard. She lowered the paper.

“A what?” The cowboy’s head bobbed as far forward as it could go.

Paul nodded at her. “She gives massages here, and her appointment didn’t show up. Might as well get a massage, if you want one.”

Did she want him to say yes? He had a bit of a dangerous air, not violent dangerous but sexy dangerous. He hesitated, like he didn’t know himself, but then he said, “Shoot yeah, I’ll take a massage.”

Paul smiled at him in a way she didn’t quite like, sort of condescending, and said with a smirk, “Ever had a massage, Dean?”

“Nope.” Whether Dean noticed Paul’s attitude or not, he didn’t show, just acted as breezy as before. “But I’ll try anything once.”

Well, she thought, so will I. Putting the paper aside, she rose to escort him up to the massage room.

“I’ll be there in a sec, darlin’,” he said, nodding towards Paul as if to say he wasn’t quite through with him.

A warm flush filled her face. In the past, she would have sneered, maybe even come back with a *darling your ass*. But the new Roxanne nodded okay and smiled

sweetly before turning to go upstairs, adding a bit of swing to her hips as she walked away from the men. Hot damn, a good-looking man just called her darling. How smart she'd been to wear her pink t-shirt, which made her complexion look especially rosy. The humidity of the August day made her hair curl up nicely too, just the way she liked it. Outside the massage room, she leaned against the wall, stuck out her hip and posed like a steamy massage goddess awaiting her charge—the conquering hero from afar.

A trickle of sweat fell down between her breasts, bringing her back to earth. Slow down, woman. What was she thinking? Some man she didn't even know called her darling, and there she went, all giddy. She went inside and smoothed her hand over the massage table. This was just going to be another massage, perhaps a little more interesting than usual, and maybe not even that. The room next door was vacant, which meant they'd be alone up here, and she felt a bit nervous. He was probably gay anyway. They all were here at the center. He just happened to know how to be charming to women. He was from the south, by the way he talked and those pointy-toed boots he wore.

He clomped up the stairs and stuck out his hand. "Howdy, ma'am. I'm Dean. What was your name again, sugar?"

She blushed. "Roxanne." He had a good handshake.

"A pretty name for a pretty lady. I know I'm going to enjoy this." His smile was wide and his voice confident. She knew he was talking flattery, but she didn't mind. "So do I strip, or what? You tell me."

“Just leave your clothes there,” she said, pointing to a chair in the corner of the small room, “and then lie on the table between the sheets. I’ll be back when you’re ready.”

“You don’t have to leave,” he said, unbuckling his belt. “Won’t take me long to get naked. Damn, this is going to be good, I can already tell.”

“No, I’ll leave,” she said, backing out. “I’ll be back in a minute.” She shut the door behind her in a no-nonsense manner and then stood out in the hall under the bare light bulb and took a couple of deep breaths. Everyone she’d massaged so far had either been shy and almost totally silent or they’d chatted very politely. She didn’t know how to handle this guy. It wasn’t that she was afraid of him. Shoot, she probably weighed close to what he weighed, and as for toughness, well, she could handle herself. The problem was, he wasn’t giving her trouble; he was flirting.

She turned the handle quietly and stepped inside the room. Under the yellow light of the floor lamp, Dean lay totally naked on top of the sheets, the bottom sheet and the top one. His penis, half-hard, was huge.

“I know you said to get under the sheet, but damn, it’s hot down here. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No. Suit yourself.” With the door closed, she turned the dimmer down to low, then poured a smidgen of oil in her hands and rubbed them together while trying to do something besides stare at his thing, his dick. “Cock” sounded pornographic. Well, he *was* pornographic. That was definitely a *cock*. Placing her hands on his forehead, she pressed lightly down and out.

“Damn, that feels good,” he said. His voice was full and nasally like a radio announcer’s. “I could get used to this. How long you been doing this?”

“A month,” she said, her throat thick with saliva. Settle down, girl.

“You have great hands.”

“Thank you.” She ran her fingers around his eyes, down the side of his nose and around his lips, gently working the underlying muscle. He closed his eyes when she worked around them but opened them back up again when she moved away. She could tell he wasn’t used to getting a massage. He looked up at her and smiled.

“So where are you from, Dean?”

“Oklahoma and Texas. All around. I’ve been in prison here in this damn state, just got out a couple weeks ago. I hate it here. I gotta get back to someplace not so fucking cold. Excuse my French. I’ve been around too many men for too long.”

“No problem.” He’d been in *prison*?

“Now you could keep a man warm in winter.”

She blushed some more but resolved to keep the conversation more impersonal.

“Nothing dangerous about me, don’t worry. I got busted for selling LSD. My life was going so smooth before that.” She poured more oil in her hands and stroked his neck, receiving a moan in appreciation. Now Roxanne had been slowly acclimating to the oddities of men, but this one was odder than most. Above his left nipple, and pointing right at it with its beak, a tattoo of a hummingbird drank deep. On one bicep, a set of initials, and on the other, a cross. And that cock! While she pretended to concentrate

fully on the therapeutic touch, in fact, her eyes strayed constantly to that part of him that pointed up from the base of his stomach, pulling her attention like a strong magnet.

While he talked about how much he hated snow, she took his arm and rubbed it up and down, while gazing out of the corner of her eye at his belly, where the thing's head pointed ever higher.

He sighed happily. "You are so beautiful," he said. She knew it was flattery, but of a very convincing kind, and she willingly let herself feel warmer towards him, even while her shyness urged her to throw her hands over her face and run from the room. Instead, she just kept on massaging his arm, up and down, up and down. He had the most perfect bicep—not too big, and curving like a sculpture into his shoulder.

"I mean that," he said. "You are beautiful." Well, maybe he was sincere. "I just love women," he said. "I really do. The guys here, they're gay, and I love gay people with all my heart, but I'm not gay myself. I'm bisexual through and through. Hell, I'm just sexual. You got the only man in this place that knows how to appreciate a beautiful girl like yourself. You have the most beautiful eyes I've seen in a coon's age."

"You're handsome too." He was, although his good looks were on the edge of ugly, rough in a Mick Jagger kind of way.

He grinned. "Well, I don't know about that, but I got a big dick."

She laughed, then covered her mouth and wished she hadn't, wished she could remain professional about all this.

"You like it, huh?"

“Well, I’m not supposed to feel one way or the other about it. I’m just giving you a massage.”

Had she done his other arm yet? She couldn’t remember. Oh, bother. She moved on to his leg. He pulled his thighs slightly apart. She had no idea what to say. Sweat beading on her forehead dripped into her eye, and she wiped it off. As her hands slowly pushed their way upwards to the top of his thigh, his dick rose to meet them until its length was fully extended, so that by the time her hands stopped just under his balls, his genitals forming a veritable castle rising from the foundation of her fingers.

“I’m not really supposed to be looking at it,” she said, weakly.

“Who says?”

“The rules of massage. We’re just supposed to massage you. I mean, the rest of you, not your dick.”

“I don’t mind if you look at it. I’m not shy. Sex is a natural part of life.”

As she slid her hands back and forth sideways over his thigh, pulling and pushing the flesh like bread dough, he sighed happily. Well, as long as he was okay with her not touching it, she could relax and enjoy herself. He was sure a nice guy.

“I’m bisexual too,” she said.

“You like men and women both?”

“Yeah. Although I’ve just been with women for the last few years.” She moved to his foot, wrapped it like a sandwich between her palms and then continued back up his leg, leaning down so that she ended up with her arms stretched out towards his dick and

her head hovering so close she could smell the musk of his balls and see the tiny blonde hairs poking out like porcupine quills.

“You haven’t had any dick for a few *years*?” He’d had his eyes closed but now opened them up and lifted his head to look at her. She shook her head.

“So what do you think of mine?” He nodded at it.

She stood up straight and grabbed the oil bottle and poured more into her hands, rubbing them together. “It’s great. It really is. But it’s not like I’m going to get on the table with you or anything.”

“You don’t have to get on the table.”

“Well, you know what I mean. Whatever you’re thinking I could do, I can’t. Sorry. Even if it weren’t against the professional rules, they’d kick me out of here if they caught me messing around with a client.”

“Okay.” He laid his head back down and closed his eyes. “No problem.”

She moved to his other leg. He didn’t argue. The thing stayed rock hard, though, until she told him to turn over so she could do his back. It took him a minute to get comfortable and get his cock soft enough to lie on, but then he started talking again about how much he hated this state, about how the only reason he was here was because this was where the carnival had been playing when he’d been busted. He’d been a carnie.

“Best job I ever had. I loved that job. I wanted to retire with that outfit. They travel all over the Midwest, but I have to hang out in this damn state until my parole is over.”

Then he got quiet, and she felt his breathing slow. By the time she finished his back, he was totally still and as quiet as a sleeping baby. She laid one hand lightly on his sacrum and one on the top of his head to balance the chakras. An intense wave of energy passed through her.

“Wow,” he said, when she removed her hands. Yes. She had to agree. She stepped back and told him she’d be just outside, that he could get up and put his clothes on whenever he was ready. Out in the hallway, she leaned against the wall and took some deep breaths, her veins bristling with a strange electricity. She wanted to see him again. He opened the door and stared at her quietly before saying, “You’ve got to give me your phone number at least.”

“Okay.”

She had to go downstairs to get a piece of paper and a pencil, and Paul looked at her funny. She tried hard not to look like she was blushing or had been blushing or had been up to anything funny, but she stuttered as she asked him for what she needed.

“Can I—uh, you gotta—um, I just need to write something down. Some paper, or something? Thanks.” She smiled like an idiot and walked primly back upstairs to hand the piece of paper to Dean, who stuck it in his back pocket with a wink.

“See you soon, sugar.”

He said he’d better leave first, so it wouldn’t look like they were together, in case Paul was getting suspicious. She watched him walk away, those lanky legs moving more slowly now, his body looking less like a colt than an old dog ambling back home after a long day chasing cats. After a few minutes, she packed up her sheets and oil and left,

waving cheerily to Paul, who did look suspicious. She had to go shopping. Condoms, for one thing. She could have sex with someone with AIDS as long as she wore a condom and used it correctly. AIDS no longer shocked her, not in the least. Then she had to get a razor and some shaving cream. Her legs were still lesbian legs—hairy, and that wouldn't do for sex with a man. She was going to get laid.

Chapter Eighteen

Condoms, condoms. Up and down the drugstore aisles. She'd never bought them before. Would Dean bring them? No telling. With the curious eye of a tourist, for she rarely ventured down the "female" aisles at a drugstore, she passed eyeliner, depilatories, barrettes, face cream, conditioner, hair color, pink plastic sandals. Would he even call? Maybe she'd made a fool of herself. No, he would call. He would come over and fuck her. None of that was in question. Ah, there were the condoms, all the way at the back of the store in a rack flush up against the prescription window, where the pharmacist, a bald man in glasses, chatted leisurely with a gray-haired woman leaning on a cane. They gave her sidelong glances as she scanned the rack: regular, lubricated, large, ribbed. Would they please stop looking at her? Flushed, she pulled a pack of large regulars off the hook and tossed them into her basket with a flourish. It was a free country.

Razors next. Not having shaved anything on her body in many years, she didn't know if she should buy men's razors with steel grips or women's razors with curved

handles in pastel shades. The hair on her legs was not girlish. More manly. So manly she'd been sure she was a lesbian based on body hair alone. What a disappointment to be back to this shaving gig again. Into her basket went the toughest razor they had, a gray and black number with a thick steel handle.

At home in the bathtub, she shaved all the hair from her thighs to her toes, leaving her skin so smooth and sensual she wanted to stay in the tub all day and run bubbles up and down her skin with the tip of her finger. She wished she *were* twenty pounds thinner. Could she ask him to wait a while? Maybe another couple months. If she went to the gym every day and cut out all the Haagen Dazs, that might be enough time, especially if he were waiting at the end. The inspiration would be phenomenal. She'd waited so long for sex; another two months would be nothing. But no, he wasn't the type to wait. She dried off and stood squarely in front of the full-length mirror attached to the bathroom door. Bulky thighs. But her breasts were full and would draw his eyes upwards. Her waist curved inwards, giving her figure a classic hourglass shape, and the overall look of her skin pleased her—pink, smooth and unblemished. She smiled the seductive smile she'd been developing in the privacy of her midnight hours, a smile meant for a lover she'd known would come.

“Hey,” Dean said. He stood half-turned toward the door and half turned toward the yard, his blue eyes scanning the bushes and path that ran down the side of the building.

“Hi,” she said, waving him in while Gustave poked his head forward and sniffed his jeans.

Dean bent over slightly and gave his hand to Gustave to sniff. “Hi, fella. I love dogs.” For a moment, the three stood inside the door, Gustave’s tail wagging but otherwise no one moving, and then both Roxanne and Dean laughed nervously at the same time.

“You look pretty,” he said. She wore her neon green t-shirt, black pants that ended at her calf, and no shoes.

“Thanks. Why don’t you come on in and make yourself comfortable there on the couch? Want something to drink? I have beer.”

“That would be nice.”

She scurried into the kitchen and returned with two bottled of Budweiser already damp with condensation, and sat a polite foot away from him on the couch, one knee pulled up so she could rest her chin on it. Gustave lay down next to her on the floor and watched Dean.

“Nice place,” Dean said, and pointed to the red flower picture. “I like that.”

“Thanks. It’s Georgia O’Keefe.”

He nodded dubiously. Something about him was different. He seemed tired, like he'd had a hard day, but maybe he'd been so relaxed from her massage that he had continued to relax all afternoon and was now close to falling asleep.

"Boy, did I feel good after I left you." He leaned over with his elbow propped against the back of the couch for balance, kissed her with a peck on the lips and then leaned back again and let his arm fall to his side.

"You want me to rub your back some more?" she asked.

"Not really," he said, grinning suddenly as if turning on a light, a totally artificial switch that nevertheless seemed natural and in tune with his odd approach in general. "I thought you might want to rub something else. Where's your bedroom?"

This was what she wanted anyway. He knew it, and she knew it, so why wait? She led him to the bedroom. Dean slipped out of his jeans and singlet and helped her out of her t-shirt, and she slipped off her pants and underwear. Before she had time to get comfortable on her back, he'd slid his legs over hers and got into position.

"Wait!"

He looked surprised, or perhaps woken up, like a man snatched from sleepwalking his way into the neighbor's bed. She reached over to the bedside table and picked up one of the condoms she'd set out before he arrived.

"What's that for?" He truly seemed surprised.

"Protection. Aren't you HIV positive?"

"Nah." He shook his head sharply.

"What were you doing at the center then?"

“I know some of the guys that go there. I was just looking for somebody.”

Surely he was lying. She couldn't read his face in the dark. No air of malice emanated from him, nor any corresponding feeling of dread from her heart. Would he lie about life and death matters? She couldn't tell. But he was nothing but a fling, a one-night stand, so what did it matter, as long as he put one on? “You have to use one anyway,” she said. “I could get pregnant.”

“Oh.” He said it as if pregnancy was a new idea, making her wonder how long it had been since he'd had sex with a woman. Sitting up, he unwrapped the condom and fumbled with it for a minute before it getting it all the way on. She lay quietly and watched. Her anticipation for this moment had been growing for months now. The thing she'd fantasized about so fervently was about to slide inside her body. It came with him attached, and she was willing, even glad, to accept him as part of the deal.

He climbed back onto her and, with his hand, put his cock into position and shoved his hips hard.

The space that existed so mysteriously inside her, what Dean called her pussy, belonged to her again. She had imagined it empty and unfeeling for so long, it amazed her to feel it clasping his cock, to feel it grab him with its own fingers and pinch it like a child clutching chocolate. Her empty cavity was more a volcano than a vacuum, more a seething grotto of steam and flooded walls than a sterile receptacle. She had been right. This was what she wanted. She stopped thinking.

Sex refreshed him. “Tight and wet, smooth as silk, darling, just like a girl ought to be,” he said. “How long did you say it's been?”

“Seven years.”

He shook his head. “Man, I can’t believe a woman who likes cock as much as you do would go without it for that long. You must have *really* liked pussy.”

She let that stand. She thought him amazingly handsome in the moonlight that crept through the blinds. His forehead was tall, his cheekbones high, and his skin smooth and lightly browned with only a whisper of stubble on his chin. In his ear, a jeweled stud shone.

“What’s this?” she pointed to a scar on his calf. She felt she had the right to ask him about his body now, to hear the story his skin told.

“Bullet. I was running, got away.”

“And this?” A lightly-pigmented slash seared his chest.

“Knife. The guy was trying to scare me, that’s all. I probably look like a dangerous criminal to you, huh?”

“Yes. Truthfully.”

“I used to be. Not any more. I gave up being violent. It doesn’t get you anywhere. People change sometimes. I changed. But you,” he said, raising up on one elbow to look at her more closely, “I don’t understand how you could go without dick for so long. If someone’s too ugly, well, that’s a sorry state of affairs, and they have my complete sympathy. But you’re not ugly.”

How to explain? She was as odd to him as he was to her. “Have you ever heard of the patriarchy?”

His face turned sour as if she’d asked him to kneel and pray.

“I saw all men as patriarchal oppressors and all women as their victims, and I couldn’t have sex with my oppressors. I couldn’t even let a woman stick anything up me during sex, because that was patriarchal.”

He reared his head back and looked at her as if she were insane, then, as if he’d decided it was none of his business if a person acted that bizarre, he shrugged and reached over her for cigarette pack, taking the opportunity to graze his lips over her tits as he passed. “Takes all kinds, I guess.” He cackled lightly.

She supposed he’d been around a lot of “all kinds” and had learned to let people be people. What if she told him she was the reincarnation of Joan of Arc? He’d probably say, “Whatever suits your fancy,” with that same shrug.

“So what was growing up in Texas like?”

“Worse than you could ever imagine, except I liked riding horses.”

“You got to ride horses?” She was envious.

“I grew up on a ranch, a boys’ ranch in Oklahoma. Hated it. I ran away every day I was there. Every day, they brought me back and beat me.”

“How long were you there?”

“Ten years.”

“And then?”

“Military. Vietnam.”

“Oh, you poor guy.” What a life he’d led! “I’m glad you survived that.”

“Hah.” He threw his head back, his eyes lit up and he told her a story about “being a point man, the guy who goes into the tunnels first because he’s skinny, the guy who gets killed first if he’s not lucky. I was lucky. Them sonsabitches missed me.”

“Wait a minute.” Something didn’t add up. “Didn’t you say you were thirty?”

“Yeah. So?”

“So you were born in 1957.” She got up her knees and stared down at him righteously. “The war was *over* by the time you were eighteen. You weren’t in Vietnam.”

He looked at her with surprise and a bit of admiration. “Well, so I wasn’t.” Then he shrugged. “Good story though, ain’t it?”

She shook her finger at him. “You’re a liar!”

“Well, now, that’s rude. I was just trying to entertain.” A yawn escaped his mouth, which he covered politely. “Could I crash here? I’m just getting over walking pneumonia, and it’s a long walk back home.”

She’d caught him in a lie, and he’d escaped, but instead of being incensed, she was entranced at the ease of his lying and the casual way he didn’t mind her pointing it out. Takes all kinds! Besides, he wasn’t very good at lying, which made him seem less venal. She would take him with a grain of salt and enjoy him while it lasted.

He fell asleep almost immediately. Tomorrow, he could disappear forever. Didn’t matter. But if he wanted to stick around, well, they could have a little thing going. Before she moved away. She’d made up her mind to go back to California.

Chapter Nineteen

When she left for work, he was still zonked out. All day, she felt her crotch warm and her limbs melt at the memory of what they'd done, and every now and then had to stop and sit down and smile, her arms wrapped around herself in a tight hug to keep herself from exploding.

When she came home, he was still there.

"Me and Gustave went on a nice, long walk this afternoon. Didn't we?" He bent down and rubbed the dog's ears, and the dog wagged his tail like a metronome. "I locked the door, don't worry."

"Where did you get a key?"

"In here." He pointed to her kitchen drawer where she kept assorted junk. "I just tried the keys I found until one worked. Here." He dug out the key from his pocket and handed it to her. "You hungry?"

He foraged through her cupboards, found an old can of salmon and made the best salmon patties she'd ever eaten. He was a coyote, a trickster, a flipped coin landed on its edge. Entranced and bedeviled, she began to feel like a rube being suckered in, but willingly, eyes open but along for the ride.

He lived at a halfway house and perhaps even had a sort of life there, although he said little about it, and she didn't enquire. His story, when he told her more, was as riveting as she'd suspected. Maybe even true.

"I was born in Texas, raised in Oklahoma. I'm never going back. Oh, it's in my blood, but it's bad for me. But you should see the sky out there. You ever been there? They have sky so big it's unreal. And red rivers, like strawberries. Anyway, my pa worked at a gas station. My ma, I don't know what happened to her. My pa wasn't much good as a father. My baby teeth rotted out before they even had a chance to fall out natural. Of course, there was always some woman around, but they'd go out drinking all the time. I used to sleep under the bed so my dad couldn't find me when he came home, because he liked to whale on me." His eyes grew dark and angry.

"I'm sorry."

"You and me both. Why do you want to hear all this?"

"I'm interested in you. Is that so strange?"

He shrugged. Maybe it was.

"I was six years old, mad a child as you ever seen, and one day I set fire to the neighbor's garage. My pa drove me to this boy's ranch and dropped me. I remember him saying he'd be back later to get me. I believed him. Never did come back. And I waited. They finally threw me out when I was sixteen. We'd had enough of each other. See, they believed you shouldn't spare the rod, no sirree. You can be damned sure no child there was spoiled. But see, I knew they were wrong. I fought those bastards every day and stood my ground. They never knocked the fight out of me.

“I’ll tell you what, though, the best part of living on the ranch was riding the horses. When I wasn’t on restriction, I got to take a horse out, me and a buddy, and ride the plains. Used to search gullies for hidden treasure. I found a cave once. Oh, and you’ll like this. Every year we had a rodeo, and I got to be the clown. I was the best one they had.”

His face brightened up, and he got more animated. “You know anything about rodeos?”

“Nope.”

“The rodeo clown’s job is to distract the bull when the rider falls off, to keep him from trampling that boy, and of course I had to keep him from trampling me too. Jumped around, dodged him, and scrambled over the fence at the last minute. Oh, man, that was fun. I was *good* at it too.”

Her own story sounded boring, but he wanted to hear.

“I guess I had an okay childhood. But my mother died of cancer when I was eleven.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. So you and me was both orphans.”

“My aunts raised me after that, and my dad too, although they believed I needed a mother substitute and kind of took over. They were wonderful, and I love them. They live in California.” She heaved a great sigh and looked at him sorrowfully. “But you know what I went and did? I decided my whole family was totally dysfunctional when I became a lesbian. I cut them off.”

He made that face again, as if he’d sucked a lemon.

“We lesbian separatists kind of *had* to hate our families because they were part of the patriarchal system. Came with the package.” She could hear herself trying to distance herself from who she’d been, which now seemed shameful. “A lot of lesbians didn’t think that way. I did. Of course, I guess I wasn’t really a lesbian. But I sure thought I was.”

“He smokes pot,” she told Hope. “Doesn’t much like beer. His dad was an alcoholic.”

“Cigarettes?”

“Yeah.”

“How can you kiss him?”

She invited Hope over for a peek at him. Fresh out of the shower, his hair combed back slickly over his head, dressed in an old plaid shirt and jeans, he sat slumped in a chair watching TV. When Hope came in, he lifted his head and said a polite, “Howdy, ma’am. Hope? Pleased to meet you, Hope. Pretty as a bluebell. Any friend of Roxanne is a friend of mine.”

Hope tittered nervously and shook his hand and then retreated to the kitchen with Roxanne. “He looks like a drowned rat,” she whispered, her brows turned down in disapproval. “Does he have a job?”

“He’s only been out of prison a little while. He’s waiting for a check. I don’t know, he seems to be getting by.”

“He must really rock your boat.”

“He’s a fling,” Roxanne said in her defense. “His dick is this big.” And she held her hands apart the length of a ruler.

“Hmm.”

“I’m moving to California soon anyway. It will all be over then. He knows that.”

She imagined herself an initiate in the cult of the penis. The walls of her vagina were covered in tapestries and filled with smoke. Whenever they fucked, she felt she could see more clearly and her hearing became sharper, and she felt overwhelmingly safe in her own skin, and empty of desire for anything more. All those years of being a lesbian had served as spiritual preparation.

Chapter Twenty

Dean had been a prostitute. Or so he said. And plenty of other disreputable things. But he didn’t want to talk much about his past. Prison? First time, he was nineteen.

“Oh, they loved me in there,” he said with a dark look. Roxanne wanted to ask what he meant but was afraid to hear too much. He didn’t look inclined to say more anyhow. She felt it imperative to leave him alone to a certain extent, to not push, not be a pest. She didn’t want him being a pest to her, after all. She had embarked on a new life of freedom where people lived their lives as they saw fit and didn’t intrude on each other unduly. If he was lying, it wasn’t apparent. She decided he lied to entertain but only half-heartedly. If it was all a big story, she was willing to go along for the ride. But she had the feeling most of it was true.

“I relocated to Los Angeles and started running a couple of girls, dealt some drugs. Got picked up again for stolen checks and had to spend another couple years in the joint in Arizona. That time, when I got out, I got working at the carnival, and I thought I’d finally had it made. You know that game where you sit and roll the ball and the horses race down a track on the wall?”

“Sure.”

“That was my game! Come on, ladies and gentleman, over here, take your places, the race is about to commence!” His voice boomed and he strode over the floor with his hands waving the invisible crowds over before holding an imaginary microphone to his mouth. “And they’re off! Green is taking the lead, watch out for green, and here comes red, he’s coming up fast, green and red are neck-in-neck, it’s a fight to the finish, yellow closing in, red takes the lead, but yellow is pulling hard, yellow is coming in fast, ladies and gentlemen, unbelievable, it’s yellow by a nose!”

Roxanne clapped her hands. “You should be on the radio with that voice.”

“A man’s got to have something he’s good at. Of course, I got this.” He grabbed his crotch and leaned back and laughed.

“When you met me, I was hustling,” he said.

“You were?”

“Yup. Oh, I’ve done a lot of that. My dick has been my biggest asset my whole life.” He swiveled to look at his behind. “I just wish my ass weren’t so flat.”

In the second week of their affair, Dean brought out a bag of pot after washing the dinner dishes. She’d cooked spaghetti. Deftly, he rolled a joint, sat back in the big chair and took an enormous hit before handing it to Roxanne.

“I don’t know if I should,” she said. “I get paranoid.”

“No, you don’t,” he said, shaking his head indignantly as if she’d just told him she couldn’t ride a bike. “You just need practice. Here. Go on.” He held it out to her, and she was transported to years past, sitting on the floor listening to *Ten Years After* with Dwayne and Alicia who’d cut school with her and gave her first high. She’d giggled for hours.

“You’ve been living like a nun, girl.” Dean shook his head sadly. “No sex, no weed. Can’t cook a measly pork chop. I’m going to show you how to live.”

“Well, maybe I’ll try.” Everything was going so wonderfully. Maybe the paranoid thing that had ruined pot for her had been related to her youth, or more likely to

the terrible insecurity of those teenage years. Youthful nonsense. Now she was a woman of the world. Yes, she would smoke a little pot. She plucked it from his fingers, held the damp end between her lips and took a solid, respectable hit.

No problem! They passed it back and forth two or three more times, and she fell back laughing on the couch, kicking her feet in the air with bravado. She could do this! But wait. Dean's face grew over-animated as he talked, his eyebrows shooting up and twisting to one side like a maniac, that wide grin of his looked demented, and his eyes glowered like a demon's. *Stop laughing!* She suddenly saw that he'd moved in on her and she didn't know anything about him. He could rob her, beat her up, he could kill her. He had right out warned her he was dangerous, had told her he'd once killed someone. What a fool she was. He kept cackling, and throwing his arms around and talking about—what was he talking about? She couldn't understand.

"This AIDS thing, it's not from a virus, they say it is, but they don't want you to know how it's really caused. You should hear the truth; of course you wouldn't believe it, man. Fucked up. Waaaay fucked up!" And he cackled again, so loud she wanted to cover her ears. Like this was funny? She just sat there and nodded. She knew she looked stupid, that her mouth hung open, and she was probably red in her cheeks since she always blushed too easily and people could tell everything she felt. Damn, she wanted to be cool and act normal, but sweat was popping out on her brow, and Dean just kept throwing his head back and cackling.

What was he saying now? Something about California.

“I can’t go back to that state. Not allowed. The people I used to work for, they told me never to come back to that state. They said, you got the whole country, you stay out of here, we won’t touch you, we’ll leave you be. You come back here, boy, you better watch your back because we don’t forget. Got that, boy? We don’t forget. That’s what they told me. Not people you want to mess with. I can’t tell you their names. One guy, big motherfucker, Harley riders all of them, he told me, he said, see this exhaust pipe? Same size as your mouth, ain’t that interesting, don’t that beat all? I scraped the floor bowing down. No sir, never come back, no sir, keep my distance, of course, sir, don’t have to worry about me. See, I’m not like some people. I *believe* them.”

Why was he laughing so loudly? She got up and ran to the bathroom and shut the door. He was still laughing. Or was he? She couldn’t tell. Maybe that was the echo of his laughing she heard, pounding through the walls and over the floor even though he’d stopped. Oh, man, she had to get out. She had to take her stuff and get out. No, just the valuable stuff. Her guitar, she had to get that out, or he’d steal it. She opened the door and crept out.

Dean was asleep on the chair in front of the TV, his head collapsed sideways in an uncomfortable position, his mouth open so wide she could have stuffed a pillow in it. Signaling Gustave to follow, she retreated to the bedroom and closed the door and sat on the bed with Gustave on one side and the bedspread clutched to her bosom, absolutely terrified. She was in no danger while he slept. As long as he didn’t wake up, she could wait until the morning to kick him out and change the locks. If he would leave! All around her, the city boomed with crashes and murmurs she couldn’t decipher, as if people

were busy rearranging the whole town behind her back and when she woke up in the morning, everything would be unrecognizable. And then what would she do? She clutched the pillow tighter and dug her fingers into her palms. She had to get out of here.

Summoning all her courage, she put on her coat and slipped into the living room to grab her guitar. The case was open, so she closed it and delicately shut the snaps and lifted it, signaling Gustave with a nod of her head to stay. He wouldn't hurt Gustave. She had to take this guitar somewhere and leave it, and then she could come back and take Gustave. In the car, she went through a list of people she knew who lived nearby. Hecate. Driving slowly, the streetlights watching her, the gleam off the windshields of the cars lining the streets, blinding her, the city booming with unrecognizable sounds, all mushed up and loud, she drove four blocks to Hecate's house and knocked on her door, guitar in hand.

"Roxanne! What a delightful surprise. Come on in!" Hecate wore sweatpants and slippers and had a book in her hand.

"No, not tonight," she said, trying to keep alarm out of her voice. "I just need a favor. Could you keep my guitar here for tonight? I just have to get it out of the house, and I promise I'll come back for it tomorrow." She had to keep the panic from her eyes. She grinned widely.

Hecate took the guitar and stared at her with growing concern. "Are you okay? What's the matter?"

"I have someone in my house. I don't know... the person very well. I'm probably being silly. You know." Know what? How often had Hecate had a man like

Dean in her house? Or any man at all? Jesus, what had she done? Waving and grinning, she backed down the stairs, saying, "I'll be back tomorrow. Don't worry. I'm fine." In her rearview mirror, she saw Hecate still standing in her doorway with her mouth open. She reminded her of someone. Aunt Maggie! A small explosion went off in her heart. The aunts would die if anything happened to her. They'd commiserated so politely when she'd left Dorothy, had tried so hard to not say an uncomfortable word that might send her raging away from them again. She called them once a week and had even dropped a hint about how she was maybe, maybe considering someday moving back. When they'd called over the weekend, she'd let the machine pick up and hadn't called back. How could she keep Dean out of her voice?

Now they would know, because he would hurt her or rob her. Even now, he might be ransacking the place, secure in how well his plan had gone: seduce her with sex and crab cakes, wash her dishes and pet her dog, then get her good and fucked up and steal everything she had. This wasn't a decent man she could trust. He was a criminal through and through. He'd *killed* someone. That hadn't sunk in until this moment. He'd never been attracted to her. He was using her.

And Gustave was sitting alone in that apartment with this bastard. It began to rain. She turned on the windshield wipers and headed home to rescue Gustave. They could sleep in the car or wander the dark city until dawn. Dean had faked his interest just to get a good situation. She knew that. She'd known that since the beginning, but she'd thought she had the upper hand. Now she knew what a fool she was. That was her stuffed chair and her ottoman, and she ought to be sitting there petting her dog. He was

counting on his “asset” keeping her enthralled. She was too proud to admit the truth to any of her friends, who would only shake their heads and remember how they’d once respected her.

The rain drenched her face and hair in the few seconds it took her to run from the car to the door and get her key out and open it. By the time she’d dried her hair and changed into warm clothes and got herself a drink of water, she was hungry. Starving, in fact. Dean had turned halfway on his side in the chair, and his cheek smushed against the yellow roses of the upholstery made her think of the yellow rose of Texas. He didn’t look too dangerous. Maybe she should think about all that later.

She’d told him she shouldn’t smoke pot.

Chapter Twenty-One

“So how’s the penis hunt going?”

Hope sighed. “Fred is just not coming around. I flirted with him again yesterday at the co-op. We’re getting requests for organic meat. Uck. I mean, why do people think organic meat is any better for you than unorganic? It’s all going to clog your arteries. Don’t people read anymore? Anyway, he’s been given the job of finding a source for organic chickens. Oh, my mail order dildo arrived.” She giggled hysterically, causing Roxanne to hold the phone away from ear. “Get this. It came in a plain brown wrapper.”

“And have you put it to good use yet?”

“Ahem. Yes. I had to start gently, but I got it in. It’s probably as big as Dean’s. Or bigger. I think it’s eight inches. KY jelly, baby. Slid right in. The balls are a handle. Now I know I want the real thing.”

“You’ll get one,” Roxanne said. “I still think you should wear something tight to show off your body.”

“No, no, no. I’m not going to advertise. I don’t want some man who just wants my body.”

“But you just want his.”

“Not just that.” Hope sounded offended. “I want a soul mate, someone I can communicate with on more levels than sex. I don’t want some animal pounding away.”

Roxanne held her tongue. Fucking Dean felt animal. So did her need for him. No matter what sort of past he had, no matter what danger might lay ahead, she had to have him for a while. Just a while. She’d be careful.

She savored quiet moments in the same way Gustave did now, curling up in her own arms when Dean wasn’t around, or stretching out all four limbs and leaning her head back on the pillow like a sated beast of the forest. Lying in the dark after fucking Dean, she felt life humming through her veins as the hypnotic strings of sex cast its net tight around her body.

What if another client got an erection? Not all her male clients would always be gay. What if she wasn't so good at saying no the next time. Not that she'd actually said no anyway, only postponed things until she could get her client in her own bed. Naked men sighed from her touch. Her book on finding the right career suggested you interview a person doing the kind of work you want to do. Of course, this was silly. She didn't really think she would give sexual massages for any sort of career, but she found herself wondering what it be like to do it just once or twice.

Dean had experience in this sort of thing, sex with strangers for an exchange of cash, but Dean wasn't inclined to discuss such things in detail. But she was twenty-nine, free of religion and unencumbered by conventional morality. No one was watching her. After living as a so-called sexual outlaw all these years, a little hand job might polish her resume, nothing more. Homosexuality wasn't quite as taboo as it had once been, but when she'd come out, it still shocked. She'd felt on fire with defiance of the social order. To lick another woman to orgasm was a revolutionary act! Some lesbians went so far as to be non-monogamous, also quite shocking, and then there were all those sadomasochistic dykes who'd caused all the upheaval and set sister against sister. Sex with women was good and noble, all right, but not *that* kind of sex with women. But how humdrum that controversy seemed now. Prostitutes could actually get arrested and go to jail. Such thoughts tickled her. As if she could be a prostitute!

She told no one of these thoughts because they would call her silly. Even if the profession was one to be sought after, which was highly doubtful in the first place, one had to be qualified. Having warm hands was one thing. Looks wise, her body was not

top drawer, but maybe there was a second-tier prostitution string she could aspire to. She was not unattractive. She'd come down in weight to a reasonable size, if not quite where she hoped to be. Dean was satisfied. They continued to fuck every time he came over, every other day or so. He held her around her waist where she stood at the bathroom sink in front of the mirror and remarked on what a good-looking twosome they were. Was it the sheen of satisfaction that made her so beautiful lately?

Sex with Dean had turned on a switch. She wanted more sex. She felt aroused all the time. Not quite horny, not as she'd understood the word, implying an urgent need to have an orgasm. Need was too strong a word. Orgasms felt good, so she gave them to herself simply because she could. She didn't know if she'd felt actually horny much in her life at all. Besides, she didn't have orgasms when Dean fucked her and didn't feel any need to, which made her uneasy. Women were supposed to come too. She was supposed to want to. He never went down on her. She tried to make him one day and was surprised at how strongly he resisted, finally putting his head down there but using his thumb instead of his tongue.

"I can tell that's not your tongue," she said, scolding. "Okay, never mind." Secretly, she was relieved, for she suspected she wouldn't have come anyway. The only person who'd been able to lick her to an orgasm was Dorothy. And in some way, that had spoiled things, for they stopped spending long hours stroking each other's bodies and instead concentrated on giving each other orgasms. Until they'd stopped doing that too.

Dean fucked her, and nothing more. For now, that was exactly what she wanted, to feel his giant cock inside her pounding away vigorously. Pornographically. She felt

she had a role model of sorts in Dean, a flesh and blood male ex-prostitute hanging around her apartment, singing along with her old Ray Charles records, wrestling with Gustave and making love to her at night. When she told him her fantasy of jacking off a client, he was just surprised she didn't do that already. She asked him how old he'd been when he first got paid for a sexual act, and he looked at her with a faraway stare, and she felt that wall go up again. She let it drop.

"Damn, women do like to talk about things," he said one day in a more light-hearted tone.

She laughed. "It's our burden. And men do like to have sex." She threw her arms around him, and they danced over the hardwood floors to the beats thumping out of the stereo. He could dance, oh my, shaking his shoulders and shoving his hips in an aggressively suggestive come-on. Loose with his limbs and nimble on his feet, his body struck her as the opposite of hers, which was heavy and slow and languorous. She swung her hips and presented her thighs to him like an animal in heat, and he grabbed her from behind and held her while they swayed to a slower song, singing low in his deeply sonorous voice that tickled the hairs of her inner ear, "You send me. Darling, you send me."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The man, who could have been any man, happened to be the landlord of the house next door, and it was a mere accident that he happened to be mowing the lawn on a late summer morning when Roxanne took a moment to stop in her tracks and gaze happily at the daylilies crowding the walkway in his yard. Paolo was a black-haired man in his forties with bushy eyebrows who always smiled gregariously and always liked to stop and chat rather than work. Waving, he shouted hello, then turned off the mower just so he could hear her answer his utterly ordinary greeting.

“Hello,” she said. “How are you?”

“Middling! Heat wave’s coming in, so they say. I say it’s hot enough already. But you know what else they say. Everyone complains about the weather, but no one ever does anything about it.”

She nodded with polite enthusiasm. “It’s supposed to be in the nineties all week.”

“You keep cool enough in there?”

“I’m on the first floor, so I do okay. I shut the blinds during the heat of the day and open the windows at night to cool the place down.”

“Smart girl. Say, how’s the massage business going? Did you ever finish up your training?”

“Oh yeah. I don’t have clients yet. You want to be a client?” She was joking, but he took her seriously.

“Sure. When can you schedule me?” To her surprise, he stared right at her breasts. He’d never done that before. It set her tingling, especially when he looked up at her eyes again and turned red in the face.

“Well, I have time tomorrow around four. That work for you? I have a table.”

She jerked her head towards her apartment.

“I could do that. How much does a brand new masseuse charge these days?”

Quickly, she invented a number. The going rate was forty dollars. “Twenty-five.”

He screwed up his face and pondered. “I think I can afford that. Sure, that’ll do.”

Now here she stood, with jism all over her hand. She’d gone and done it. With her other hand, she turned on the faucet and waited while the water warmed up, one ear cocked to Paolo in the next room. All quiet. The tape she’d put on to accompany the massage, a soothing, generic blend of ocean sounds and synthesizer, had ended forty-five minutes into the massage with a sharp click, leaving a resounding quiet that amplified every remaining sound.

It had been harder than she’d thought. Not the act itself. That had taken less than a minute and happened in the predictable way. No, the signals leading up to the act had been hard to figure out. The room had fallen silent except for the soft whirring of the fan. Paolo had lain perfectly still, but too still, with his eyes closed too tightly and his shoulders stiff. But he wouldn’t come out and say what he wanted. She thought a man would do that. But it was up to her. When she’d heard him swallow hard, heard his throat work like a valve, she’d known.

“Want me to massage that?” she’d asked, laying her hand two inches above the bunched pile of sheet at his crotch. Her voice cracked the quiet like a baseball hitting a window.

He’d jerked his eyes open and raised his head like a jack-in-the-box. Their eyes met. He nodded emphatically. She’d lifted the sheet and dropped it to the floor. The rest was easy. He lay sated now, half comatose on the table in the center of the living room rug, his mouth open like an O, his head thrown back, one calf dangling off the edge of the table.

Here in the bathroom, she smiled at herself in the small mirror on the medicine chest. Her cheeks were scarlet. Hot day. Hottest day of the summer. Sweat turned the tendrils of blond on her forehead dark umber. A song reappeared in her head, the same one that she’d woken up with that morning. *Life could be a dream, shaboom, shaboom.*

She ran her hands under the warm water and rubbed a bar of soap between them, washing off the semen and soap until her hands no longer slid against each other, then turned the handle to cold and rinsed up to her elbows in the chilly water as her massage teacher had instructed. “In this way, you wash the client’s energy away and don’t carry any unpleasant feelings in your own body when you are done,” Mrs. Baugmarden had said, raising her brow in mock horror as if warning them of cooties.

Paolo was her first paying client. She tried the word on. Mouthing it silently, she pushed her lips gently forward in a little poof, then tapped the tip of her tongue on the ridge above the back of her teeth, twice, letting the third *t* slide silently away. *Prostitute.*

From the living room, she heard the massage table creak. Paolo was stirring. She would give him a few moments to dress before returning. Drying her hands and patting the towel over her forehead, she assumed the pose of a practiced professional, cool and collected. She checked for unpleasant feelings. Stomach calm, eyes bright, mouth relaxed, mind relieved. Not a one.

Before he left, Paolo gave her an enthusiastic hug. “Thank you!” he said, clasping her to him so warmly she felt like a favorite sibling. “That was the best massage I ever had. Say, where did you learn how to massage like that anyway?”

She ducked her head in a coquettish manner, a gesture so unlike her she wanted to extend it into a full curtsy just to see what that would feel like, as if she was a child playing dress-up. A ritual tableau of their parting seemed quite appropriate, engaged as they were in a scene from an ancient profession. She raised herself up to full posture again and gave him a steady look with a polite smile, but he seemed to follow her thoughts and laughed as he pulled out his wallet, shaking his head as if he’d never seen such a thing as Roxanne before. He laid out exactly fifty dollars into her palm, which was twenty over her asking price. In return, she gave him a slight nod and a smile that felt cousinly and familiar. When she let him out the door, he was still chuckling happily.

For a moment, she stood frozen in front of the closed door, her hand clutching her money. Behind her, the fan still buzzed quietly, and the white light of midday clamored to steal in at the edges of the closed blinds. Paolo wouldn’t tell, she was sure of that. With a giddy lightness, she passed through each room of her apartment, from hall to living room to bedroom to bathroom to kitchen, making one big circle, round and round,

looking into mirrors and into the glass of pictures hung on the wall as she passed, her image a swirl reflected all around. Her eyes were on fire, as if an inner furnace had been lit.

Dorothy was wrong about her: she was not irresponsible. She had only mistaken who she was. The face in the mirror was the real her. She wanted to crawl into the mirror and touch that face all over, lick inside her mouth, taste her, embody her. She might explode, being her.

Dean came over that night, and she told him what she'd done with Paolo. He didn't say much. Said it would be more surprising if she didn't jack him off.

"When's the first time you exchanged sex for money?" she asked, then wondered at the formal way she put it, considering the subject matter. Well, she was nervous. Distancing herself was only normal.

He shrugged and made a face that said he didn't know, didn't care and wasn't about to tell her anyway. She wished she could be that offhand about sex. To him, it existed, plain and simple. What more was there to say? A little sex mixed in with massage, a little massage mixed in with sex, so what?

For dinner, he whipped up a couple of burgers and corn on the cob.

“He cooks, you know,” she told Hope on the phone the next day while quietly smoking a cigarette. Hope hadn’t figured out she was smoking, and she kind of hoped she’d quit before Hope did find out. She would not approve at all.

“What did he make?”

“Corn and hamburgers yesterday,” Roxanne said, enunciating the words with pride as if this dinner was ambrosia that floated down from the sky.

“And you ate it,” Hope said, with a sad, disapproving voice.

“I’m not a vegetarian.”

“I thought you were.”

“Never officially,” Roxanne said. “I just forget to eat meat. Dean loves meat. I’m so used to vegetarian casseroles and beans that eating hamburgers feels exotic. Pickles too. He bought pickles.”

“Is that Dean? I hear a male voice.”

“It’s Mike Wallace. He loves Sixty Minutes.” From her seat in the kitchen, Roxanne could see Dean slouched low in the comfy chair, his feet slung across the ottoman, chewing on his lip as if thinking something over. Gustave lay curled on the floor next to his chair. He’d taken to Dean quickly.

“Well, it’s your heart.”

Roxanne hadn’t meant to breathe a word of what she’d done with Paolo to anyone but Dean, but she felt a huge need to discuss it. She took a deep breath and spit it out. Hope was not the least bit blasé. “What?!?”

But Hope calmed down surprisingly quickly as Roxanne waxed euphoric over the whole idea and begged her to understand.

“I admit it’s very intriguing, at least the way you’re telling me. But it’s dangerous.”

“I suppose. Doesn’t feel like it though.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dean moved in. He asked first, saying he was over there so often, why not? She agreed. Her move to California was imminent, making her safe from too much entanglement. The warmth of his body comforted her, especially since she’d been without this sort of natural intimacy for so long. She soaked up his heat, taking in the smooth dusky skin of his arms, his silky hair, his smile freely given whenever she looked his way. And he was funny, took nothing seriously, and grabbed his crotch in the parking lot of 7-11, laughing at some joke, not even drunk or stoned, just half-crazy. He would never chastise her for wanting sex or wanting touch or wanting to be told she was beautiful or that he loved her. He told her he loved her. He told her he needed her, wanted her, and even though she blushed and laughed and wanted to believe him, and even though she knew she was falling in love with him, part of her held back. She had to be sensible.

She occupied no prison with Dean. She could tell him to go if she wanted to, and he would have to go. He had no say, just as she had none in his life. Her own inner guidance would keep her steady, and so for now, she felt quite free in her wish to keep him around, no matter how odd the arrangement. His life had been spent behind bars and under the authority of people who wanted only to keep him in line. For him, she was an oasis, a cool spot to rest in, an easy shore to laze upon. And it took nothing out of her. They would both laze, rest, laugh, fuck, and the world around them revolved just the same.

“I always said I’d quit playing around when I was thirty,” he told her. “Find me a good woman and grow a garden.”

So he wanted a garden. So did she, someday. The flowers and vegetables she and Dorothy had grown were a treasured fragment of that life she wanted to someday revive. Dean wanted to grow roses and eat cherry tomatoes off the vine. He loved Gustave too, happily led him on his leash around the neighborhood in the middle of the day when she was at work and leaned down to pet him where the dog sat next to his chair, rubbing his ears as affectionately as Roxanne did.

He was a peculiar fellow, but men in general seemed mighty peculiar to Roxanne, having been away from them for so long. But Dean was more peculiar than most men, she knew, with his odd little tail of hair that had gone out of fashion, and his strange background of imprisonment and institutions, and his extreme openness to sexual excess on a level she’d never encountered. How many men admitted so freely to being bisexual,

at least to their girlfriends? Which she was. His “old lady,” that’s what he called her, a term so old-fashioned and blatantly sexist that it made her laugh out loud.

“We should get a motorcycle and go cruising,” she said in jest.

“Now you’re talking! I got the leather jacket already. Oh, I’d ride you all over creation, darling. Wouldn’t it be great to just take off and ride for days with nowhere to go?”

It was all so weird, so bizarre, such a surprising turn of events. She reveled in her new roles, girlfriend and sexual outlaw. She’d thought of herself as a sexual outlaw when she came out, but now? No community would welcome her to dance in tribal joy or sing the praises of felon love and hand jobs for clients. She hadn’t even told Lisa about this guy. She’d tell her when it was all over. Why go through a big long conversation? She had begun a secret life. She who had once believed in the need to be open about everything, who’d struggled to express every iota of her experience loudly and forcefully, now kept her own counsel like a queen with the secrets of the kingdom to guard.

Hope plowed through the library catalog to find out all she could about the subject. “It really does seem to be one of the oldest professions,” she told Roxanne on one of their evening phone talks. “In ancient Greece, they had six different levels of prostitute. The ones at top made a lot of money and picked the best clients. Some were even married.”

“So it was accepted?”

“Well, considering the Greeks also had slaves, and that women’s lives in general weren’t all that hot, yeah, being a prostitute could be an okay gig back then. Wives weren’t supposed to know anything about sex. That was left entirely to the whores, who were trained in the arts of sensual love.”

“Ha ha! The arts of *sensual love*.” Roxanne imagined a school with white columns where everyone wore flimsy robes and fed grapes to each other. Surely it wasn’t that simple though.

The week after Dean moved in, he strode in just after she got home from work, threw his leather jacket over a kitchen chair and pulled a plastic bag and two hypodermic needles out of a pocket and laid them on the table. She said nothing, just looked at the stash and at him, her mouth hanging open.

“I got some coke,” he said. “You have a hand mirror?”

“In the bathroom.”

He went to get it, leaving her stunned, unsure of what to do. Well, if a person wanted to do drugs, a person could. She guessed. When he returned, he sat down and rolled up his sleeve while she sat down opposite him and watched.

“I brought a clean one for you,” he said, pointing to the needles, which had orange caps on their tops and looked smaller than she would have imagined hypodermic needles

to be. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a needle and had never examined one.

"No thanks." She said it politely, without disdain or judgment.

He shrugged, pulled up his sleeve and wrapped a length of rubber tubing loosely around his bicep, then pulled a small plastic bag out of the larger one and tapped a pile of powder onto the mirror. Roxanne had done cocaine a couple of times in her younger days, and speed too, little white pills they called beans. But no one in her circle had ever shot up. She watched, fascinated, as he chopped at the powder with his pocketknife. He was so bold! And oddly trusting of her, or perhaps simply set on doing this regardless of her opinion. No, she believed her opinion mattered. This was still her home, and he still her guest. She might have tossed him out at the first sight of the needles. Something in her had told him she wouldn't, and that pleased her. Sitting in her bright, cheery kitchen, with her dog lying contentedly on the floor next to her chair, watching a man prepare to shoot up, she felt transported to an exotic, forbidden land. Another leap into a new lake.

When the powder turned soft and fluffy like confectioner's sugar, he poured it into a spoon. These spoons were special, a set of stainless steel service she'd bought when she moved in with Dorothy, a sort of wedding present to herself. He wouldn't hurt the spoon, would he? Flicking his lighter, he held the spoon over the flame, and her heart fluttered with anxiety. She almost told him to stop. She hadn't said it was okay to use that spoon. But she said nothing, just watched, sort of like an anthropologist, and what kind of safety does an anthropologist have when on new territory? The spoon was heavy

duty, so it would survive, she hoped. With the powder quickly melted, he removed the flame, which made her breathe easy again.

He certainly seemed to know what he was doing. Tipping the needle into the clear cocaine broth, he pulled back the plunger and drew it up. Like a scientist in a lab, he added a torn-off bit of cotton ball to the spoon to soak up the residue and sucked up the remaining fluid. And there it all was, ready to go. He set it down to wrap the tubing around his arm, and with that in place, he flicked his finger hard against an inside vein of his elbow, then picked up the needle and stuck it in. Roxanne flinched. Blood oozed into the needle, mixed like ink through the fluid, turning it pink. He pushed the plunger slowly, slowly, all the way down until the shaft emptied into his vein.

Roxanne sucked in her breath and realized her crotch tingled and her thighs were warm. This had turned her on. Even so, she had a sudden knowledge that she should turn away, that he was giving in to something dangerous for them both. But she couldn't turn away. Dropping the needle gently onto the tablecloth, Dean leaned his head back and smiled. "Come here, baby," he said, reaching out his hand. "Let's fuck."

She had two orgasms that night, rubbing her clit with her fingers while Dean fucked her from behind. Dean had four.

Chapter Twenty-Four

She woke with a start to Dean's voice shouting, "Good morning, America! It's almost noon. Ten minutes to noon. Wake up, sleepyheads! Gustave, wake up your mama! I got pancakes, oh yes, I got pancakes cooking." He clapped his hands over Gustave's head, and the dog jumped off the bed and pranced around Dean's feet. A slap of the hand on Dean's stomach brought Gustave jumping up into his arms. "There's my good dog, yessir. Want a pancake? I bet our Roxanne wants a pancake?"

Roxanne covered her head with a pillow and turned away from him. "Yes, but only if I can eat it with quiet."

"Can't hear you. You're talking into a pillow."

"Argh." Oh, to wake slowly to the cool light streaming in through her blinds.

"Pancakes," he whispered.

"Okay, I'll get up!" Throwing the sheet off, she stomped off to the bathroom.

The pancakes were good and filling. Whistling, Dean poured coffee and added a dollop of milk to her cup. "You still love me enough to go to the state fair today like we said?"

"Sure."

Love him?

Crowds made Dean nervous, had his eyes darting every which way as if about to spot an enemy, or someone else? Didn't say. But a hit of weed behind the bathroom,

toked up quick and clamped shut with a little metal cap that swiveled open and shut on the metallic green pipe, and he was good to go, mellowed out and calm as the still August sky. She shook her head and gave him a sour look when he offered her some.

“Forgot,” he said. “Just trying to be polite.”

With the pipe tucked away in his jeans pocket, they hit the midway, strolling arm-in-arm like a married couple out on the town. Roxanne wore her best pink t-shirt and some dangly glass earrings, which had brightened her mood considerably when she put them on.

“Stop that!” She swatted him, giggling. He’d put his arm around her waist and snuck his hand up to cup her breast.

“Sweetcakes, if I had boobs like yours, I’d be so busy playing with them, I’d never leave the house.” He didn’t even lower his voice to say it. Now she was the one who looked around, checking for people she knew. If one of her dyke friends saw him do that, she’d be too embarrassed to live. But only strangers passed by, and they paid no attention. In truth, she kind of liked him behaving badly and didn’t want him to stop, not really.

The midway was Dean’s territory, and he strolled past the rides and games like a king visiting a neighboring province, head high, shoulders back, looking golden, his hair gleaming almost white in the sunshine.

“You want one of those?” He pointed to the giant white panda bears lined up on a shelf over the ball toss game.

“I guess.”

He plunked down a dollar. The carnie, a lanky young man in jeans and singlet, the same outfit Dean had worn when she'd met him, laid out three baseballs on the low counter.

"Watch this," Dean said, picking up a ball and drawing his arm back to throw. On the first try, he knocked down all three pins and let out a whoop. "Yeehaw!"

Roxanne clapped her hands and laughed with glee. The carnie glared daggers at him but reluctantly pulled down a panda and handed it over, mumbling "That ain't fair, mister."

Dean presented the oversized panda to Roxanne with a chaste kiss on the cheek. "For my panda girl."

Walking away from the glowering carnie, he leaned down and whispered, "He knows I was a carnie. We're not supposed to show them up. See, we know how beat the games. Now, on that one, people always think they have to throw at the top or the middle. Uh-uh. Aim for the base. Nobody ever wins those bears. They keep the same supply for months. Look, it's got dust in its ears. Want me to win you something else?"

"This is plenty. I'm going to have to carry it around all day." But she didn't mind. She'd never been one of those women who had a man at their side winning them prizes and handing them gifts. Might as well live it up for now. People kept stopping her all afternoon, asking how she got that.

One guy said, "I've tried ten times. I thought it was rigged but couldn't figure out how."

Dean smiled impassively when she pointed to him with pride, her hero, the one who'd done what none of the other boyfriends could seem to do for the women on their arms. Sometimes Dean gave them the answer. "Aim for the base," he'd say. "Not the top."

And then she saw Dorothy. Or Dorothy saw her. Roxanne glanced up from a jewelry display and saw Dorothy staring at her from a food stand, a cardboard dish of cheese curds in one hand and a giant soda in the other. A woman vaguely familiar to Roxanne stood next to her but was staring off into the distance, distracted by something across the road. Roxanne saw the look of horror in Dorothy's eyes and flushed with a sudden mix of shame and bravado. She had Dean's arm around her. Well, so she did.

Shifting the panda to one hip, she nudged Dean to follow her across the way where Dorothy stood like a statue, glued to the tarmac until they got close, when she recoiled and stepped back as if to escape a tidal wave heading straight for her.

"Dorothy," Roxanne said in a voice she meant to be friendly and mild but that came out harsh, aggressive even. "How are you? I was wondering if I'd see you here. You look great." She did, looked like she'd lost a few pounds, and had a deep tan.

Dorothy nodded, still speechless, but looked like maybe she was considering just walking away and not even engaging in a bit of polite conversation.

"Dean, this is Dorothy. I've told you about Dorothy."

Dean reached out to shake her hand. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am. Beautiful day, don't you think?"

were so brown they were almost black. Roxanne lowered her gaze to the bridge of Dorothy's nose.

"This probably isn't the place to discuss this."

"Why not?" Dorothy's voice rose.

"Look, it's been happening for a while, started after I moved out. I just met him about a month ago. I'm bisexual."

Dorothy snorted.

"Well, I am," Roxanne said, feeling her gumption rising back up. "And yes, I probably always was bisexual. You knew I used to sleep with men. You did too."

"Stop it! I thought I knew you, and all this time," she said, her voice breaking, her shoulders shaking. Dorothy stepped back and tripped on the curb and fell, sending her cheese curds flying. When Roxanne reached down to help, Jenny shoved her back, and Dorothy screamed, "Get away!" A group of passing teenagers stared and began to laugh. Roxanne picked up the cardboard container and tried to shovel up the spilled cheese curds, getting her shaking hands sticky as she cleaned up the mess and carried it to a trashcan. Dorothy and Jenny disappeared into the crowd just as Dean strolled over and handed her a beer. "I figured you wanted one," he said. "So that was your old lover? Whew, now that's a dyke."

"You shouldn't talk like that. I was a dyke."

"You looked like a man?"

"Don't say that! Don't talk like that!" She shouted, then lowered her voice when a passing family, mother, father, two children, every single one of them blond and tanned,

each one carrying a heaping pile of cheese curds, turned their heads simultaneously to stare at her.

Dean put his arm around her shoulder. “Hey, don’t cry. Now, come on, don’t cry.” He sounded lost. “I hate it when women cry.”

She threw his arm off her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Paolo caught her outside the next day and asked for another appointment.

“Later this afternoon?” she said. Dean was going to an appointment with his parole officer. He drove away just before Paolo knocked on the door.

This time, when she reached the last part of the massage, he laid his palm on her breast and left it there in perfect stillness as she jacked him off. He added ten more dollars to his tip.

As he left, Tony from upstairs came clomping down and past her door just in time to see Paolo adjusting his pants as he walked out the foyer.

“What’s that guy doing here?” he asked, jerking his thumb toward Paolo’s back.

“He’s a client. I’m a massage therapist now.” She clutched the cash tightly in her fist.

Tony gave her a stern look as if he was putting two and two together. She flushed and grinned, trying to look innocent, but Tony didn’t smile back. She closed the door

before he could say more and stood with her hand on her heart. This was no business of Tony's. Or anyone's. A healthy woman with a healthy sex drive might like a healthy hard penis, and what did that matter to people who had nothing to do with it? Nothing!

On the other hand, she'd grown fond of Tony's approval, and the approval of all the men in the building. She liked the idea of being a good woman in the eyes of these men she met: kind and accepting, easy to talk to, as Tony had said when he'd made his ridiculous proposal. She was the kind of woman who would laugh at their jokes and help them out if they got in trouble.

That woman existed one millimeter to the side. That woman was going to get fat again, and she was going to marry some guy who needed bailing out of jail, and she was going to take in stray cats or even children and never wander the night like Venus. That woman might even marry someone like Tony. No. She wasn't that woman.

Shortly after their trip to the state fair, Dean began to grow silent, as if he had something on his mind, and he became reluctant to have sex. Remembering how things had gone with Dorothy, Roxanne fought a growing panic. She wouldn't push him. But after a week of him falling asleep early and keeping to his side of the bed, she felt her panic rise, giving her flutters in her stomach as she went about her day, making her stop in the middle of work and hold her arms around herself to keep from weeping. She had to stop him from sliding away, had to get them back on track.

One evening, she asked him to go with her while she walked Gustave. Out in the warm summer air, as the sun's rays disintegrated into a radiant purple splash on the horizon, she asked him in a calm, controlled voice if anything was the matter.

"No." He sounded wary.

Trying to keep calm, and failing, she burst out with her question. "How come you don't want to have sex anymore? Is it because I make you use a condom? I know you don't like them."

He waved that off, frowned and said, "It's nothing about you. It's nothing anyway."

"But Dean." She could hear her voice rise. "It's been eleven days since we last had sex."

"You keeping track of how often we fuck? Jesus." He sighed and looked up at the sky. "Hear that owl?" he said, his face brightening. She listened. There. It hooted above them. She imagined the round-faced owl peering down at their heads and thought it curious she'd never heard an owl around here before. Gustave pranced ahead, pulling on his leash.

"What good's having a lover if you don't get to have sex?" Her voice grew higher and more desperate, but she couldn't stop it. Maybe he was put off by meeting Dorothy and getting a glimpse of who she'd been before.

"I'm not some windup toy," he said. "Can't a man get some rest?"

Oh, God, he was right. She had to back off.

“Look,” he said. “There’s things you don’t know about me. Things you wouldn’t like.”

“You’ve told me about your life.” She spoke carefully, lowering her voice to sound reasonable and not scare him away. “Haven’t I accepted you?”

“Oh, man, why do we have to talk about this? Pretty soon you’ll be gone to California, you’ll forget me. I’m just trying to take care of you. Don’t push.”

“Don’t push at what?” she said, her voice rising. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” It was time to be direct. “You act like sex is some impure act lately, like you don’t want to soil your precious love for me by imposing your filthy cock on my body,”

“Don’t talk like that!” he said.

“Don’t act that way then! What am I supposed to think? The more you say you love me, the less you want to have sex with me. I don’t want to be a Madonna, I want to be a whore.”

“Stop it! Jesus Christ, listen to yourself.”

“Don’t go all pure on me.”

But he wouldn’t say anymore. They walked the dark streets side by side, arms not touching, passed under the glare of each streetlight and into the dark spaces between, their quiet march observed by owls and raccoons and neighborhood cats. Even Gustave trotted with his head down. Roxanne didn’t know what to do. That night, Dean lay far over on his side of the bed again.

The next day, Dean fell ill. Stomach flu, most likely. But the next day, he was worse, with constant diarrhea and vomiting. She took him to the emergency room and sat in the waiting room late into the evening until a doctor came to tell her Dean was being admitted to the hospital. Undiagnosed intestinal distress. They needed to get it under control. “Don’t worry,” the doctor said breezily, waving away the worry he saw on her face. “He’ll be okay.”

But he had a look on his face she couldn’t read, something that made her wary, as if he wanted to say something else. Before she could ask, he turned away. She was allowed to see Dean before he went upstairs to a room, and she lingered until they took him. He seemed to have lost a few pounds, looked gaunt. She hadn’t noticed him wasting away. This must have been his problem lately, that he didn’t feel well. He told her to go home and he’d see her tomorrow.

When she returned the next day, he was much peppier and said he was ready to blow this place and stood up to put on his clothes.

“Have they said you could go?”

“I don’t have to wait. I’m fine. Look at me, don’t I look like the picture of health to you?” Hitching up his jeans, buckling his belt, he smiled his movie star smile, looked ready to walk down a runway. But he was still too thin.

“What did they say was the matter?”

“Dysentery.”

“Where the hell did you get dysentery?”

“Now don’t start swearing.”

“Fuck you, and fuck Texas too,” she said, laughing. It was good to see him stand tall and straight. “I’m not a southern lady. Don’t distract me from being mad.”

He grabbed her and waltzed her over the linoleum, nuzzling her ear. This was her Dean! He’d been keeping to himself because he didn’t feel good and in his way had not thought it proper to complain. He’d suffered quietly, hid in his den and licked his own wounds. She picked up the admitting papers on his side table as he put on his shirt. Leather jacket slung over his shoulder, he walked down the hall with her, and waving off the nurse who told him he hadn’t been released yet.

“The doc told me I could go home today. I’m going.”

“But Mr. Fowler, he hasn’t signed off yet. You’re leaving against medical advice.”

“I take full responsibility. Thank you kindly, ma’am.”

“But Mr. Fowler—“

“Thank you kindly!”

On the elevator ride down, Roxanne glanced at the admitting sheet, and she suddenly froze. She held her hand out to steady herself. Her stomach lurched. He had lied to her. In the stainless steel elevator door, their bodies were reflected in cloudy blurs of colors. He had lied, and she knew it now. The low hum of the elevator ended with a loud ping, and the light came on over the door.

“Dean, why does your sheet say ‘HIV positive?’”

“Oh, they just ran a test, no big deal. Don’t mean nothing.”

Out in the lobby, he strode quickly to the front entrance, leaving her running to catch up. The door opened automatically and they exited to the sticky heat of the day.

“Tell me the truth, Dean,” she said, her heart racing. “Talk to me now. Right now.”

“Damn it!” He looked around in a panic and shushed her with his hand. “Let’s get in the car at least.”

“You could have killed me,” she told him in the car, both of them facing the windshield, he with his elbow resting on the open window and smoking a cigarette, she with her hands clutching the steering wheel. “You had no right to keep that from me. No right. I made you wear a condom, not you.” Her voice rose, and she pounded the steering wheel with her fist. “You’re a shameful man. You could have killed me! You’re shameful!”

“I heard you the first time! I’m shameful. I know! Quit screaming!”

“I’ll scream until I’m blue. You had no right to lie about this. No right!” She pounded her fist over and over until she accidentally hit the horn, which squawked loudly. “Why didn’t you *tell* me? You could have told me.”

“I didn’t believe them.”

“What? That’s crazy!”

He reared back indignantly. “I’m still not sure it’s true. Do I like look some goddamn AIDS patient to you?”

“Yes! You’ve lost weight, Dean. Your cheeks are thinned out. Yes, you look like an AIDS patient.”

He stared at her with a desperate look she'd never seen in his eyes before. She felt mercy for him but wanted him to stop pretending. He had to. Both of them did.

"You've been in a hospital all night. You're not strong." Thrusting the pink admit slip in front of his face, she spoke with fierce intensity. "Look at this! You're HIV positive, Dean. And you know you are. And you know you had sex with me and didn't tell me."

Cringing, he knocked the paper out of her hand and wiped it off his lap like he was swatting at a hornet. "Stop it!"

He was going to die and didn't want to know it. She didn't either. He could die next week if the right bug struck. He could die with barely any notice. Falling back into her seat, she put her hands over her eyes and tried to calm the raging turmoil in her mind.

"Do you know how bad off you are, how far the disease has progressed?"

He coughed, a wet cough that rattled, and spit a gob of sputum out the window. Wiping his mouth, he said he didn't know. Didn't know when he got it either. Didn't know where. "Could have been sex, could have been a needle."

"They diagnosed you in prison?"

"Yeah. Put me in a special wing. Cons don't take to AIDS too well. One time, I was using the phone, and when I was done, the next guy in line wiped down the phone before he'd even use it. That hurt. Like I was going to make him sick just by being near me."

"Does your parole agent know?"

"Of course. He has my sheet. He doesn't care, as long as I stay out of trouble."

“But why didn’t you tell me?”

He sagged in his seat and spoke quietly and without rancor. “I wanted to.”

She laughed bitterly.

“I wasn’t planning on sticking around with you. Not at first.”

“That first night, you don’t want to wear a condom.”

“I did though.”

“I made you.”

“Damn it, I’m trying to explain. I’m not used to this.”

“Explain what? That you didn’t care if the woman you fucked got AIDS too?”

“Don’t use that language.”

“I’m fucking pissed. I’ll use any language I want, and you’ll hear me out.”

“Yeah, and the whole world.” He thrust his arm out the window and banged his palm on the outside of the door. “Should we invite everyone passing by to get all the gory details? Right here, folks, come on over.”

The parking lot was full of cars but strangely empty of people except for an old woman picking her way with a cane who refused to look at them.

Roxanne punched in the lighter and stuck out her hand. He gave her a cigarette.

“You’re smoking a lot,” he said.

“With reason.”

They sat in silence. Roxanne was hungry. She hadn’t eaten since breakfast, and now it was two o’clock. They’d go home and make sandwiches. Home. He lived in her home. Shared her bed. He hadn’t meant to stick around, and she hadn’t meant for him

to. As her anger cooled, she thought of how to get herself tested. And they should find him a doctor and getting him thoroughly checked out. There was no cure, not even any treatment, or not that she'd heard of. Death sentence, that was all she'd heard.

"Some people live a long time," she said. "I heard of this one guy who's had it for five years."

He laughed. "I'm not planning on dying any time soon."

Let him have his hope. "But you should have *told* me."

He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. You want the truth? You would have probably told me to leave. And I should have left. You would have been right."

"No, I wouldn't!" She imagined the scene. Pointing her finger at the door, telling him to get out of her life. She was sorry, she'd say, but she couldn't sleep with a man with AIDS. Slinking away, he'd be left to live out his final days on the streets, or in a halfway house, growing sick and dying among strangers. "I wouldn't have told you to leave," she said.

He held his hands in his lap like a child. "You sure?"

"I think so. I'm not like that." She turned to look him in the face. "This is why you didn't want to have sex lately. This is what's been on your mind."

His eyes answered her. With a forlorn tone in his voice, he said, "What have I got you into?"

He was a bad man, and yet only partly bad. She thought of how such a conversation would have gone with Dorothy, how even the slightest disagreement with Dorothy could escalate into days of cold fuming silence. Dorothy had always treated her

like someone committing unspeakably awful acts that wounded her to the core, had equated simple anger with hot, fiery rage. To be mad was to scream and fume and act hateful. To be mad was to hide the northern lights! That was Dorothy's way of anger. Well, here she was having an angry conversation with a three-time dangerous felon, and she felt perfectly free to speak her mind no matter how angry. And suddenly she wasn't angry anymore.

"I have no idea," she said, following the words with a great sigh that ended in a slight laugh. "But from here on out, you better tell me the truth."

"I promise."

"You're not used to telling the truth."

"No. I'm not used to living with someone who's not a cellmate either. I'm not used to having AIDS. I'm not used to being around someone nice as you. I don't know how to handle this stuff."

"That's okay. I'm not sure I do either."

Chapter Twenty-Six

So she had secrets now. Dean didn't want anyone to know about his HIV status. He said he couldn't stand people looking at him differently. "And they will. They won't see me anymore, just a guy with AIDS."

“But people are learning about the disease now, and they aren’t all prejudiced. A lot of people will be accepting.”

“Accepting of some guy with AIDS. I’ll be Dean who has AIDS. I just want to be Dean. It’s my business anyway, not anyone else’s. Don’t go telling people.”

“I have to have someone to talk to about it.”

“Why? I don’t have to talk to anyone about it.”

“You should talk to someone too. Don’t you want support?”

“No.”

“I do.” And she started to cry.

He put his arms around her and smoothed her hair. “Listen, darling, I don’t need any support other than you, and if you want to talk about it, you can talk to me. What is there to say?”

She sobbed some more, and he relented. “Just don’t spread it all over creation.”

“We’ve given it a name,” she told Lisa on the phone that night. “Adventures in the Dark Side.”

“Haha!”

“Last night I dreamed I moved into a new house, and I went wandering around and found a whole slew of rooms upstairs that went on and on behind a secret door. That’s sort of how this whole thing with Dean feels. He’s a man, which is strange room

number one. With AIDS, strange room number two. 1990 is turning out to be a much more exciting year than I expected.”

“But aren’t you *worried* at all?”

“I must be.”

“I think you’re brave.”

“Oh, nonsense. I’m *probably*—” Roxanne rolled her eyes, “—just reacting to a man’s need, which is the oldest female failing in the book.”

“Listen,” Lisa said, her tone mildly scolding. “It’s okay to help another human being. Man or woman. Don’t apologize.”

Roxanne considered the life of a merchant marine. Shoveling coal into the steam engine. Keeping watch through the night. Rotten food and bilge water. Treachery below decks. Comrades one could trust with your life. Muscles and sunburn and drunken nights in port. And the ports! Marseilles, Genoa, the Panama Canal. A tattoo for crossing the equator.

Family ties, not for her! Whalers, seamen, journeyers abroad in all ages, tradesmen crossing mountain passes and arid deserts, soldiers, traveling troubadours and actors, all lived for months and years without relatives near. Numerous connections and well-met friends enlivened one’s life on the road or the seas. Family life was for the settled.

She was returning to California as an adventurer heading west. Not to reunite with relatives but to seek her fortunes in the land of milk and honey, these days known as the land of fruits and nuts. And she was a little of both.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

On the first of September, they loaded up the truck and headed for the highway. As they turned south on 35, the road that would take them to Iowa where they would pick up Highway 80 and take it straight west, Dean stuck his arm out the window and flipped off the city.

“See you, suckers! Yeeeeeehaw!” Banging on the door like a drum, he shouted and laughed like he was drunk. “Yeeeeeehaw! We’re leaving!”

The promised land awaited them! Roxanne kept the city in her rearview mirror as it grew small. No more wild thunderstorms, no more skies colored pea green and sirens going off warning everyone to take shelter, tornado coming! No more beds of red and yellow tulips sweeping away the white winter and making her stare in awe simply to see color again. No more winter sun glinting off icicles, no more crunching of snow underfoot.

She let him drive even though he didn’t have a current license, and he stayed within the speed limit to the exact number. “I don’t want to get thrown in jail for a dang speeding ticket.” He hadn’t told his parole officer he was leaving, but he said since he

had AIDS, his parole agent didn't care where he went. "He figures I'll be dead soon anyway. I'll call him when we get to California."

That might be a lie. But only partially. She found it easy to believe that no one would look very hard for a man with a death sentence working its way through his body.

The prairie spread out before them, its fields of plucked corn and soybeans scorched and pale at summer's end. Windbreaks of trees marked their approach to the small farm towns at the highway's edges, and when they needed gas, they left the highway and let up on the gas pedal and rolled down the window so Gustave could stand with his paws on the door and his head out the window and inhale the wind and the prairie smell—hay and horses, the manure of the fields, the smoke of burning detritus behind barns

Outside of Des Moines, a tire went flat, and Dean went right to work, digging out the jack from the space over the wheel well where he'd stored it before they left, clamping the tire iron onto the lug nuts and jumping on it to loosen them. That had never occurred to her, that you could loosen the lug nuts by jumping on the tire iron. She'd only changed a couple of tires in her life and had been highly annoyed both times that the nuts were on so tight it took superhuman effort to loosen them. And here he just jumped on them, and voila, they loosened. Whole thing took maybe ten minutes, and that included time looking in the weeds for a lug nut that scattered away when Gustave sat down next to the carefully placed pile and wagged his tail.

Dean talked while she drove. He liked to talk about riding horses, and about how he could ride and ride for hours over the dry, dusty scrub land of Texas and never get

lost. And about the carnival outfit he traveled with. The owner had taken him under his wing and given him a home, even if it was just a trailer hitched onto the back of a pickup. And the sex he'd had with women he picked up at county fairs.

"I never got so much pussy in my life," he said, chuckling.

She believed these stories, knew there were plenty of small-town women who'd go for a fleeting rendezvous with a good-looking Texan who called them ma'am and looked them straight in the eye.

The plains of the Midwest began to recede behind them. She began to think of herself as a more exotic type of flower than this growing zone could sustain. Another land, lush with rolling hills, sweetened by grapevines and warmed by a balmy climate, a land akin to the Mediterranean, so her aunts had told her, had once been her birthright. She hoped it still was.

At every stop for gas, Dean checked the oil. In Cheyenne, Wyoming, he deemed it low enough to need another quart.

"I put 20-50 in," Roxanne said. "But that's for Minnesota weather. I don't know what kind to put in now."

"20-30. You just sit sweet," he said in his nasally disc jockey voice like he was announcing his expertise over the airwaves. He cleaned the windshield and checked the radiator fluid and put air in the tires.

Dean's health improved as they drove west, as if the sight of the sun traveling westward every day over his head pulled him along with no effort. "Leaving that sorry state behind, oh Lordy, my soul rejoices." He brightened with every state border they

passed, each time zone crossed. His face relaxed, his cheeks filled out. For lunch, they ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches slapped together in the car, and at night roasted hot dogs and beans over a fire.

Every night they set up their tent at a campsite. Dean knew instinctively how to place the poles and where to stick the pegs in, and she found herself his helper even though it was her tent. She didn't mind. Whoever could do the job better should. That was her opinion. More efficient that way. They could both cook. Of course, he could start a fire "faster than a mule could kick." Roxanne had a hard time sleeping on the ground and tossed and turned, waking each morning with another ache in her neck or back, but Dean liked the hard surface, said he wasn't used to comfort anyway.

After dinner, she took out her guitar and played the few old songs she could remember. Her favorite took a good bit of finger picking, but she finally got it down. Dean learned the words quickly and sang harmony.

Freight rain, freight train, going so fast.

Freight train, freight train, going so fast.

Please don't tell them what train I'm on

So they won't know where I'm gone.

Back here among the pines, she watched the stars come out and whispered a prayer to the brightest, to Venus, who traveled the night sky like a true wanderer, showing up at different points all across the firmament with no rhyme or reason, or at

least none that Roxanne could tell, just twinkling overhead on a whim one night or over by the northern horizon the next night just because she felt like it. Not like the stars of a constellation trapped in a set path, Venus made her own rules and did what she pleased and seemed the stronger for it, for no other star shone brighter than this traveling lady of the night.

After the deserts of Utah and Nevada, they climbed the eastern flank of the Sierra Nevada mountain range and crossed into California. And suddenly, civilization couldn't keep hidden. What had been a long passage through mostly empty lands interrupted by the occasional city or town now became an endless string of subdivisions, of small towns with new suburbs, of discount malls and highway signs. The evening sky was brightened by lights of all kinds—streetlights, neon signs, store lights, and a mass of headlights. They hit the last of the evening traffic jam through Sacramento.

“Welcome to California,” Roxanne said as they slowed to thirty miles an hour.

California wore its costume of late summer brown. Dying ochre grasses covered the monotonous lines of hills. Straw like weeds edged the roads, along with a few dusty roses. They moved into a small cottage on the edge of Santa Rosa, not far from Sonoma where her aunts lived, they found by looking through the classifieds, a search so fast and efficient and with such a fine result that Roxanne felt the hand of destiny guiding them. Between the house and the road stood a walnut orchard, and behind, unpruned plum and

orange trees grew in messy profusion. Neighbors were set at a polite distance past lawns and trees. Best of all, the previous tenant left behind a piano, an old scuffed upright more or less in tune.

Dean sat down and rolled out an arpeggio. "Where did you learn to play?" she asked, shocked almost speechless. She couldn't sit down and play without sheet music, and she'd had lessons.

"I never learned. I've come across pianos here and there. Do you think it sounds good?"

Without opening any of her music books, he simply improvised an open-ended melody with a corresponding bass line. She was amazed and not a little envious. A diamond in the rough, this man. Indeed.

When the rains began, the hills would green up, and the trees would leaf, and their new world would turn moist and fertile. But not yet. They tracked dust in with their unloading of boxes, and clods of claylike dirt fell off their boots when they stomped over the kitchen linoleum. Dean took the hose to two scraggly rose bushes on either side of the front door.

Roxanne felt uneasy knowing they were dependent on rainfall for their very life out here, even though she'd never given it a second thought growing up. She thought of all those lakes they'd left behind. An ocean of salt water forty miles to the west wouldn't help anyone stay alive if the rains held back. She wondered where the reservoirs were, and how full they were at this time of year. The year she'd left, she was twenty, and a drought had kept California in its grip for two years, but it had meant little to her beyond

the game of conserving water. Everyone flushed less. People could only water their lawns every other day depending on what side of the street they lived on. She had been horrified when people at her gym in Minneapolis had left the water faucet running for hours. The handle was sticky, and they didn't care enough to turn it all the way off. Who cared about a little water?

Aunt Flora and Aunt Ruth put on an open house to welcome her and invited all her old friends and as many relatives as they could muster, along with several of their own friends, so many that the crowd spilled out of the house, over the deck and onto the lawn. Roxanne hadn't seen some of her cousins in years. Dean had a headache but did his best. Neither of them dressed up, but this was casual California, and no one else did either, wearing tee shirts and jeans, some still in shorts, for summer hadn't yet ended.

Roxanne felt awkward being straight, even though everyone else was, or even being bisexual, or whatever she was calling herself these days. But everyone was older than they'd been when she left, and wiser, so personal change even on that big a scale might not seem unreasonable. She chatted cautiously with her aunts' friends and laughed heartily when some of her cousins got drunk and told raunchy jokes. They seemed to tell more and more just for her, and to laugh louder and longer than they might normally, making her wonder if she was the joke, or if her presence made the jokes edgier and made them feel brave to tell them.

Her old friend, Jean, who'd lived down the street and who used to walk to school with Roxanne, had grown plump but still had the same half-dazed smile she always had. She brought her two little girls and introduced them. "This is Kimberly, and this is Jennifer."

"How do you do, girls?" Roxanne bent over in a solemn bow and shook their hands. She judged them to be four and five, or maybe five and six. "They're six and seven."

Not used to children, she didn't know what else to say. The girls twisted around on their legs and made sour faces that signified, she thought, that they didn't like her.

"Say, remember that girl you used to hang around with?" Jean said. "Had a name like a flower."

"Daisy?"

"Yeah. Daisy! I ran into her a while ago at the park. Man, she was with some tough customers. I almost didn't want to say hi. You know, I had the girls with me. But she saw me and came over, and we talked. She was okay. She was always really nice."

"So she still lives here. I thought she moved away."

"She did. She moved back a couple years ago. Everyone comes back, I guess. Of course, she asked about you, and I said you lived in Minnesota. Jennifer, *stop*."

Jennifer removed her finger from her nose and glared at Roxanne. It wasn't my fault, she wanted to say. I don't care if you pick your nose.

Jean asked about the weather in Minnesota, and the conversation moved forward. So she hadn't said anything about Roxanne being a lesbian? Or no longer being a

lesbian? Of course, they must all know. Such news would spread quickly. Roxanne downed her beer and felt herself getting tipsy, which was an unfamiliar feeling. She hadn't had more than one beer at a time since college. But instead of becoming verbose, she drew inwards, careful lest she blurt out confidences she might later regret. These were her people as ordained by the society she had grown up, but only that. She supposed she'd missed the family hearth, missed the common memories, but this welcome home felt stifling even so. For so long, she'd shunned these people. Their lives and hers had veered so far apart she couldn't see them abiding comfortable side by side again, or not easily. In her own mind, she was still a black sheep, and perhaps that wasn't such a bad role to be stuck with. Not if it fit.

She excused herself and went to check on Dean. He was nursing a warm beer and sitting around the kitchen table with the aunts and their friends, listening to them talk politics. He looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Let's go, baby," she said, placing her hand on his shoulder."

"Already, dear?" Aunt Flora said, giving her a look of disapproval.

"We've been here two hours." She kissed her aunts on the cheek and waved goodbye.

They took a drive to the beach. "Prepare for cold. Bring a jacket." She sounded motherly. He obeyed.

“There might even be fog,” she added.

But the sun shone bright and hot. They rolled up their pants and kicked at the waves, then dried out by lying flat on the sand soaking up the day’s heat into their bodies. They picked up long ropes of seaweed and whipped the ground with them, laughing and giddy from the sea air, and hiked in a leisurely fashion to the northern end of the beach to find the tide pools she’d seen years before.

“They’re filled with starfish of every color. Purple, orange. Really! And sea anemones too, that open when you poke their middle with your finger.”

They were both disappointed when they couldn’t find any.

“The tide is in,” she explained. “The water is covering the tide pools. We’ll have to come back.” She felt guilty. “But I know they’re here.”

They took a seat on a grouping of rocks where the waves met the shore, rocks that had been carved smooth by the sea and wind, and set their eyes drifting over the horizon and the waves that flowed ever toward them. A boat of some kind, with no sail, far out to sea, chugged tirelessly from south to north and made barely an impression on the seascape. They shielded their brows from the sun, which lorded over the western half of the sky.

I have seen this very ocean so many times, Roxanne told herself. *But this time, it won’t lift me up.* An anchor tied her spirit to the sand. She’d come all this way, driven two thousand miles, uprooted herself to return to these shores, and she wasn’t done yet. Something would have to change, was going to change, to untether her. From what, she couldn’t quite say.

Dean was tired. He had thrush, an opportunistic infection which caused white, itchy spots to erupt on his tongue and the inside of his mouth. Due to his poor immune system, he was vulnerable to such things. He had athlete's foot too, and headaches.

"I'm rotting," he said as they drove home. "Rotting from the inside out."

But he looked healthier than she'd ever seen him. He ate heartily, slept well and had meat on his bones again, and filled-in cheeks.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Work came as easily as the cottage had come. The manager of the Valley of the Moon Resort looked over Roxanne's application, read her letter of reference from the HIV+ center, which she had nervously handed over, and asked if she could give her a half hour massage right now because they needed someone to start work the next day. If she was any good, Corinne said, she could be that person. Roxanne passed the test with ease, leaving Corinne languidly rotating her neck and muttering praise. "You're good," she said. "Great back work."

She began work that Friday and would be given two days a week until more shifts opened up. Everything was falling into place, but she felt uneasy for no clear reason. The clients all wanted great back work, and by the time she finished each day, she felt worn out and wanted a massage herself. This massaging was not easy, although it beat housecleaning. The money wasn't as good though. Tips could help. In the back of her

mind lay those sessions with Paolo, which seemed long ago already and in another woman's life. But the memory of Tony's stony stare as Paolo walked down the stairs still made her flush with shame. Well, Tony would be pleased at how respectable she'd become. In a flash, her life had switched from daring to domestic, and it had happened as soon as they'd moved. Dean took up her energy. A strange malaise tugged on her and made each step forward an effort. She could barely muster up the courage to gaze into her mirror anymore.

Still, her work pleased her, and her massage room became her domain of expertise. A door separated the massage room from the hallway. On her side of the door stood the massage table, and a ledge was fastened to the wall for her to set her oil. One chair sat against the wall at the head of the table in case she felt like sitting down. On the back of the door hung a hook. On the other side of the door walked clients and therapists to and fro. The door opened silently with no squeaking, and shut with the barest click, and could be locked.

Even when the client lay as if dead, a current ran between her hands and his skin, electrifying them both in a way that didn't require action or words. They were two people connecting through flesh. She felt infused with an eager animal need to give comfort and heal, as if she were a mother cat licking her kittens, as if she and her clients, so silent, most of them, were primitive creatures long absent from each other and from the caves where they'd once lain close for warmth all together, and now they had found each other again. Every time she lay her hand on the small of a back, her palm heated up as if plugged in to an electric socket. She knew the time was coming, and it was coming

soon, and there was no way for her to avoid it. Surely this animal current was apparent to everyone who gave massages or got them, or did they have filters in their brain that shut such thoughts down? Perhaps she'd had those filters too but had lost them over the years, leaving her unprotected.

"I don't like all this TV watching, Dean. Why don't you read a book? Here!" Roxanne grabbed a book off the kitchen table and tossed it on the couch. "This book is all about spirituality. You might learn something. Read it."

He looked at her with irritation. "Stop pointing your finger at me. I hate that."

"Well, I just think you have to do something. You can't just sit around and smoke pot and watch TV. What about your life?"

"This is the best life I could have dreamed of." He spread his arms as if revealing treasures beyond measure. "I have a good woman and a great house, a yard, rose bushes even I got money coming in. I got a great dog."

"And a great TV," she said, rolling her eyes. "And great pot. And months of time to vegetate."

"Lay off. So I like to smoke pot. Did you get up on the roof and clear out the gutters yesterday? I did. Leave me alone. You talk about wanting to be free. So let a person be free!"

She bit her lip. He was right, she supposed, although she kept looking for the flaw in his argument.

“I aim to sit in this chair long as I feel like it. Smoke weed and be warm. That’s what I aim to do.”

“Okay.” It wasn’t, but she couldn’t figure out why not. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I hate it when people are sorry.”

Her third week on the job, a man named Harry, fair-haired and short with a pleasant manner, lifted his head and turned to look at her while she was massaging the back of his leg. “You have incredibly warm hands,” he said.

“Thank you.” She heard his unspoken desire. It flew to her ears as loudly as if he’d been a bird and flew around her head singing it. There was a certain clairvoyance that came with massage, perhaps due to the intense focus on the feelings of another’s body, the kind of implicit knowledge lovers had of each other’s thoughts. She often felt she knew a great deal about her clients even though she couldn’t pin specific details down. It wasn’t that kind of knowing.

Feeling brave, she folded his thighs back and forth with intense concentration, shifting from foot to foot, rolling her shoulders.

“How about massaging a little higher?” he whispered.

Yes. The time had come. Pulling the sheet back, she uncovered his bottom and rubbed in small circles over his cheek while he rolled his hips in a wider and wider circle, his movement matching the rhythm of her rolling shoulders. His buttock, flecked with tiny blond hairs, glistened with oil. She felt like a sculptor crafting a golden body out of a packet of flesh. When she was done with one side, she walked around the table and worked his other buttock the same, with a methodical sensuality flowing from her fingers into his skin. Suddenly, he stiffened and gasped, and his pelvis jerked twice, three times. She hadn't expected that. Not without her having to do anything illicit. Rubbing his ass was allowed, after all.

He tipped her twenty dollars.

"Do you work outside of here at all?"

She had that spare room, occupied with the piano the previous tenants had left, and nothing else. But she also had Dean, sitting on the couch and determined to sit there forever. "No, sorry," she said.

"Too bad," he said, rolling his shoulders languorously. "That's the best massage I've ever had. And I've had a lot. I love massages."

She almost wanted to curtsy, as if she were a seamstress who'd sewn a fine dress for the queen and was being honored in court.

He reached out for a hug and whispered into her ear. "Thank you."

“You smoke pot and watch the Donahue show. What’s your *plan*, Dean?”

“My plan? To do as many drugs as possible before I die.” He slouched, sour-faced, on the couch with his legs stuck out straight and his heels dug in to the carpet.

“That *was* my plan.”

Roxanne laughed sharply. “Sorry if I ruined things for you.”

“Aah, you’re okay.”

She sat on the edge of the couch and composed her face so she looked rational and calm and yet concerned. “I just wonder if it would help you if you had something to do. Weren’t you thinking about getting some kind of job when we got out here? Your check helps, but we could use more money. And I think you need something to occupy your mind.”

“Hey, this is who I am. If you don’t like it, you can dump me off at the driveway and we’ll end this right here. I’m not some kind of doll you can wind up. I’m not your husband. Ain’t going to happen.”

“Yeah, well, I’m no doll either.” She felt herself grow hot and stood up and pointed her finger at him. “I don’t have to be with you either. I’m fine by myself. I like living alone just fine. I’m a free woman who makes up my own mind, and I’m not looking for a husband and I’m not looking for a prince. I’m just looking for someone who doesn’t sit around stoned watching TV all day.” She flounced out of the room, too angry to say another word, but then turned right around and confronted him again. “I thought you wanted to make something of yourself. I thought you wanted to learn about love and find your path in life before you die.”

“I *do* want to learn about love,” he said, throwing up his hands as if he’d just about had it. “Why don’t you just shut up about it? Maybe I’m taking my time, okay? What the fuck is your hurry? What, I’ve been in California all of ten days, and you expect me to be a new man?”

She cringed and backed off. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. But it’s over two weeks.”

“Would you stop being sorry? God, that is annoying.”

“Sorry!”

He laughed. “I’ll make you sorry if you don’t knock it off. For real. Come over here.”

She knelt and lay her head on his lap. He stroked her hair. “Don’t be sorry for anything, baby. Let me tell you what this life means to me. A few times in my life, someone’s been kind to me. A few times in my life, someone’s given me a break. And you know what? I do aim to change. You just got to be patient. I figure there’s a good man inside me, if someone like you can take me to heart like you did.”

Roxanne lifted her eyes and just looked at him. She had no words. He was beautiful to her. He had heart, not she. She wanted to be him, to be clear of brow and long in stride and tall in posture. She wanted to shake her body to music like he did and to fuck like an outlaw. She wanted to take lovers and toss them off like birds, to walk across the world like a happy vagrant with no tribe and no family and no one roping her back in. And all she seemed to do was rail at him for doing exactly as he pleased.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

But already, Dean was less sexual than he'd been when they met. Maybe it was the AIDS, or their mutual knowledge of it now. Maybe they both felt more careful touching, as if more was at stake when they lay together in their double bed and dreamed side by side, their nights adding up to months. Maybe they had already begun to grow weary of one another. Roxanne had put on a few pounds, and worried about it. She'd quit going to the gym and begun eating cheese again, slicing thin slices off the block of cheddar all evening long while she read a book or talked on the phone.

With the cold temperatures arriving, Roxanne found herself fearing winter like she hadn't in a long time. She shivered with the merest breeze and took to bathing in hot, hot water every evening to thaw her frozen feet. She wasn't ready to insulate herself from the coming cold, even after her years in Minnesota. The cold in California was drafty. Snuck in through cracks. People left doors open, weren't careful. No one thought it was cold, so no one took care to keep it away. She rummaged through her trunk for thick socks and long underwear.

Roxanne insisted they go to an AIDS support group the county offered. Reluctantly, he agreed. The next one was Thursday evening. In the days leading up to the meeting, he took on a new demeanor, calm and almost childlike, even stepping across the floor with increased lightness almost as if floating. He became sexually wild again and wanted to try different positions and spend a long time just fucking while lying in a spooning posture, then fucking while scissored, and fucking in the usual way. She felt

dumb with an excess of sex. He even dipped into the book she'd tossed at him, a tome on creating reality and living one's life as an artist painting the canvas of their days.

"If I create my own reality," he said, "I want to create it that I don't have AIDS."

His eyes were luminous in the moonlight streaming through their bedroom window, and his cheeks shone with sweat. He was capable of being a true believer, of earnest desire. Capable of being fooled too. An innocent in some ways. But she believed in the power of the unseen herself. She'd given him the book. And she knew one piece of her future with absolute certainty: she would not get AIDS from him. She didn't know where that fact came from, only that it was indisputable. It was not her destiny. Seeing him through this without being hurt was her destiny. She knew that absolutely.

And he was changing. She could see it.

The AIDS support group met in a basement room at the Catholic church downtown. Three other people were in attendance: a young social worker named Lorna with long brown hair tied at the back of her neck and hanging like a waterfall to her waist, a tall scarecrow of a man named George who spoke with a booming voice, and a thickset, sullen young man named Rick, recovering from drug addiction, which he spoke of quite freely. "I was as bad as they come, man. I'm lucky I'm not dead already. But for the grace of God." He cast a secretive eye on Roxanne.

George turned a folding chair backwards and sat on it with his elbows propped up and his chin settled in his palms. He told them all about his new treatment scheme involving ozone which had proved, he said, quite effective even if it wasn't condoned by

the medical establishment. “Not yet. Those bozos only look at drugs. AZT doesn’t cure anybody. Hurts your body more than heals it. My t-cells may be down, but I feel on top of the world. How about you, Dean? What are your t-cells?”

“I don’t know. Last I had them checked, I was over 100.”

“You have to get checked out by a doctor, Dean,” Lorna said. “As a way of monitoring your health.”

“Monitoring your health is essential,” George said. “We have to be on top of our medical history. The doctors are learning bit by bit. Shoot, I know more about this disease than my doctor. I tell him stuff. He’s grateful too. Who’s your doctor?”

“Nobody.”

George whipped out his wallet and plucked a business card from inside. “Call this guy. Tell him George sent you. Tell him to check you out but don’t get yourself on that AZT shit. What do you eat?”

Dean looked at Roxanne for a cue. His face and skin seemed to shimmer with innocence, as if all these considerations were of an adult nature and he was a fawn poking his head out from the woods. “I don’t eat much. But I like eggs.”

Rick glared at him with suspicion. Roxanne didn’t like this guy.

“Eat plenty of protein, and lots of vegetables and fruits,” George said. “You have to get your appetite up. You have to stay strong and give your body something to work with. Can’t live on hope. I’ve seen too many people die already. What do you do for work?”

“Nothing. I’d like to work though.”

Roxanne resisted the urge to raise her eyebrows and clap her hand to her mouth. He wanted to work! He was creating a new life for himself!

“What kind of work can you do? It’s important to keep the body strong. Work the muscles. Get the blood flowing and flushing out the toxins. Surely you drink plenty of water.”

“Yes, I do!” Dean smiled with self-congratulation. “I love my body and you’ve just explained to me exactly what I need to do. I need to work hard.”

Rick smirked. “Yeah, right.”

“He does. His body is his teacher. It knows. Okay, here’s the deal, Dean.” George leaned forward again and slapped the side of one hand onto the palm of the other. “You can work for me. I manage an organic dairy farm just east of town. Ever pitch hay?”

“I could do it in my sleep.”

“Really? You know ranch work?”

“He was raised on a ranch,” Roxanne said proudly.

“Well, I’ll be. This could be the start of a great partnership. Monday’s okay to start? I’m totally serious.”

All eyes landed on Dean, who smiled widely and nodded. “So am I. I’ll take the job.” Everyone relaxed and leaned back in their chairs.

“You all are wonderful people,” Dean said. “I can just feel the love in this room, and it makes my heart swell with joy.”

Lorna looked tickled. Rick smirked again. What was the matter with that guy?

“Say, everyone,” Lorna said. “I know this is a small group tonight, but I’m really glad you all came. It really helps to have other people to talk to. Do either of you have family you can talk to?” She looked at Dean and Roxanne.

“Not me, ma’am,” Dean said. “Roxanne is my family.”

That night, Dean was more than usually restless. She got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom and saw his side of the bed empty and went looking for him, finding him standing naked by the front window and peeking through the curtain. “What are you doing?” she asked. “How come you’re up?”

“Do you see that in the tree out there?” His voice was hoarse.

“Someone’s out there?” She peeked around the edge of the curtain but saw nothing but the silent orchard. “Where? I don’t see anyone.”

He jabbed his finger onto the pane. “In that first tree.” He whispered. “Keep your voice down.”

Gustave had padded sleepily behind her and stood between them and poked his nose on the window. “Why would anyone sit in a tree on a cold night staring at our curtain?”

“Right there.” He jabbed again. “Go straight down from the moon and a little to the right. It’s the shape of a man, crouching on a branch.”

She tossed the curtain edge back into place. “Doesn’t mean it is a man. Are you feeling okay?” She put her palm on his forehead. Dementia was a complication of AIDS. Jesus, did Dean have dementia already? She’d have to quit her job to keep an eye on him. He’d lose all rational sense. He’d throw things at her. Oh, Lord.

He stood still and let her touch him. “Do I have a fever?”

“I don’t think so. But your voice sounds funny, like you’re sick. I think you should come to bed.”

“Okay.” So docile he was. He followed her to bed, and Gustave followed behind him, and the three took their places under the covers again. Dean lay on his back perfectly still as if laid in his coffin.

“There’s something not quite right with you, Dean. Maybe you should call that doctor tomorrow.” What else could it be but dementia? Oh, this was the worst thing that could happen.

“Okay.” His voice was thin like an old man’s.

Later in the night she woke again, and again his side of the bed was empty. So this was how it began. Poor man! And how would she be able to help him through madness without going mad herself? Unable to go back to sleep, she sat up and listened for his movement in the dark house. Nothing. She would have to find him and bring him back to bed. Tiptoeing, she passed through the hall and stopped at the bathroom door, which was almost closed but not quite. A line of yellow light shone from inside. She pushed at the door.

Dean didn’t even look up from the needle which stuck out of his arm.

Horried, she backed up and closed the door, muttering “Oh, sorry.” Mouth open, she stood for a moment with her hand on the knob, unsure of what she ought to do. If anything. He was a free man. Returning to bed, she collapsed on top of the blankets, Gustave jumping up to lick her face so she had to push him gently away. Dean was not a madman. He was on drugs.

The minutes dragged on. Gustave crawled under the blanket and shivered next to her thigh. “It’s okay,” she told him, smoothing his fur like a worry doll and forcing herself to remain calm so the dog wouldn’t be afraid. He picked up emotions so easily. Dean had said he was going to do as many drugs as he could get. *I am who I am*, he’d said. Then who was she?

He came into the room and lay down next to her, neither of them speaking for minutes. “You turned the heat up,” she said.

“It was cold.”

“If you stay up every night, our heating bill will be high.”

“I won’t.”

“Why did it take so long?”

“I had to get it all.”

“And did you?”

“Pretty much.” What a strange sound his voice made, like a ghost’s—thin and unconnected to a body, but strangely sweet. A benevolent ghost. That ethereal voice had been talking to her all week, had spoken at the support group, had whispered during sex and murmured about God. It was a drug voice.

But she was too exhausted to work up a righteous anger even though she felt betrayed. It must be four in the morning. “Dean,” she said. He didn’t answer, not in words, although she felt him tune into her with a sharp awareness that surprised her.

“What was in the needle? Cocaine?”

“Speed.”

“I thought speed made a person hyper. You’re mellow, or sort of a mix of mellow and electric. I feel you buzzing.”

“Speed relaxes me. It does that to some people.”

“Then why don’t you go to sleep?”

“I can’t sleep. It’s a different kind of relaxation.”

“Huh.”

“Do you love me?” he asked. His voice carried a sad note like in a funeral parade, and yet she heard a happy strain rise over it, striking a harmony she’d never heard so clearly, a song of intermingling pain and gratitude.

“Yes.” Never so much as now. “But I may need you to change. What if that happens?”

He turned on his side and laid his hand over her belly. “I’m sorry I didn’t rake.”

“What do you mean?”

“The leaves. You wanted me to rake. Next time I will.”

Clicking her tongue, she shook her head in annoyance. “Fuck that. I mean the drugs.”

He turned back onto his back. “I have something to tell you I think you’ll like.”

She was silent.

“How would you like a deck?”

“What are you talking about? Dean, you’re not listening.”

“I will. I will listen to everything. But first, let’s talk about the deck. I think it will make you happy. I know where to get the lumber, and I’ve been designing it on paper. Would it be better to go all the way down the side of the house or just halfway?”

“It wouldn’t be better to go anywhere at all. This isn’t our house. We can’t build things onto it.”

“I think we can if we do it right. Give me a chance to show you.”

“I’m getting mad.”

“I’m sorry. I could make something less ambitious first.”

“You could not shoot speed.”

“I’ll make a table. A coffee table?”

“Sure.” Her jaw tightened, and her neck felt stiff so she adjusted the pillow.

“How come you do drugs, Dean?”

He took a while to answer. “How come you don’t?”

“I don’t feel like it.”

“There’s your answer.” Not a smidgeon of antipathy accompanied his response, which seemed to her an admirable model of straightforwardness. And he was right—she didn’t want to do drugs, and he did. Nobody’s business, really.

“But Dean,” she said, still unnerved by the vision of his torso bent over the bloody needle and his entire consciousness seemingly attached to that point of entry in the crook of his elbow, “What about your wanting to change before you die?”

“I am changing. You’ll see. You have the eyes for it, don’t you?”

So late. The alarm clock said it was four-thirty. In a stupor, she said, “Eyes for it? I have the stomach for the truth, even if it’s distressing. The truth for you is you only have so much time.”

“I know. Keep looking.”

“I’ll try to see you as you want to be. I don’t see it yet, but when I see it, I’ll tell you.”

“Do you want to make love?”

“I want to go to sleep.” But the mention of sex brought her body around, and she felt on the top of the blanket in the dark for his hand, which clutched hers hotly. “Yes.”

Chapter Thirty

He didn’t go to work, not that Monday morning. When George drove up in his old red truck, Roxanne ran out the door to catch him before he got out.

“Dean’s sick, George. He can’t go to work today.”

“Oh, man. What’s he got going on? Has he been to the doctor? I’ll come in and see him.”

“No, he’s sleeping. I don’t want to wake him. It’s just his stomach. If he’s not better tomorrow, we’ll go in to the doctor.”

George frowned but put his truck into gear. “Well, don’t wait. He’s dealing with some serious issues, you know.”

“I know.” She began to shiver from the cold morning air.

“You okay? You worried?” George was so nice, she felt bad for lying to him. But Dean was sick, from drugs.

“I’m fine. He’ll call you when he’s better.”

“Well. Okay.” He put his truck in gear but hesitated. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Of course.” She laughed. “I promise to make him go to the doctor if he isn’t better by tomorrow morning.”

“He doesn’t have to work if he doesn’t want to.”

“Oh, he does.”

George shrugged. “I guess I’ll go then. Tell him I said hey. Make sure he drinks plenty of water.”

She waved him off and went back inside.

Dean crept through the house on soles so light they barely made an impression, like he was a fairy, or Peter Pan, some light-limbed creature only slightly connected to what everyone else thought of as real life. Roxanne felt uncomfortably bound to the earth and tradition, to rules and society, more than she ever had. At times, Dean spoke of his inner angels and let her into his faraway land. He wanted to be strong and tell the truth.

“My love for you is bigger and stronger than I’ve ever felt for any living thing on this planet.”

“Huh,” she said.

Finally, he ran out of speed. It had lasted ten days. Roxanne had taken to sleeping in the spare room on top of her massage table, but her nerves were frayed. This couldn’t happen again. Dean agreed. He was exhausted and slept for two days.

They made a visit to the doctor George had recommended. Dean’s t-cell count was seventy-one. Not so good.

“But I have a patient whose t-cells are down around ten and have been for the past year. He feels great.” Dr. Harrison leaned back against the examining room sink and crossed his arms. Young and handsome, a foot shorter than Dean, he had the air of a casual observer of disease. “We don’t know enough about this disease yet to understand all the markers and what to expect as the disease progresses. We don’t really know why the disease moves quickly in some and so slow in others.” He eyed the two of them cautiously.

Roxanne smiled placidly, and Dean slapped his stomach in a hearty show of vigor. “I’ve got strong blood pumping through my veins, doc. I don’t aim to go down fast. Although I’ll tell you,” he said, lowering his voice, which caused Roxanne and the doctor to lean forward slightly. “When the time comes, I *do* want to go fast. I don’t want to linger. Uh-uh.”

Dr. Harrison nodded curtly as if to say, you keep telling yourself that. He mentioned one possible treatment, all they had available so far. “You know about AZT.” And its side effects.

“I don’t want it,” Dean said without hesitation.

“All right. Clears that up.”

On the first of the month, with the arrival of Dean’s check, he got more speed. Roxanne cried and yelled, spent a few nights at her aunts, and then relented. If he only did a reasonable amount, she could handle being around him.

Dean didn’t see what the big problem was. “Other women don’t get so darn upset when their old man does speed,” he said.

Roxanne’s jaw dropped, but she resolved to either take him as he was or leave. Old story by now.

At times, the drug was lots of fun. What was the term she’d heard? Contact high. She was getting high from his drug use. He went up and he went down, and in the early spurt of bliss the drug induced, he was full of high spirits and easy laughter, and, of course, randiness. He liked to fuck on speed. Like a husky eager to get the sled going, his cock went to work and didn’t tire. She tired, but he was in no hurry to get anywhere, so they stopped, changed positions, did it this way and that and stopped for her to rest and perhaps sleep. These long bouts of fucking left her sated like a lion on the savannah after

a meal of hyena or giraffe. Almost in a swoon, her breath shallow, spread across the bed with her neck thrown back, her pale skin flushed hot pink, she would curl herself into a ball slowly and artfully, moving her limbs like a cat rearranging itself on a sun-drenched window seat, and cradle her face inside her palms, her lips delicately resting on her fingers and let the blood coursing through her heart slow to a trickle.

He needed no rest and could carry on without her. His hand kept himself busy. He wandered around the house naked, his penis leading the way, doing who knows what while she slept. A bottle of cooking oil appeared on the coffee table. He ate no food, not that she could see, for three or four days. Only drank orange juice. Vitamin C, he said.

Best were the hours when he was coming down off the drug. He opened up and talked without any shield at all, halfway back in her world again but still pleasantly removed enough to say anything.

“What I’m saying,” Dean said, whispering even though they were alone in their bedroom, “is that he trusts you.” He nodded at Gustave.

She held the little creature in her arms like a mother cradling a baby. Gustave leaned his head back to watch Dean as he talked, drawn to his voice the same as she was.

“Look how he bares his neck to you. Doesn’t tense up when you bend him backward. Lets you dance around holding him. Look how relaxed he is. He looks like a cat on a windowsill soaking up the sun. Soaking up your love.”

She stroked Gustave’s chest with her fingers. “He was more nervous when I first got him. It does soothe me to see him so happy.”

“I almost expect him to purr. Did you ever want to have a baby?”

Roxanne laughed. "Nope."

"Really? Most women do."

"Plenty don't too. Did you ever want kids?"

"Not ever."

"I didn't ever want a husband, didn't want children, didn't want marriage or a picket fence. Well, who would, when the world was out there?" She turned sadly to the window. The night was so bright the limbs of the orange trees out back shone white. Leafless still. So far, there had been some rain, but the weathermen seemed nervous, and she'd read in the paper about fears of another drought this year.

"What do you want to be in your next life?" Dean asked. He lay back and put his hands behind his head and contemplated the ceiling.

She laid Gustave on the bed between them and slid down to a lying position too.

"A cowboy."

"Will they have cowboys in the future?"

"You don't have to go into the future. Your soul can develop regardless of the century."

"Well, I'll be. How do you know?"

"I read about it. What do you want to be?"

"A monk."

"No." She laughed. Gustave poked his head up. "You! A monk!"

He nodded.

"But why? Monks don't have sex."

“I know. I want to live a purely spiritual life next time.”

“Eschew the flesh?”

“Exactly. I’ve gone about as far as I can go with the flesh this time around. “

Her heart broke a little to hear him say that. “Don’t be a monk yet.” She poked him.

“No. Not yet.”

When he’d slept the last of the drug off, he promised to only smoke pot and stay away from speed, abiding by her rules and doing his best, as he said, to be a good boyfriend. When she came home from work, she heard him on the piano before she walked in the house, and the sound lifted her spirits immensely. The roses were pruned too, and the weeds along the front path were pulled and lay in a pile on the driveway.

“Hope called,” he said, giving her a welcome hug. “And your dad called. And I’m making pork chops and baked potatoes for dinner. Sit yourself down and rest your feet and be my queen.”

The living room rug was vacuumed and the kitchen counters sparkled. Roxanne poured herself a glass of raspberry sparkling water and plopped down on the couch and put her feet up on the coffee table. “I love you, Dean,” she said.

“Can’t tell me I don’t know the way to a woman’s heart. Huh, Gustave?”

The dog jumped on her lap and licked her as if he hadn’t seen her in weeks, or like he was doing his doing his part to convince her of their domestic bliss. She let him get in a few licks before pushing his face away, then pet him with firm, gentle strokes.

“If I could only massage my clients like I pet my dog, I’d be happy. They all want me to dig in so hard it makes me ache afterwards. I wish I weren’t so good at the back work.”

“Tell them you quit.”

“Haha! Not a chance. I like massage. I do, really. But I like it best when I can just rub them, soothe them, relax them. I don’t like overhauling their whole body.”

She dialed her father while Dean started dinner.

“We’re going to dinner with my dad,” she said when she hung up.

Dean hummed a private song.

“Did you hear me? Dinner with my Dad. Tomorrow. Is that okay?”

“Sure.” But he sounded doubtful.

“Okay, what’s on your mind tonight?” Roxanne said, taking a cigarette out and lighting it with a practiced move that made no sound. She listened for any sounds from the bedroom. Dean was crashing. All quiet. Gustave flopped down next to her thigh.

“Elk,” Hope said.

“And what about elk?”

“Elk masturbate. I read about it in a wildlife study. They masturbate with their antlers, not by using them directly on their genitals but by rubbing the highly sensitive

antlers through grasses. They get an erection and ejaculate. Seriously. That's what the study says."

"But that's bizarre."

"With the antlers. Yes, it is."

"Wow. But I still say what you need is to spend less time researching and more time going out."

"I will. Don't push me." Her voice hardened. Roxanne backed off.

"Nymphomania. I thought you might be interested in what Ellis and Sagarin have to say about it. Circa 1950. One major reason for nymphomania was a woman's, quote, 'overwhelming need to be loved, a hunger that generally seems to be greater in women, than in men.'"

"Now why do they pick on women? According to my growing experience, men also *hunger* for love."

"Those that's got, is them that gets. And I ain't got nothing yet," said Hope.

Her latest crush had fizzled. No telling why. Roxanne was sure it was something Hope was doing.

When she told Dean later, he shook his head. "A woman shouldn't have so much trouble getting her cherry popped. Shoot, let's fly her out here. I'll do it."

The restaurant served Thai cuisine. Neither of them had ever eaten it before. “Pretty good,” Dean said, his head bowed over his plate. He was dressed in a white button down shirt and a pair of khaki pants she’d found for him at the thrift shop and ironed with starch.

“I told you I clean up good,” he’d said when he’d dressed and stood for her inspection.

“Sure do.” His posture startled her as it had when she’d first met him, standing loose and lanky like a cowboy with his shoulders straight and his eyes seeming to focus on a distant bird passing over the horizon.

Joe regaled them with the story of Mwindo, a character from a story of the tribes of the Congo back when they had an oral tradition, before writing. Mwindo was boastful. The tribe had a taboo against boasting, and Mwindo got into trouble because he was special and talented and lucky, and he boasted. Of course, he got out of his troubles in the end. Still, it was a lesson for the tribe.

“See, the tribe believed themselves to be immensely talented and wonderful people. They had plenty to boast about. The taboo was meant to keep them in check, to keep them from going too far and getting in trouble with the gods. They had to keep reminding themselves of their place, even if they did believe they were the best people on earth.

“But didn’t they get bored with the same old stories?”

“They told them differently each time, embellishing them, spicing them up, adding jokes, just like a stand up comic in our day.”

Dean listened intently.

“It’s the same with us,” Joe said. “We all know how a love story ends, for instance. The boy gets the girl. First he loses her, have to have a complication, but by the end, they’re living happily ever after. And take your average mystery story. You know when you start it that by the end, you’ll know who did it and how and why. Mystery stories are completely lacking in mystery. Every single one ends the same way.” He dipped his stick laden with chicken into the peanut satay sauce and took a big bite.

“I love mysteries,” Roxanne said. “Or I used to. I used to suck them up. You don’t know who did it until the end.”

“Me too,” said Christina. “I never know who did it.”

“But you know you’ll find out,” Joe said. “And you know it will be who you don’t suspect, and you know they’ll be caught and put in prison. They’re written with a rigid convention. The world makes sense again at the end of a mystery. Has to.”

“How did they remember all their stories so well?”

“Talked all the time. We think we talk. People in an oral tradition love to talk and are much better at it than we are. It’s their main entertainment. They’re extremely facile with language, and very funny. Keep each other in stitches.”

The waiter came around and asked if everything was okay.

“Excellent,” her father said. “You like it, Dean? You haven’t said much.”

“It’s very good, sir.”

“Sir! You sound like one of my students.”

Dean turned red.

“Honey, be nice,” Christina said in a low voice, leaning in to Joe.

“I’m nice.” He leaned toward Dean and asked in a challenging tone, “So what do you read, Dean?”

“Spiritual books. Roxanne’s got tons of them.”

“Bent on enlightenment, eh? Well, that’s a good thing.”

Roxanne wiped sauce off her lips and laid her hand on Dean’s thigh in comfort.

“I don’t understand the whole concept of tradition. What makes it so appealing to do things the same way forever and ever?”

“But of course they don’t.” Christina lowered her eyes shyly. “I just can’t believe nothing changes even in very traditional societies.”

“It’s amazing how *same* things do stay. Even when nothing is written down.”

“I thought things had changed in our society,” Roxanne said. “Since returning to my old stomping grounds out here, I’ve been amazed at how my old acquaintances, and all the cousins, Daddy, have thrown themselves into the rat race. I thought we were all dropping out of it. I did. Now I’m behind the times!”

She liked to think she’d drive across the country on two hundred dollars again, crashing with people she met, or friends of friends, if she felt like it. She’d find drugs if she wanted them again, good acid or peyote even, and people of like mind to do them with. If she wanted to.

“But you have a career now,” Christina said. “Massage isn’t your chosen field?”

“I guess. I’m just surprised that it’s so important to have one these days.” She still wanted to work no more than she had to and still thought that to be an admirable goal.

But perhaps she was wrong. Things were changing in the outside world around her, or so she read in the papers and saw around her. People she had once known were now workaholics, or spendaholics, buying more, traveling more, sending their kids to more expensive schools, raising the brightest, strongest, most attractive children money could buy. Career and children seemed to be the concerns of most everyone she knew out here. Perhaps she should have gone to school and become a nurse. Perhaps she’d missed the boat.

“Do you know about the people in New Zealand who live through their dreams?” Roxanne asked.

“Yes,” her father said. “I’ve heard of them.”

“They wake up every morning and relate their dreams to each other, and they lived their day according to the dreams they had the night before. They see the dream life as the true one and the waking life as the dream. Sometimes I feel that way.”

Her father looked at her thoughtfully.

“The tribes in the Congo with oral traditions see the world differently than we do too. A team of anthropologists set out to question this one tribe very seriously about what they knew about their world. Asked them to describe a particular tree. Pointed at it. Describe that tree, they said. Well, the people thought they were nuts. It’s a tree! It was standing right in front of them. Why would anyone need to describe it? They didn’t even

understand the point of such an exercise. See, they had no way of writing down such things, so they never developed that sort of thinking—the describing, the analyzing of differences, the dividing into genres and subgenres, etc. To them, the tree in front of them was clearly itself. The tree was the tree! Stupid men with notebooks couldn't even see the tree."

"What is, is." They all looked at Dean when he spoke. "Don't have to explain everything, that's all. Just behold it."

Later, when they drove into their driveway and got out of the car, she stopped him back before he went into the house. "Look," she said, pointing straight up. "It's Orion. The constellation of winter."

"Show me. I don't think I know it."

"See the three stars right up there? That's his belt, and the shorter line of three stars is his sword hanging down from the belt."

"I thought that was a kite. I always thought that was a kite with a tail hanging down."

Squinting, she tried to not see a warrior with a belt and sword. "Oh! I see the kite," she said. "In the Greek legend, Orion was a mortal who was a great hunter and a lover of Artemis. Her sister was Apollo, who became jealous and sent a scorpion after Orion. But Orion went after the scorpion instead, diving into the water after him. Apollo dared his sister to shoot the shining thing in the water, and she did, not knowing it was her lover. She begged Apollo to raise Orion up into the sky so she could always see him."

Dean crossed his ankle over his other foot and set the toe of his boot lightly on the ground. “Good story.” He raised his head and looked at her with curious eyes. “Why are you with me?”

His question flustered her and she laughed nervously before answering.

“Really,” he said. “You could have someone more like you. Guy who has a career. Been to college. Why are you with me?”

He said it without self-pity. Just stating the facts. She owed him an answer as straightforward as the question. “Your shoulders. How you look at the sky all the time.” She searched her mind for something more profound. “How you accept me as I am. You don’t judge people. I’ve never heard you say a harsh word about anyone.”

“Other people aren’t my business. If I don’t want people to judge me, I ought not judge them.”

“Yeah, I think that too, but you really believe it.”

“So what you’re saying is you like my mind.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “And other parts of your anatomy.”

“Hmmp.” He shook his head, then grinned and reached for her hand. “I guess I still don’t understand, except that part about you being hot for me.”

“Yes,” she said, her voice husky.

Pulling her close and wrapping his arms tightly around her, he whispered so quietly through she wasn’t sure she’d heard him. “Love me then.” She didn’t think he meant sex.

That night, they made love like they had back in Minneapolis, but more slowly, both of them clear-headed and quietly passionate. She decided she had chosen right in him even if he had lost it over drugs for a while. He was like the wild poppies that grew by the side of the road, blooming out of nowhere with startling color, deep gold and orange, in the driest of climes.

“In prison,” he said, “when they’d put me in solitary, I flew every night. That was how I got through it. That and masturbation.” He poked her tit playfully.

“Did you go into solitary a lot?”

“Yeah. Oh, I had to show everyone how tough I was back then. Had to. Besides, I was angry as they come. Would have killed you or looked at you, didn’t matter. They never broke me though.” He sat up and took two cigarettes out of his pack and handed one to her. She let him light it, sucking in the flame with his hand cupped around it as if they were standing out on the prairie with wind blowing.

“To pass the time, I’d make myself into a bird and fly over places I knew and try to see every building and every hill and every tree just like it was.” He blew a smoke ring. “Got me by.”

When they were outside, it was always he who saw the birds—the circling hawk, the cawing raven, the quail bursting out of the oak, the geese in formation like an arrow piercing the sky.

“The only thing I’m certain about regarding the next stage of my existence is that I’ll be flying somewhere.”

She liked how he used words like “existence” now.

Chapter Thirty-One

The next day when she came home, his eyes shone exceptionally bright. She froze. “You on drugs, Dean?”

“Of course not.” He looked offended.

“Okay. Sorry. I guess I’m just worried you might do them again.”

“You worry too much. Would you like spaghetti for dinner?”

“Sure.”

But he didn’t eat more than two bites. Her heart sank. That night, she watched his feet crossing the kitchen floor with that exceptional lightness in his step.

Dean was a wild bull. She had to learn to ride him.

Over the course of the next two nights, he hauled in the truck a jumble of two-by-fours, stolen from a construction site, and dumped them behind the house, then spent hours drawing up plans for a deck.

“You can’t make a deck here,” she said, casting a scornful look over his drawings.

“This isn’t our house. We aren’t allowed to just add decks whenever we feel like it.”

This attitude surprised him. “Why wouldn’t Mr. Gandler want a deck on his house then? I’ll do all the work.”

The pile of lumber drifted high with leaves and turned dark with rain.

Roxanne felt confused, lost, her mind halved and weakened, her will yanking her in two directions at once. Dean was the sea she had set off on so full of power and resolve, and now she was seasick. It wasn't his fault she sat frozen at her kitchen table in the mornings, sipping coffee and staring at the ice-filmed branches out the window, unable to will herself to a happy mood. If drugs made him happy, that was his business, not hers. Her job was to make herself happy. Drugs didn't make her happy.

She would have to split her life off from him. Or perhaps he would change. Making another person change seemed a daunting task and one she was not eager to attempt, not after the years with Dorothy where so much of her being had been deemed unsuitable.

She would leave him, except she didn't want to, not yet. He captivated her still, so strange, dangerous and beautiful. He might die in her arms, if he didn't kill himself with drugs first. What she wondered most was whether he could conquer whatever held him, and what a sight that would be to behold.

Aunt Maggie covered her dismay on hearing the news. "I'm sorry he got into drugs, dear. I had no idea you were going through this."

"But it isn't so bad. He's got a lot to deal with in his life. I'm strong. You know that."

“Yes.” She looked as if she weren’t sure. Roxanne hated that look, as if it marked her as a reprobate still, a woman living on the edge for all eternity, never able to find a calm place in the world. The humiliation felt like a test. If she could stand it and continue to love the man she’d chosen to love, then she could be proud. It would be like climbing an arduous mountain all by herself on a peak no one else ever climbed and no one was concerned about. An obscure peak in the Andes. She might die there alone, and no one would ever know, or she might scale it and return safely and even then no one might ever know. But she would know. That would be enough.

A man as decadent as Dean, and doomed as he was, his life sure to end long before hers, looked to her as a star to lead him to something good, not domestic life or romantic love in the usual sense, but a land of milk and honey nonetheless, an oasis of the mind where a man could die at peace. He would have to reach this oasis on his own, it was not hers to bring to him, but she could walk at his side and point out markers. And she liked that idea.

They were soul mates of a sort. Another ridiculous notion. But their fates were intertwined. Cuddled in her bed, Gustave curled at her feet, Dean wandering the house, she pulled the blankets tight around her chin and closed her eyes, but her feet stayed cold. She worked her toes deeper into her socks to circulate the trapped air, but it didn’t warm up. She took a hot bath. A candle lit on the edge of the tub turned the steamy bathroom into a grotto, a place for prayer.

This whole thing had been supposed to be about sex, and now it had evolved into love and been ruined. How womanly, to make love out of sex, and yet Dean seemed

even more set on love than she was, always talking about how he wanted to learn to love and she was his lady and he would make a home with her. She'd see.

Bah. A lover! That's what she wanted. Or no lover at all. Her heart's desire?
Not this.

Snuggled back in her bed, she decided Dean would have to leave. Gustave poked his head out from under the covers and looked at her curiously. Soon, pet. Soon. A branch blew against the window. A change was in the air. A crisis was brewing.

The next evening, she came home to find a grey navy blanket carefully tacked up all the way around the window frame in the bedroom.

"What have you done to our bedroom?" The mattress was skewed, the sheets strewn over the floor, and several glasses of half-consumed orange juice stood precariously on the bedside table next to two large glass ashtrays overflowing with butts.

"Sorry." He paced the hall, looking down at the floor.

"Stop saying sorry. That's creeping me out too."

"Sorry." She was only background noise to him now.

"Where did you go, Dean?"

"I'm here." He looked up at her as if surprised to see her there, then resumed examining the floor.

"What are you looking for? Seen any people in the tree today?"

He looked at her suspiciously but said nothing. She stomped out of the room. Speed was no longer sexy. Revolting, more like.

"George called," he said, glancing at her out of the side of his eyes.

“What’d he want?” she asked.

Dean didn’t answer for so long she thought he hadn’t heard, so she asked again.

He answered with a piercing look. “You know.”

“No. I don’t.” He was especially careful in his movements as he laid the dirty dishes in the sink and wiped the counter. She gasped. “You think George is spying on you.”

“You know he is.”

“Oh, my God. You think *I’m* in some conspiracy with George?”

Without a word, he let the answer sink in. When pressed, he assured her he didn’t think she had cruel intentions toward him. None of them did. They were doing this for his own benefit, to get him to leave drugs alone. “You know I’m not supposed to come back to California. They’re trying to get me to leave. That’s why you’re all doing this.”

“Doing what? What are we doing?” she asked, incredulous.

A knowing look over his shoulder was his only answer. His skin had an unhealthy pallor, and his face was blotchy and pale. On his lower arms, a mosaic of scabs showed where he had been scratching. Dried blood coagulated under a pimple on his neck, which was covered by a weak growth of beard stubble.

“Is it almost gone?” she said. “The speed?” The words came out as a sort of high-pitched moan. “I need to talk to you as a human being again. Is it gone?” Her hands beseeched him.

He hesitated, then nodded. Strangely, he was incapable of lying in this state. Speed not only made him docile, it worked like a truth serum. Scowling, she dragged her herself to the living room couch and sat down.

“Dean, where’s my guitar?” There was a vacant space next to the couch where the guitar usually stood.

“I didn’t think you wanted it anymore.”

She shot off the couch. “Of course I still want it. Where is it? You tell me, or I’m calling the police right now.” He was nothing compared to her. She could squash him. She grabbed the phone and began to dial.

He raised a hand which wavered at the end of his wrist like a wilted hunk of lettuce. “Stop.” His eyes were ringed with dark circles.

“Are you going to cry? Hit me? Are you having fun? Is this the life you want, stealing from your girlfriend, disappearing into skin and bones? Good times! Right now, I love that guitar more than I love you.”

“Sorry.”

“We’re going to get it. Now.” She grabbed her coat. “Take me to whoever the fuck you sold my guitar to. Now.” She was shaking.

“You can’t go.”

“I can. I will. Tell me who has it. You thief.” She spit the words.

They drove to an apartment complex she passed often on her way to visit her aunts, a series of white two-story stucco buildings connected with cracked cement paths and lined with weedy lawns. A tiny young woman who seemed to weigh less than a bird

opened the door when Dean knocked, then caught her breath when she saw Roxanne next to him.

Roxanne thrust a twenty dollar bill at her. "My boyfriend sold you a guitar. We've come to get it back. Here's the twenty dollars." Beyond the door, the living room was practically empty except for a far wall stacked with TVs and VCRs.

"One sec," the woman whispered. "Wait one sec." She put her index finger to her lips and closed the door. They waited. One minute. Two. A sharp argument ensued behind the door, a man's voice urgently speaking, and a woman's hysterical response. Then the woman opened the door and handed the guitar over, her face serene, her smile calm, like she'd just stepped out of a warm, relaxing bath.

"Thank you very much," Roxanne said, handing over the twenty.

The woman bowed slightly. "You're welcome." The door shut. They heard the lock click.

On the drive home, Dean said he was sorry.

"You sound like an automaton," Roxanne said. "What's happened to you?"

"I'm sorry."

"You should be. Here's what's going to happen. You're going into treatment. You're a drug addict."

"All right."

The next morning, she dropped him off at the county detox program. It was housed in the same building where the crisis clinic had once been. With a shudder, she drove away and watched in the rearview mirror as he opened the door and went inside.

The house needed a thorough cleaning, but first, she lit a stick of incense and whispered an encouraging message to Dean and whatever angels might be watching over him. Then she got busy removing all traces of the horror that was Dean's speed binge, wiping clean the encrusted rings on the coffee table, washing curious streaks off the front window, taking a rag to the grubby hand marks on the doorframes, straightening the bedroom, changing the sheets, dusting and polishing the piano and vacuuming the carpet thoroughly, using the attachments along the edges and under the furniture. The only signs she couldn't expunge were the spots of oil from the bottle of cooking oil that she'd thrown at him in a rage. Try as she might, scrubbing repeatedly, the spots would not lift but stuck like dark shadows, inerasable as Lady Macbeth's blood.

Chapter Thirty-Two

A client at work, Kenneth, who said he was a surveyor, asked if she saw clients outside of the spa. Yes, she said. Now that Dean was out of the house, she could invite clients over. He told her he was having trouble with impotence and she'd got him hard for the first time in months. "And so easily!

And she hadn't even meant to. It just happened. She'd shyly stroked it with his whispered encouragement, just a few times, too nervous to do much more. He took her number and called the next morning and made an appointment for the coming Thursday, her day off, at four o'clock.

The window over her kitchen sink looked out onto a small elm tree devoid of leaves, a tangle of gray limbs which collected birds and divided the sky into fragments of blue. Rain fell that morning, turning the limbs dark and sweeping the air like a broom. Her hands soaked in hot dishwater, she sang as she scrubbed the day's dishes. Handel's Messiah played on the stereo. *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is risen. For unto us a child is born, unto a son is risen!*

She needed to make more money. She had her talents to sell. Perhaps she could make a small business from her sensual skills, offer them discreetly to selected clients only. If she did it right, she could bring in a bit of extra money and no one would know.

On the morning of Kenneth's visit, she picked a bouquet of purple roses and set them in a vase on the coffee table. Drawing the curtain on the front window, she let the lovely spring sunshine wash over the simple room, brightening the walls as if newly painted but also, she sadly noted, emphasizing the drabness of the furnishings and the age of the carpet. She crossed her fingers and sucked in a breath of anticipation. This day would tell.

An hour before he was to arrive, she showered and shaved her legs and washed her hair, then blow dried it in front of the bathroom mirror. With a careful hand, she applied eye liner, mascara and lipstick she'd only the day before bought at the drugstore. The effect was not quite right. Her lips looked pink rather than rose. The heavy lines around her eyes made her look like a raccoon. But surely she had to get used to makeup if she was going to enter this line of work. With a tissue, she wiped the line off her lower eyelid. That was better.

Now for the clothes. She put on a gold lame blouse she'd also purchased the day before at the consignment store and added a black denim skirt and dark stockings, completing her look with the black stone earrings she'd bought at the state fair. Not bad. A curl on top of her head stuck out like a point. Well, no matter. She smiled cheerily and dabbed a spot of lavender oil on either side of her neck for a final touch.

The bed. Clean sheets, clean pillowcases. She pulled the blanket taut and fluffed up the comforter. She wished she had perfume to spritz over the resulting love nest but decided it was just as well she didn't, seeing as how she had such a tendency to overdo things.

She did not set up her massage table. He was not a massage client but a prostitution client. She could be done with the camouflage of massage and get right down to the nuts and bolts of her business: Sex. She would invite him into her bedroom, disrobe and they would fuck. He would be carried away with her expertise and enthralled by her lustful willingness. But try as she might to be calm, she was terribly nervous. She shook her hands in panic and could not seem to get a deep breath or sit still for one moment, constantly jumping up from the couch to wipe off another streak from the window, set a glass in the sink, push Gustave's dish under the table out of sight, and generally tidy and make her place more posh than it could possibly be.

Ken was on time. His car, a shiny gold sedan, pulled up the driveway. She heard the gravel crackle and waited for the engine to shut off before jumping up and opening the door. She must not hurry, must not act flustered. He must feel welcome.

“Hi!” he said, raising his hand in greeting as he approached the door with a big smile on his face. He was so tall he had to duck when crossing the threshold. “Nice little place you have here. This is almost bucolic.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking his hand and drawing him in, then dropping his hand quickly when she felt how clammy her palm was against his. Bowing her head, she said, “Please. Have a seat.”

He sat on the stuffed chair, and she on the couch opposite him, where she saw for the first time oil spots on the chair’s skirt that showed between his legs.

“Smells nice in here,” he said. “Pine Sol?”

“I clean my kitchen floor on Thursdays.” As if she was merely adhering to her normal schedule and not doing anything special for him. As if she was used to having men come over to pay her for sex and thought nothing of it.

“Would you like anything to drink?” she asked. She’d bought a mildly expensive bottle of chardonnay just in case. “I have wine if you’d like.”

“Do you have water?”

“Of course.” She went into the kitchen and poured a glass from the tap and added two ice cubes. Handing it to him, he hand shook. She smiled and gave a small bow. He looked disconcerted. She sat back on the couch and crossed her legs, one knee over the other and her legs turned slightly to the side in a ladylike pose she had not affected in a very long time. “How has your day been?” she asked.

“Great. Say, isn’t the weather gorgeous lately?”

“Quite gorgeous.” She nodded her head enthusiastically. “Spring has arrived, I’d say.”

“I’d say it has. Yes.” He sipped his water and looked down at the carpet. Right at the area full of dark spots.

“Would you like to begin?” she said. “I was thinking we could go directly into the bedroom. It’s right this way.” She was already up and waving her hand at him to follow, which he did. She felt a coolness from him. Probably he was nervous. Once she had him on the bed and they were naked and fucking like they ought to be, he would relax.

“Oops!” she said, tripping on the metal stripping that lay at the bedroom door’s threshold. That thing had come loose with Dean’s shenanigans somewhere along the line, and she’d forgotten to nail it back down.

“You okay?” he said, grabbing her elbow.

“Fine. Thanks.”

She lay on top of the comforter on the left side of the bed and patted the other side. He smiled uncomfortably. “Lie down,” she said, her voice a mixture of perky and terrified. “Let’s get cozy, shall we?”

He shrugged. For a minute, she thought he was going to change his mind and say he had to leave. She’d done something wrong but didn’t know what. With a big smile, she spread her arm over the comforter and leaned back as if in a swoon.

“Okay,” he said, grinning, and lay down beside her and stared up at the ceiling. The curtains were drawn shut in this room, and the room was slightly cool. “I’ve been

thinking of you for the last five days,” he said. “I could see myself coming to see you every week.” But he said it with a dubious tone of voice as if he was reevaluating his opinion.

She lay on her side and watched him. He had reddish hair and a bare spot on top, and a face open and friendly. She didn’t want him to be tense again. He was the kind of person who got along with everyone. She could see that in the openness of his eyes and the way he walked.

“I’ve been divorced for five years, and the women I date, I feel so bad. I want to get hard for their sake as much as my own. I don’t know if it’s the pressures of dating or what, but it doesn’t work like it used to.” He looked down his body with a forlorn expression.

“But it does with me.” She snuggled into the pillow.

“Sure does. Sure does. Or it did four days ago. We’ll see how it goes today.”

That was her cue. Time to sit up. Time to disrobe. With a breezy manner, she unbuttoned her gold lame blouse while Ken watched, his face curious but a wall up to shield him from her reading him further. When she had slipped her blouse off and dropped it to the floor, and when she had unsnapped her bra and dropped that to the floor, she unzipped her skirt and slipped it off and then tugged her stockings off. Naked, she turned to him and asked him what he felt like doing.

He reached out to touch her breasts. His hands were cold. She lay on her back and let him fondle her. He kissed her. “You’re warm,” he said.

Outside, a car door slammed, and they both froze. "I think it's the neighbors," she said.

"Oh. Wouldn't want to be discovered in flagrante." Laughing, he began to unbutton his shirt. She had him now. When he had removed his clothes, they kissed and held their bodies close in a warm embrace that made her hum. But she had to get down to business. With one hand, she reached down and fondled his cock, which was half-hard, and stroked it delicately, since she had no oil this time and didn't want to pull the skin. He lay back and let her go down on him, telling her it felt good, telling her she didn't have to, telling her he was hard enough now. She lay back while he pulled out a condom from his pants pocket and worked it down over his cock, which was hard enough. He was getting what he paid for. But something was wrong. He wasn't relaxed at all, and neither was she. This was a performance.

She opened her legs. His invitation. He placed himself between them and looked at her. She tried to smile the sweet smile of an innocent farm girl, but her lips felt artificially pulled back in a grimace. Blinking nervously, she reached down and grabbed hold of his cock and set the head of it the entrance to her pussy. He pushed. That grand idea she'd had, that he would come over every week to fuck her, went clear out the window. This was a dismal, passionless coupling. Not at all what he wanted. She could sense the disappointment in the way he looked into her eyes and then avoided looking into them, not from an excess of lust but from embarrassment.

He would never call again, but she couldn't blame him. She wouldn't either. His cock was hard, and he was fucking her, but he fucked her because he might as well,

because there was no way out. Not now. Not with her roses on the table and her clean kitchen floor and her mascara and pink lipstick. She was not who he had requested at all, not this frightened gaze, not this empty submission. He wanted to run, she could tell. He would spend a few moments being polite when it was all over. Then he would run.

Maybe if she pretended to come. Closing her eyes, she bucked and moaned while his thrusts increased. “Oh, oh, ohhh.” Surely that would excite him. She would be a wildly sexual animal capable of capturing him. He seemed alarmed, fucking faster and faster as if to throw water on her.

When they lay side by side afterwards, after he’d come too and fallen at her side, he said, wiping his arm over his forehead and breathing hard, “Did you *really* come?”

“Of course!”

He looked doubtful.

Frowning, she asked, “Don’t you believe me?”

“Sure. Sure I do. I just—uh—it’s unusual for a woman to come from fucking, isn’t it?”

“Some women do.” Picking a fleck of lint off her breast, she glanced sideways to see how he was taking it. His eyes flitted around the ceiling as if looking for an exit. Seeing her look at him, he grinned, but it was a grin of fear and of pity. The kind of grin he might give a child arsonist. *Poor messed up kid.*

After he’d gone, she slipped the two hundred dollar bills into her wallet and washed the makeup off her face, put on a pair of leggings and a sweater and boiled water for tea. With a cup in front of her on the coffee table, she curled up on the couch holding

Gustave in her arms. She was afraid to return to the bed. This horror was what they warned against. Selling an imitation of herself, she had prostituted herself in the worst sense of the word. She could not be proud of that last hour. She could never imagine doing something like that again. Never! Gold lame! And the first fake orgasm of her life.

“Gustave,” she said, stroking his back in swift, sure strokes as if to wipe away the shame, “Today I was an ass. I faked enjoyment of sex. Had sex with a man for money, sure, but that part doesn’t bother me. I had *bad* sex with a man and took his money. I’m no good at this.”

She nudged the dog off her lap, and he lay on his back, letting his front paws hang limply and spreading his back legs wide to show his belly. She reached for a sip of tea. As she lifted the cup to her lips, a car drove up the gravel driveway and stopped in front of the window. Out stepped Dean. He leaned back inside to say something to the driver, who drove away with a parting honk on the horn. The front door opened.

“I’m back!” Dean dropped his bag on the floor and spread his arms. Gustave jumped off the couch and pranced around Dean’s feet with a happy whine and furiously wagging tail.

Roxanne’s heart sank. “You were supposed to be there for a month.”

“Got kicked out. Oh, I’m okay, darling.” He leaned down to let Gustave lick his face, then strode to the couch and leaned over her.

She let him kiss her but not happily.

“Well, aren’t you glad to see me?” he said in his loud, booming voice. “I’m straight!” Spreading his arms, he smiled expansively, setting the room abuzz with energy.

“No, I didn’t use,” he said. He just went off the grounds to go to the store, that’s all. With a couple of the other guys. Yeah, they got kicked out too. “Hey, guess who that was that dropped me off? Rick from the AIDS group. He kind of went on a binge.”

Laughing, he strode to the kitchen and opened the cupboard. “I can eat what I want to eat again. Damn, their food stunk. Honey, don’t worry, I’m fine. Don’t worry. I’m okay.”

That evening, he spent half an hour in the bathroom. When he came out, he stepped across the kitchen floor lightly and sat down to pet Gustave, smiling like a little child opening Christmas presents. Rubbing the dog’s ears with tender thoroughness, circling his palm, cooing sweet words, he was off and running again, and she knew it.

She’d failed at prostitution and she’d failed at loving a wild man like Dean. She’d thought she could handle it. Was sure of it. Was sure love would guide her. Big love of the overarching kind, love that drew crocuses from the frozen ground, love that spun planets. Love that looked ordinary. Ordinary and powerful. Strange and beautiful. Dean, and her love for him, interchangeable. But she’d failed.

In the mirror, which she avoided these days, her lips were set grimly. Sprouting gray over her left temple, the curls she was so proud of lacked all luster and seemed to be devoid of vitamins. Perhaps she needed to eat better. All her clothes were tight. The button of her jeans poked her belly when she sat down and made it necessary to unbutton if she was going to be comfortable at all. Feeling herself blow up from inattention, not from Dean but from her own self, broke her heart.

But her eyes haunted the most, for they'd held the beacon of light that gave her so much confidence. Now they stared back with resentment or turned coldly curious as if they were staring out of a cage. She switched off the light and climbed into bed, alone, and hoped she would not dream or even wake. Shivering in terror of what she'd wrought, and how horribly wrong it had gone, she pushed her hand down under the covers to find Gustave's back, which she rubbed over and over until she felt her fears subside enough for sleep.

She drove a car past an alpine lake and went off the road. She fell in. He ran laughing down the shore to shout at the people at the far end, catch her, catch her! But she wouldn't be caught. Not yet. The water was warm, not cold, and her skin grew gills and she breathed air and swam deeper.

Browsing a thrift shop, she came across a collection of old postcards. In one, a brown-haired woman, white of face and limb, stood wrapped in a tight-fitting sleeveless gown and gauzy stole. She had flowers in her hair. The caption said she was a prostitute. She was hefty in size. In fact, her body and her face were so remarkably like Roxanne's that she felt she was looking at an old photo of herself that she couldn't remember posing for.

Relentless, her life. About too many things, none of them finished, all mired in the middle, some even at the beginning. Dean had dissolved into his spoon. He was

nothing but a ghost now, his booming voice drowned in the needle, and keeping her from a good night's sleep.

She took Gustave and drove down to the river, the neglected part of the river, the part where only homeless people ventured to, weedy and full of brambles she had to walk carefully to avoid until she reached the shore. Gustave ran head, hopping down a narrow path to the riverbank.

On the bank, she saw a horse's leg. A dead horse's leg up on the bank. She stopped and stared. The rest of the horse must be buried in the mud. What would a dead horse be doing here? She stepped nearer to get a closer look but was too afraid to touch it. For a long time, she stood staring at it, ignoring Gustave, who was far ahead. There was a hoof, and the knee, and the lower part of the haunch, all coated with thick dried mud.

A few days later, she passed by the dead horse again and tried to touch the leg but couldn't. Sometimes she saw buzzards circling overhead but they never landed. One day she stepped on the carcass of a dead cat, flattened and desiccated, its mouth open in a petrified scream. She had to drag Gustave away from it.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Dean began to throw up. Shaking, fevered, he submitted to letting her drive him to the hospital. The emergency room doctor shook his head in disbelief that anyone who

was HIV positive would be doing all this speed. “Don’t you know you’re just killing yourself that much faster?”

Dean didn’t care. When he came home, he lay in bed for three days and took the antibiotics and drank water by the gallon. And when he recovered, Rick came to visit. Roxanne heard them talking quietly in the bedroom. Shortly they came out and Dean was dressed. They headed for the door.

She pulled Rick aside as he was leaving. “Can Dean stay with you?” she asked him. “You have an apartment somewhere?”

“Yeah. In Oakland. Me and my girlfriend. She left though.”

“Take Dean with you.”

“I don’t know.”

“Take him, or I’ll suffocate him in his sleep. Wait here.” She took a suitcase and stuffed it with some of Dean’s clothes and his toothbrush and a couple of towels. “Take this. Take him.”

When he stepped out the door, she shut it and locked it behind him. With the crunch of tires, he was gone.

“If you quit doing drugs,” she told him over the phone that evening, “you can come home. Otherwise, go live your life and leave me out of it.” She had no hesitation on this point.

He slipped out of her life and was gone, but she wondered about him constantly. His voice on the phone a week later set her heart beating wildly.

“How are you?” She held the phone tightly and waited his answer.

“Hmm, yup.” The nasal twang in his voice almost made her lips buzz through the phone.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said, smacking his lips. She gritted her teeth, recognizing the signs. He had dry mouth.

“Maybe you could bring me my check when it comes,” he said, “and I’ll pay rent to Rick, and you’ll never have to see me again. It’s what you said you wanted. We go our own ways. Probably best.” He made a *tock-tock-tock* sound with his tongue on the roof of his mouth.

“You’re doing speed,” she said.

“You always say that.”

“You always are.”

“Fine.”

“I’ll mail you your check. It’s yours.”

Summoning all her bravado, Roxanne entered the lobby of the local newspaper office and asked how she would go about running a small ad in the classified section. A distracted middle aged woman with a puffy face shoved a form at her and pointed at a plastic cup of pens at the other end of the counter. With great care, Roxanne wrote down the words she’d spent all week composing, ordinary words she hoped would not provoke any respectable person to suspect her. *Swedish massage. Warm and relaxing. Call*

Roxanne, certified massage therapist. She added her phone number, area code included, and pushed it across the counter to the sniffing clerk.

“How long?” the clerk asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Week? Month? Three months? How long?”

“What’s best?”

“What’s the ad for?” The clerk held a tissue to her nose and blew, then perused the words Roxanne had written. Her expression did not change, nor did she seem to take any more interest in Roxanne than she already had. “I can’t decide for you. It’s cheaper the longer you run it.”

But if things didn’t go well, she’d want the ad pulled, and then she’d lose her money. “I think two weeks is all.”

“Twenty-five dollars then.”

That didn’t seem too much. If the ad brought her even one client, she would recoup her expense. She paid cash and stuck the receipt in her purse.

The ad ran on Thursday. Friday morning, as she brushed her teeth, the phone rang. She spit out the toothpaste and ran to the kitchen and picked it up.

“Hello?”

Silence.

“Hello?” she repeated, wiping her mouth in annoyance.

“Yes, is this Roxanne?” a man’s voice asked. Roxanne felt her throat thicken with nervousness. “Do you do massage?”

“Yes, I do,” she said, the words coming out fast. “Are you interested in an appointment?”

“Yes.”

So easy. They agreed he would come over at noon before she left for work. Two more calls came in, both male. One man asked what she looked like.

“What?”

“What do you look like?”

“Like a female.”

“Just asking.”

“This is therapeutic massage.”

“No release?”

“What?”

“You don’t do a manual release?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” She did, and reddened. He could be a policeman.

“Okay, thank you.” And he hung up.

The next caller said he was looking for a good massage and said she sounded like a nice lady. “I am,” she replied cautiously. “I’ve been giving massage at a spa and am working up a clientele of my own. I’m told I have very warm hands. I don’t have time today but could see you on Monday if you’d like.”

“I’d like that very much. Where are you located?”

She gave him her address. “Park right in front. I’ll see you at eleven o’clock then?”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

When the phone rang again, she let the machine answer. It rang again as she was about to get in the shower. The messages left the names and numbers of two more men. Giddy, she dried her hair and scoured her closet for proper attire, settling on black leggings and a white, long-sleeved blouse that buttoned up the front. In the mirror, she saw an artistic looking woman of indeterminate age, casually tilting her chin and smiling a welcome. She would do.

His name was Dennis. He was older, portly around the middle, with pink skin that hadn’t seen the sun in a long time. She gave him her standard massage, taking care to touch only the proper places and glide up his thighs just short of the upper mark where heat emanated. They talked of the weather, of past winters, of road salt and incautious drivers sliding sideways over the highway. All the while she touched him, all the while he lay more still until he gave up talking altogether, all the while the background music soothed the both of them.

This time, she would not go looking. When she told him it was time to turn over, and stood back, lifting the sheet and holding it like a curtain between them, he lifted his head like a dead weight and breathed himself back to consciousness enough to pull his arm up and shove his body to its other side. This moment had come to be the mark of her success, for if a body was good and relaxed, she could see it in the way the person took their time and moved their neck and arms with consciousness, as if they were aware of them anew, as if they had forgotten their limbs were so full of blood and warmth, as if

they had now remembered the luxury of rolling drowsily over, collapsing their legs into place and letting their arms hang off the sides like branches drooping from a tree.

She kept her place this time. For one thing, he might be a policeman too. Anyone could be. For another thing, while she loved to see her client get aroused, she loved even more the infinitesimally small suggestions of it which left her in a state of suspense. That he might or might not want her to use her hand *there* kept her mind pleasantly occupied and her hands discrete. She didn't want to make him be aroused. She wanted to see if he would be. And if so, how would he communicate it, knowing that she might respond with anger? And how would she communicate her answer? That he might be a policeman and she might be indignant kept them both in check, so they had to find subtle means of exchanging their thoughts and intentions.

He did get aroused. The sheet over his cock sprung up like a mountain which left no confusion as to how her touch affected his body. She did nothing with it. He didn't ask her to. She merely increased her loving touch on the rest of his body and flicked her eyes kindly at his when he told her that she certainly did have warm hands. If she'd run her hands closer to the spot, he might have shifted his hips in answer, or sighed, but she kept her hands away. This time, she would do nothing, even though the door was wide open.

And yet, when he looked at her on leaving, his eyes glowed with gratitude and a secret thrill as if she *had* jacked him off. He didn't seem unrelaxed by the mere fact of having had an erection that went untended to, which sank back down as the massage reached its climax with her hands working his feet. She had not left him unrelieved. And

that seemed strange. Even with no sex, the massage had felt sexual. He said he would definitely call her again.

The doorbell rang. She rushed to it, then stood still for a moment before opening it, taking a moment to center her energy in her belly. Blood flushed through her body. When she opened the door, she smiled expectantly. “Eric? Hi, I’m Ellen. Come on in.”

Tall and thin with an angular face and a wide mouth, he looked about her age, maybe a little older. Grinning shyly, he ducked his head on entering.

“This way,” she said, turning to lead him to the open door on the far end of the living room. She waved him into the room with a flourish, gesturing to the massage table inside, hung with a peach-colored sheet pulled taut and smooth. “I work in here.” She gave a mock bow and let him step in front of her.

He looked relieved. She had begun to recognize that look on a new client’s face, a look that approved of her setup, clean and orderly and not suspect in any way. She presented herself in a similar fashion, wearing a simple costume of black leggings and a white blouse that buttoned down the front, an outfit that made her feel like an artist.

“I’m so glad you could see me on short notice,” he said. “I called you once before when I was in town, but you were busy.”

“My schedule varies from day to day. Sometimes I’m just sitting around waiting for the phone to ring. You never know.”

“I can’t imagine you have to wait long.”

She smiled indulgently. “I’m glad I could see you too. I hope you enjoy the massage. Before we start, are you thirsty? Would you like a glass of ice water? It’s so hot outside today.” Her cottage stayed cool, shaded by the black walnut tree. “And do you need to use the restroom before we begin?”

He paused with his hand on his shirt front. “Yes on both counts.”

“The bathroom’s just past the kitchen” she said, stepping outside the room and pointing. While he was gone, she filled a glass from a pitcher of cold water in her refrigerator, then raised her arms overhead and bent to the right and then the left, slowly like a bird gliding across the sky. Eric returned from the bathroom and took the glass of water. “Lay your clothes here,” she said, gesturing to the wooden chair next to the window. “You can drape yourself with this.” She handed him a bath towel of the same color, pale pink, as the sheet. “I’ll leave the room and come back in a minute when you’re ready.”

He nodded. He wore a suit and tie. It was two in the afternoon on a Tuesday. A working man. A lot of her clients were in sales. She used to think poorly of salesman, but she hadn’t known any. Now she did, and they were invariably pleasant and tended to tip well. Or maybe he was in insurance. She’d had a fireman last week.

She took him all the way. He tipped her forty dollars.

Chapter Thirty-Four

She'd seen Carl before. Liked him. He had something to do with the hotel industry. On top of his folded underwear and pants lay a pager, and he'd draped his suit coat carefully over the chair back. But what was he doing? Touching her thigh? So this important man of business thought he could paw her, did he? She stepped out of reach, annoyed, and went to work on his lower back. When she returned to his upper back, standing close to his arm again, he touched her thigh again, running his fingers lightly over the skin above her knee. That pissed her off. She moved away again, stepping to the front of the table to finish his back off from that direction. He tried again, meekly. This time, she picked his hands up and put them back where they belonged, and not too gently, hanging down on either side of the table. Like dead fish.

The client was supposed to lie there like dead weight. She was not a massage parlor. She was not a stripper. She was a massage therapist who might, *might*, massage more than the strictly therapeutic.

Carl behaved. When she had him turn over, keeping the sheet in place so he was covered up to his waist still, his cock was poking up hard and making a tent, but he didn't grab for her again. He settled back and closed his eyes and lay like he was asleep. She liked that, having him hard but well-mannered. He was broad-shouldered and a little soft, or maybe husky was a better word. Yes, he was husky. And beginning to go bald. But not unattractive, no, not at all. Stronger and bigger than her, and probably used to ordering people around, this important man of the world lay totally still and followed her lead.

With oiled hands, she lifted one of his arms and milked his bicep with her other hand. He let her move his arm as if he was dead weight, which was the perfect response. She laid it between her breasts and squeezed her palms, alternating from one to the other, down his forearm. He smiled ever so slightly. She held his hand in hers and stretched the fingers back and dug the tension out of his palm with her thumbs. He probably didn't know he had tension there at all. Then she very gently laid his arm down and walked almost on tiptoe to the other side of the table and picked up his other arm and did the same with it. He was utterly docile, and waiting.

With his arm lying between her breasts, she squeezed his forearm and then kept her hand pushing up his bicep, making a trail with her index finger up over his deltoid and down his pectoralis, where she traced a delicate circle around one of his nipples. His smile widened. Then the other nipple. He adjusted his hips and spread his legs apart the slightest degree. With quickening breath, she dragged her finger down to his belly and began making a slow rotation with the flat of her palm around his navel.

And still, he kept himself in check, although as soon as her little finger passed under the sheet on its way around his belly, he spread the fingers on the hand that lay between her breasts. She giggled without making a sound, just letting her chest shake with laughter, which he felt, of course. Before she knew it, his fingers unbuttoned her top button even while he lay with his eyes still closed. He turned his hand over and stroked the top of her right breast with a finger. Before she knew it, she'd let him unbutton her second button. Now he laid his whole palm over her breast and moaned very quietly, and she heard herself sigh in response. The next thing she knew, she had her blouse off

entirely, and Carl was sitting up on the table with his arms around her unclasping her bra while she leaned her head back and let him. Her body felt thick with desire, or no, something like desire, except she didn't want anything. Just to touch, be touched, and linger until she was tired of lingering, like she'd woken up in the middle of a field thick with wild mustard, brilliant and abundant. And temporary.

When they were finished, Carl tipped her a hundred dollars. That time was even better than the first time," he said. "And I didn't think that was possible."

She watched him drive away and then poured herself a cold glass of water and drank it quickly. She'd let him fuck her. She'd bent over the table and let him pull her pants down. He'd stared at her naked ass and put his dick in her pussy. Covered with a condom he'd taken from his pants pocket. Jesus. She'd let him fuck her and had lain there panting and sated when he was done. This was going too far. Much too far. This was what real whores were like, but even worse, because she liked it. She'd laid herself open to anything. And she'd do it again. She'd do this every day if she could.

That meant one thing: she had to stop this kind of thing right now. This wasn't a game anymore. She had to quit prostitution.

Dean called her from Oakland that night to say he was okay.

“I’m glad,” she said. Neither spoke then. But neither said goodbye or hung up. The silence hung between them like a blanket. She’d always liked that they could be alone together without talking.

“I haven’t forgotten about you,” he said.

Roxanne held the phone pressed close to her ear and clamped down her jaw, the better to keep perfectly still and hear every nuance of air that passed between them. She would not beg him to quit using, but she was worried about what would become of him. She wanted to see him break free.

“I miss my girl,” he said.

“I thought I was your old lady.”

“Psshttt. You’re my vixen then. And I miss you. Still want me?”

“Maybe,” she said. “I’m working more hours at the spa. Gave up my clients here.”

“How come?”

“Just didn’t feel like it. Too many variables.” She chewed on her lip. “Still doing speed?”

“I’ve had enough of that shit. Excuse my French.” He exhaled loudly in a blast of exasperation.

“If you would quit doing speed,” she said, “you could come back and live here again. We miss you here. There’s something wrong with the roses. The petals are brown on the edges. I don’t know what that means.”

“I don’t either. Don’t sound right though.”

She waited.

“I’ll call you again, baby,” he said. “Hey, rub Gustave’s ears for me. Tell him I love him.”

“Okay.”

“Tell him to kiss you for me, okay?”

“Okay. Dean?”

He waited.

“Take care of yourself,” she said. “I think about you. I don’t hate you, not even close. Just—don’t forget me. Don’t forget our home here.”

“I never could. Damn you, woman, I got to go before I cry. I love you. Bye.”

Gone. She clutched the phone to her breast and mouthed a silent scream.

Gustave looked at her curiously, cocked his head and waited. She called him, and he leaped into her lap and licked her ear.

Dean remained distant from her, but only in body. She imagined she heard his step across the wood floor, tiptoeing lightly so as to not wake her, in the early morning half-slumber before the day began. He stood in the doorway, or his shape did, carved from sunlight, and she left the door open when it was warm so as to keep him there. It was a position of optimal power for him, a place where he could survey nature—the oranges still green but growing fatter, the robins alighting on the fence, a wind brushing the squirrels’ fur as they scampered around the trunks of the trees—while remaining a householder, the safety of the kitchen at his back. But would he ever return to this house?

Chapter Thirty-Five

“I got laid. Oh, my God!” Hope laughed like a giddy schoolgirl, and Roxanne held the phone at arm’s length to let her settle down. She yanked the phone back up to her ear when Hope added, “By a couple!”

She’d answered an ad from a straight couple with a “bi-curious” woman and a straight man. “A married couple,” she said. “I thought that would be more comfortable.”

She’d necked with both and let the man fuck her. “I loved it!”

Roxanne felt a great sense of relief. At least something was getting resolved at last.

“I know what you need, Roxanne.” Lisa said over the phone later that week. “You need to go camping with some wild women. And guess who’s going camping? Donna and I and some friends of mine from school. And guess who lives right on way to the campground? You.”

So on a late spring weekend, Roxanne went camping with Lisa, Donna and some of their friends up in the Sierras at a frigid lake ringed with pines. After a long afternoon

hiking around the lake, Donna cooked a hearty supper of bean burritos over an iron grill on an open fire.

“Sing for us!” Lisa hauled Roxanne’s guitar out of the car trunk and handed it to her. Heather, Lisa’s friend from work, took out her guitar, and the two of them got busy tuning their instruments, hunched over in concentration, while Jane, Heather’s lover, broke out a six-pack of beer.

“I love that Freight Train song,” Lisa said, pulling another stump close to the fire ring and sitting down.

Last time she’d played that, she’d been sitting by a campfire along highway 80, maybe outside Cheyenne or Salt Lake City. She fumbled around at first, but her fingers remembered soon enough, and remembered other songs too as the evening passed and the group went through every song they could think of that they knew in common. Songs by Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, old Beatles songs, campfire songs, even some John Prine and Bonnie Raitt, although she couldn’t keep up with the chords like Heather could and just sang on some.

When the fire died down to a pulsating bed of coals, one by one the revelers said goodnight and took themselves to their tents until only Lisa and Roxanne remained, and the owls hooting over their heads. The chilly night kept them hunkered close to the fire pit, which had burned down to a wide bed of deep red coals that shimmered and crackled and hypnotized them.

“This is the kind of thing I always loved about being a lesbian,” Roxanne said, smiling with satisfaction. “Just hanging about with dykes.”

“We let you enter the golden circle on special occasions.”

“Thank you, great Amazon.”

“No problemo.” Lisa pointed to the fire. “That is a huge bed of coals.”

“How did we get such a big fire?”

“The ring was just really big, so we kept feeding hunks of wood. Wow, look at that.” The coals covered a circle about five feet in diameter, all of it thick with shimmering red embers.

“We could firewalk,” Roxanne said with a laugh.

“That sounds funny, but we actually could,” Lisa said. “I just read an article about how they do that. It’s all physics. If you walk quickly, the fire doesn’t have time to burn.”

“Yeah, I’d say you’d want to walk quickly.” Roxanne took a large stick and poked at the edges of the fire bed, causing it to sizzle and the coals to buckle.

“You want to try walking across it?” Lisa said, grinning. Her face and hands shone with a yellow glow and seemed to hover at a distance from the rest of her body, which blended into the dark night.

“Maybe,” Roxanne said, tickled by the idea but scared to say yes.

“You’re not supposed to run,” Lisa said. “Running pushes your feet down. Just walk.” Lisa sat up and shrugged casually. “At least, that’s what I read. It makes sense. Think about all those amateurs in those seminars all over the country, people with no spiritual training, not yogis or anything, just walking over a bed of hot coals. They pay hundreds of dollars for the experience too.”

“Oh man, now you’ve got me thinking about it.” Roxanne laughed and looked at Lisa with a dare on her face.

Lisa’s grin stretched across her whole face like the mouth of a jack o’lantern. “You game?” she said. “I’ll do it if you will.”

Roxanne stood up and slipped off her sandals. “Okay. I’ll go first.” She placed her feet an inch from the rocks that encircled the coals, took a few deep breaths and shifted her weight back and forth. The beer had long worn off, leaving only the pure exhilaration of a clear head bent on danger.

“It’s not really dangerous,” Lisa said. “It just looks like it. But maybe I should go first. Just in case I’m wrong.”

“No, I’m sure you’re not wrong.” Roxanne tried to lift her foot. Wouldn’t budge. “Darn it,” she said.

Lisa nodded. “You can do it.”

She really wanted to. Scooting closer, she dug her toes up against the rock.

“Okay, now!” she said. But stayed put.

“That’s all right,” Lisa said. “Take your time.”

“I can’t do it,” she said, and quickly sat down and put her hands in her lap. “It’s fire! I want to but I can’t.”

Lisa kicked her sandals off and stood up. Without saying a word, she stepped barefoot onto the coals and took one, two, three steps. A fourth landed her outside the ring.

“Ha ha!” Roxanne jumped up and gave her a high five. “You did it! You did it! You’re okay?”

Lisa picked up one foot and turned it upside down. They bent over and peered at it, then the other. “I’m fine,” Lisa said. “Wow. I walked on fire!”

“I can do it now.” Roxanne stood in place and let her arms drop to her side, then lifted her chin like a diver preparing to leap. With eyes half-closed, she stepped across the coals just like Lisa had done, quickly but without running, taking one step after another, one, two, three. And out! Turning around, she stared in awe at Lisa.

“We just walked on fucking fire!”

A wind rose up with a sudden gust, scattering sparks over their toes. The coals sputtered as if congratulating them.

Roxanne sat down and lifted her foot, inspecting it for signs of damage. “Not a thing.”

“I think I have one little singe,” Lisa said. “Right on the ball of my foot. Can’t see it, but it sort of tingles a little. But that’s nothing.”

“So now what?” Roxanne hopped around on her feet, too excited to sit back down. “I need some water. Want some water?” She busied herself filling a couple of plastic tumblers with water from a thermos jug.

“Thanks.” Lisa took the offered cup gladly and drank it down in a few big gulps. “We’re supposed to know that we can conquer our problems now,” she said, wiping her mouth. “That’s why those people pay big bucks for the fire walking seminars. To feel brave.”

Roxanne struck a pose and flexed her biceps. “We can sure conquer any problems having to do with walking on fire.”

Donna’s cry from one of the tents interrupted them. “Keep it down out there, would you?”

“We fire walked,” Lisa said in a loud whisper.

“What?”

“Never mind. I’ll tell you in the morning.”

Lisa and Roxanne kept looking at each other and laughing, but quietly, their glances returning again and again to the coals until they were hypnotized by them again.

Roxanne broke the silence. “So do you have anything you need to feel brave about, Lisa?”

Lisa didn’t answer for a moment. “School scares me. I start in a few weeks.”

“But you love computers. This is perfect for you. Everyone knows it.”

“Sure. But I’m used to hanging around dykes. What if I’m in class with males in their twenties who think Reagan is the bomb?”

“Ah.” Roxanne nodded sagely. “I understand. I’m used to men now, but I went through a bit of culture shock when I first started sleeping with them again. Not that you’re going to go that far.”

“I’ll be okay. I guess bravery is an extreme word for just needing to hold my head up, huh?”

“No. You’re a minority and could get crap. I understand.”

“Computer programming is a pretty male-dominated field. I hope I can hack it.”

Lisa poked at the embers with a stick, making them sizzle and pop. “How about you? Anything you need to be brave about?”

Roxanne felt the closeness of dark around her, and the privacy of their small campsite far from other people. “Yes, actually,” she said. “There’s something I’ve never told you.”

The blanket of night helped her tell her story, and Lisa listened without saying a word. The first time with Paolo, the mistake with Kenneth, the ad in the paper, the phone calls and the men and the cash. Even so, she had a hard time telling about the loss of inhibition, the excess of lust that overcame her, especially that last time. Her voice wavered, and she almost laughed it all off. She almost said she was never going to do it again, but as she heard herself talk in such earnest tones about how much she loved the work, how she felt high after a session and floated on the sexual energy for hours, she knew she would go back to it.

“I have to go back to it, even if I’m afraid of going too far. I have to know I can control myself.”

“I think you can.” Lisa hadn’t said much, but what she did say was supportive. “You’re just new at it. Still learning.”

“But I’m breaking the law. Risking jail. Isn’t that weird?”

“It is extremely weird. But listen,” Lisa said. “You’re still a radical, still standing up for your sexual freedom. You’re not being exploited or abused. You’re a free agent making your own sexual decisions. Nothing wrong with that.”

Roxanne stopped talking and listened to the coals hiss and sputter as if they were the voices of condemnation she so feared since she'd seen the disapproval in Jack's face back the day he caught Paolo leaving her apartment and knew what had transpired.

"You're the only person I've ever told, except Dean."

"What did he think?"

"He said sex and massage went together like a pig in a poke. Besides, he believed every person had their path to walk."

"Well, I'm honored you would tell me. I don't judge you poorly for what you're doing. I think it's kind of cool, really. How much do they pay?"

"Varies. I get from forty to eighty over the massage price. Multiples of twenty. All cash, of course." She lowered her head. "Sometimes more, sometimes less."

Lisa shook her head in amazement. "And to think I knew you when you hated all men."

"That was another world."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Return

Roxanne ran her ad again. There seemed no way to get out of her fate other than to walk right through it. The calls came just as before, although this time, some of the calls were from repeat clients who'd missed her and welcomed her back with relief.

The second week, she saw a new client who was elderly and looked at her as if not quite seeing her. She dismissed his look as nervousness. He was tall with erect posture, about seventy, and wore a yellow pullover sweater over a button down shirt and a pair of pants that would look good on a golf course. He was the first client she'd ever had who arrived in a taxi.

As soon as he realized she was willing to be generous with her service, he went for what he wanted, which was to lay her down on the table and lick her pussy. She obliged. He licked her pussy as if her juices contained vitamins that would make him young again. He licked her pussy with an ardor she had never encountered even with Dorothy or Dana. No man nor woman had ever been so skilled at licking her pussy, or so interested.

When she began to feel like she might come, she pushed his head away and sat up. He was supposed to come, not her. He begged to be given a few more minutes, even after she said the time was almost up and pointed to his cock and said she wanted to have time to stroke it. He didn't care. Perhaps he was a man who'd had plenty of orgasms but not enough vaginal nectar, and now he was old and felt time slipping away.

But he was also, she suspected, not in his right mind. When he looked at her, he looked beyond her. His eyes didn't connect. She'd thought he was just shy, or maybe even a snob, someone who thought himself superior. But his voice had a hollow ring, and he fidgeted like a child and was as fixated on her pussy as a puppy on a chew toy.

He was supposed to be on the table. She gave him another ten minutes and then insisted he lie on the table. When he did, a bit grouchily, she stroked his cock, which he

didn't seem to find that interesting, even when spunk spurted onto his belly. He immediately jumped up and began to dress and asked when he could come over again.

"Um..." she said, stymied. "You have to call for an appointment." That made no sense. She could make an appointment right now. But he nodded, again like a child, and paid her what she asked for plus another forty, then sat quietly on her couch until his taxi returned exactly five minutes after the hour. Roxanne was nervous by now. There was no ring on his finger, but surely this man had a family, someone who kept him in clean clothes and kept an eye on his bank account.

The old man called twelve times the next day, always leaving the same message on her machine. "I'm calling for Roxanne. My name is Robert. I saw you yesterday for a massage. I'd like to make an appointment. Please call me at this number between the hours of ten and two o'clock." He stated those hours very clearly, as if afraid of what would happen if she called at the wrong time. "Thank you." He was unfailingly polite, but Roxanne began to get an eerie feeling listening to the messages, which were all the same, with never any rising tension in his voice or any impatience other than the one that he'd had since first diving into her muff and grabbing her hips as if he would stay there until he died. It almost seemed as if he was unaware of the other phone calls. Or only half aware of them.

He was so needy. And an easy client, certainly. He obviously had enough money to make it worth her while and then some. Plus, he almost made her come. He was an ideal client. Even if she only took the usual fee from him, he would be a regular and reliable source of weekly income. But even if he paid too little, she would take him on, if she could, because of how starved he was for the scent of a pussy. He was the most hungry man she'd ever met, and so easily satisfied. And here she was, willing, eager even, and here he was, ready to sign up for appointments. Refusing him felt cruel.

But the two of them were a minority opinion.

He called the next day too, and the next. She began to worry. Every message was exactly the same, with that same polite but desperate plea. "I'd like to make an appointment." Was his voice rising? Poor man. On the fourth day, she couldn't stand letting him hang. She picked up the phone and answered.

"Hello, this is Roxanne."

"Hello, Roxanne. My name is Robert. I saw you yesterday."

"Not yesterday," she said. "But I remember you."

He stuttered, confused now. "Uhh... uh."

"I got your messages, Robert. I'm sorry, but I can't make any appointments right now. I'm busy with other work. I don't have time. I'm sorry." This was an obvious lie, since her ad continued to run in the weekly paper.

"I understand," he said. "I wonder if you can tell me when you will have time for an appointment. I'd like to make an appointment."

“No, I can’t tell you. I won’t have anything for quite a while. I’m sorry. Please don’t keep calling.”

It would be so simple to let him come over. But she had to say no. She thought of him even when he didn’t call. His need was so naked. In his old age, in his dementia, he had lost the civilized veneer of casualness that people wrap themselves in from adolescence on. His need was raw and real.

He showed up on her door just before Aunt Flora was going to come and pick her up for Aunt Maggie’s birthday lunch on Sonoma square. With his taxi waiting on the street, he stood smiling and hopeful. “I brought you apples from my tree,” he said, handing her a bulging paper bag. “Gravenstein.”

Her mother’s favorite. She almost wanted to cry, or to pull him inside and hug him and make that damn appointment. “No, Robert,” she said, pushing the bag toward him. “I can’t accept that. I can’t make an appointment for you.”

“Why not?” At last, his voice rose with the plaintive whine he’d been holding in. Roxanne feared he would start to cry. “I can give you more money.” He began to dig in his back pocket for his wallet.

“No,” she said. “Put your money away. I *can’t* see you, Robert. I’m sorry.” She lifted her finger and pointed to the road. “Now go. Don’t come back. I’m *sorry*.” Her voice was a whisper now. With sagging shoulders, he shook his head, not understanding.

“Go,” she hissed.

He turned and walked dejectedly down the drive. She felt sure he would not return. The dust from his taxi had barely settled when Aunt Flora's Buick came into view.

"You're thirty-two," Aunt Flora said, dabbing her lips. "Settled into a good career. Finally. I take it you like it?"

Roxanne took a moment to savor the cake in her mouth before she swallowed it and gave her answer. "Very much."

Aunt Maggie smiled gleefully. "Oh, good!"

"Maggie," Aunt Flora said. "You have lettuce stuck on your teeth. There. No, right—there. Oh, now don't wipe it on the tablecloth!" She hissed at Maggie with barely restrained fury. "I should have taken you to McDonalds."

"Don't be a stuffed shirt on my birthday, Flora." Aunt Maggie spoke loudly now that she didn't hear very well. The couple at the next table glanced their way.

"Aunt Flora isn't a stuffed shirt," Roxanne said in a rare defense of Flora to her sister.

With great fanfare, Aunt Flora pushed her dessert plate back, folded her used napkin and placed her clasped her hands together on the table. "Tell us what you like about your work, Roxanne. Do you give the same massage to everyone? Is there some *variety*?"

“Piety?” Aunt Maggie raised her eyebrows.

“Vah-rye-eh-tee,” Aunt Flora said.

“Oh, tons of variety,” Roxanne said. “For one thing, there are men and women.”

In fact, she did have female clients, and even a few men who were not sexual clients but just wanted straight massage with no hanky panky. “And everyone’s body is different in some way. Not just physically. People feel differently. Their—“ and she held her fingers up to make quote marks “—energy. I know that’s froo froo talk, but it’s true. People feel differently in such drastic ways that touching them is endlessly interesting.”

“Mmm.” Aunt Flora nodded and nodded but looked confused. “How does my energy feel when you massage me?”

“Not like a stuffed shirt at all,” Roxanne said. “You relax surprisingly well.”

“I’m very healthy.”

Aunt Maggie heaved a loud sigh and said, “Oh, I need to lie down.”

“We’d better go,” Aunt Flora mouthed to Roxanne. She waved the waiter over and accepted Roxanne’s offer to pay. “You’re doing well then.”

Roxanne smiled confidentially. “Yes. Don’t worry about me. Here, let me help Aunt Maggie to the car.”

When she saw a falling star that night, she knew Dean would return to their house. She knew this as surely as if an appointment had been made and circled on her

calendar. But when the call came the following week, she was still surprised. He called from San Jose, where he'd checked into a Salvation Army treatment program. "I begged 'em, honey. They kept saying they didn't have room, but I convinced 'em I didn't have *time*. I was on my knees." She could hear the shudder in his voice. And something else. A determination.

He stayed for thirty days and then came moved into a halfway house where Roxanne visited him. Sometimes he was her brother, sometimes her son. Never her lover, not anymore. Sometimes she tried to remember the last time they'd had sex but couldn't. She wished she'd known it would be the last time.

Dean began driving up with a friend to spend weekends with her. "You have to understand," he said one night as they watched TV on the couch, her legs flung over his. "People in their first year of sobriety have a fucked up sex drive. Mine's shot. I never thought I'd say that. I don't seem to care about it at all."

"Do you masturbate?"

"Yeah. Once a day." He laughed sharply. "Okay, I guess I do think about it. Having sex with another person is what I mean."

She felt warm all of a sudden. Laid her hand closer up his thigh. He giggled. "What you doing?"

“Shhh. Nothing. Keep watching the TV.” Scooting down onto her knees, she laid her head on his lap and breathed his scent. Jeans and oil. Sunshine and rain. Slowly, she reached for his zipper. He laid his head back and let her pull his pants down and slip them off one foot. “Shhh,” she whispered. “Shhh.” Then she took his cock in her mouth and slowly built him up to an orgasm, taking her time and using her hands to caress his balls and stroke his shaft as she softly sucked him off. When he came, she kept her mouth in place and let his bodily fluids slide down her lips to pool on his belly.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

She would be a botanist of love. The taxonomy of men could occupy her mind for years. Merely being alive and breathing made a man infinitely interesting to Roxanne. His beating heart fascinated her. His bicep, short, long, thick, thin, fascinated her. His jaw, thick or receding or long or square, how the jawbone met the skull and how the shoulder curved into the back, it all seemed endlessly interesting. That’s how it was for her. The male body was her altar and her laboratory.

The more she studied, the more she loved her own body. She loved her thighs, loved her arms, loved the curve of her waist and the white of her skin. She loved her desire too, loved to use her hands on a man, loved to use her mouth, loved to be caressed. She loved the men’s bodies, the thick hair, the bald spot, the hairy thigh, the smooth balls, loved the paunch, the thick chest, the stubble, the smile, loved the large hands,

tender palms, eager fingers, the curious stare, the silent waiting. She loved to see the hips rock and the cock spring up, she loved to sweep her hands up the long torso and down the length of leg. She loved the hesitant question, the curious stare, loved the surprise, the blush, and grateful sigh, loved most of all the license to linger and look and feel every part and piece and aspect and angle.

Every one of them lay still and took it, her gentle arms, her slowly building rhythm, the time it took for her to build up steam. He took her permission, took her breasts in his hand, took her body to his, took her fingers wrapped around him, her mouth so near his cock, her lips sliding over and down. He took her gasps, he took her rocking him, he took her to the end, where their mingled breaths and twisted fingers and the rise and fall of their chests left nothing but the dissolving world at their feet, in one long forgetful hour.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

One by one, the leaves of autumn fell, twisting, floating, landing on top of each other or on the dry ground. The seasons drifted too close together here in California, and nothing fantastic occurred in the sky to mark the difference between summer and fall, or fall and winter. No thunderstorms in July, no calamities of snow in December. The hills were the key. Brown in summer, green in winter, wet dirt in February, dust in August.

On a rainy Halloween, Roxanne's cowboy set to dying. Couldn't eat. No speed around. Just couldn't eat. Pushed his plate aside with a distasteful grimace even though it was piled high with spaghetti. He had thrush bad again too. Couldn't enjoy the taste of food all that much anyway.

"I just don't like it much," he said.

Dr. Harrison took Dean in on short notice. "It's called 'wasting syndrome,'" he said, his eyes switching back and forth from Dean to Roxanne. "You'll get thinner and thinner."

Roxanne saw she was not a bystander. The doctor saw her as an equal partner in this thing. She was the one who watch, then comfort and wait. She would still be alive when it was all over.

"We don't have any way to stop it happening, not at this point," Dr. Harrison continued. "You'll continue to lose weight." He nodded at Dean. "You won't feel like eating. Get him some Ensure," he said, turning to Roxanne. "You can get it at the grocery store. Or if that's too expensive for you guys, try baby food."

"How's it going to happen?" she asked in a solemn voice as if she were speaking in church.

"He'll grow thinner and weaker. He'll need a wheelchair. I recommend renting a hospital bed. Even if he goes into the hospital at the end, it will help you care for him at home before that time."

"And when's that time, Doctor?" Dean asked.

Doctor Harrison paused, looked at the floor, then at Dean. "I wouldn't count on seeing the Super Bowl."

On the way home, Dean said he never liked football much anyway. "Except college teams. Always like the bowl games."

He moved back in with her, and she took her ad out of the paper and let the machine answer the calls that came in, returning them with a subdued message about how she needed to take some time off.

Dean's body grew weaker, but not all at once, so he seemed about the same for the next few weeks, except for having even less appetite and getting more tired more often.

Then he started looking gaunt, which Roxanne noticed especially one day when she drove him to Berkeley so he could hunt down some pot to smoke.

"I need to eat something, and pot will help." He couldn't hunt down drugs in Santa Rosa where some guy from his Narcotics Anonymous group on a relapse would run into him and then go back and tell everyone.

"I can't drive myself anymore, Roxanne. Just drive me to Telegraph, let me loose for a half hour, that's all. I promise you it won't take me longer than a half hour."

Was she that much a hardass about this whole drugs thing that he had to beg her like this? "Sure I'll take you, Dean," she said, feeling guilty. "Let's go, right now."

Speeding, they made it to Berkeley in thirty-five minutes. She dropped him off at Telegraph and University and said she'd go find some place to park and be back in half an hour. Oh my God, she thought, watching him limp down the sidewalk among the

raggedy gang of Berkeley street people all robust and glowing with health compared to him, he looks like a dying man, nothing but skin and bones covered with baggy jeans and a shirt, and his face all jutting cheek and eye sockets, his legs lunging through the crowd like he was going to fall over if he didn't hurry up and get to where he needed to go.

Roxanne didn't know where he'd get what he needed, but she wasn't a druggie, and he was. When she came back thirty minutes later, he stood unsteadily at the curb and swaggered to the door when she pulled over.

“Did you get some?”

“Yup.” His voice sounded hoarse. He laid his head against the window in a kind of stupor while she drove him back home, wishing she could comfort him more, wishing he'd let her. As soon as they got in the door, he lit up, drank a whole can of Ensure and then went to sleep for six hours straight.

When he woke up, he staggered to the bathroom and back to bed. “I saw myself in the mirror. I look ugly. My face is a skeleton.”

“Oh, Dean, no.” She stroked his chest. “This only lasts a while. Then you will be handsome again. I promise to remember you as handsome. Always handsome.”

“Please.” His eyes pleaded.

“Yes.”

His visit to Berkeley was his last trip anywhere.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Mirror Lake was silting up and turning into a meadow. The process would take seventy-five years, more or less, and the park service wasn't going to do anything to stop it. It's nature's way, this sedimentation. Alpine lakes gradually turn into alpine meadows. The park service explained all this in a bronze plaque set on posts in front of the lake. Roxanne had wandered over to the plaque after staring in some disappointment at the lake's surface. Now she understood.

But Mirror Lake had always been pure and clear. Always. All of Roxanne's life. She'd come here every year of her childhood, with schoolmates and cousins, hiking the trails past waterfalls and leaping into the frigid Merced River. Once she'd spotted a bear at the base of Yosemite Falls. Part of every trip included the short hike to Mirror Lake to gaze at the perfect clarity of its surface, so still, so like glass. And reflected in its sheer surface was the most compelling landmark of Yosemite, the enormous sheer face of Half Dome, which rose two thousand feet straight up, every inch of which lay in crystal clear counterpart on the lake below.

That reflection was already turning vague. Roxanne felt her throat thicken. So much to get used to.

Not a cloud marred the turquoise sky. A hawk swooped down, hovered in the air and slowly lifted its wings and soared out of sight again. Roxanne bowed her head over the cardboard box in her hand. What should she say on such an occasion? What words? She'd driven the speed limit all the way up here, taken her time on the curves, with the

box sitting on the seat next to her. It was smaller than she'd expected. Larger than a milk carton, smaller than a breadbox.

Dean, I'm trying to think of what to say. I want to say the right thing. Words that mean something. A blue jay screamed over her head, and two squirrels chased each other around a pine tree at the edge of her sight. She knew Dean was laughing at her. She could almost see him slouched against the upper reaches of that pine, eating a peach and watching her with amusement. He never had the proper reverence.

The top of the tree bowed with a sudden gust of wind. Time to get to work. Dean didn't need words. She slid her thumb under the tape and lifted the flaps of the cardboard box. Inside, a plastic wrapper held the remains. With a deep breath, she yanked the top edge of the plastic wrapper, and there it lay. The dust of him. She scooped a handful and let it sift through her fingers. It was soft, pearl gray and scattered with crumbs of white bone, one of which lodged at the base of her middle finger. Was this a piece of bone from his shoulder? His foot? The blue jay screamed again, loud and insistent. It was time to let him go.

When she poured it out, the dust lay on the surface at first, but then began to swirl and clump and drift toward a group of rushes farther down the bank. Dribbling the last of it over the water, she imagined the flowers that would grow from his body—vivid wildflowers crafty enough to lay over the alpine winter and burst loudly into spring with no holds barred. Bluebonnets. Indian paintbrush. Poppies.

"I'm happy, Dean," she said. "I'm happy."